



Toronto Alliance for
Better Parks

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Planning parks and
open space networks in
urban neighbourhoods



Toronto Alliance for
Better Parks

What we're all about:

Toronto Park People is an independent charity that brings people and funding together to transform communities through better parks by:

CONNECTING a network of over
100 park friends groups

WORKING with funders to support
innovative park projects

ORGANIZING activities that bring
people together in parks

RESEARCHING challenges and
opportunities in our parks

HIGHLIGHTING the importance
of great city parks for strong
neighbourhoods

BUILDING partnerships
between communities and the
City to improve parks

Thank you to our funders for
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary.....	4
Introduction	7
Planning for a network of parks and open spaces.....	9
What are we doing in Toronto?.....	12
The downtown challenge.....	15
The current park system downtown.....	17

8 GUIDING PRINCIPLES

For Creating a Connected Parks and Open Space System in Urban Neighbourhoods.....20

1	Proactively plan central green spaces as the heart of open space networks	21
2	Create green connections that become places themselves	23
3	Be flexible in design and use	26
4	Broaden the park to include the space beyond its edges.....	28
5	Find park space in overlooked and unexpected places.....	31
6	Empower communities by building new partnership models.....	33
7	Experiment and be nimble.....	36
8	Create collaborations and pool funding sources	38

Opportunities in Downtown Toronto	40
Garrison Creek Greenway	41
The Green Line	42
Cloud Gardens and Temperance Street	43
Cumberland Corridor	44
Downtown Yonge laneways	45
Residential green laneways	46
Yonge Street Park.....	47
College Park.....	48

Focus on Greater Fort York: A Model for Building a Successful Parks and Open Space System	49
Recommendations	53
Sources	57

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As many Toronto neighbourhoods continue to develop and intensify, the need for an expanded and improved parks and open space system grows.

Meeting this need, however, is increasingly challenged by high land prices, limited space, and pressures from high and diverse use. While a number of creative ideas are emerging in Toronto to tackle these challenges, Toronto needs an overall framework and plan for creating a connected system of parks and open spaces. This requires a shift from thinking about parks as isolated green spaces to planning them as the heart of a network of diverse open spaces that serve many needs.

This report highlights tools and strategies for planning parks and open space systems that are emerging in North America in response to the challenges presented by growth and densification.

A proactive plan for a network of parks and open spaces must be green, creative, flexible, and locally responsive. It requires:

- Reframing how we view different open spaces, such as streets, sidewalks, schoolyards, laneways, trails, and courtyards, to understand how they complement and connect with parks and facilitate movement within the system.
- Creating proactive plans that not only identify where to buy new parkland but coordinate the work of city divisions around a community-driven vision of a connected parks and open space system.

- Encouraging flexibility and experimentation both in designs and funding as well as in how we engage with communities.

Underpinning all of this is the need to make connections—connections between different types of parks and open spaces, between communities and partners in those spaces, and between city divisions and resources.

These connections can also help bridge divides by linking communities. They increase access to parks and open spaces through our hydro corridors and ravines as well as our streets, laneways, and trails. Traditional parks and green spaces remain the core of this network, and acquiring land for new ones is crucial, but making connections is what creates a true system of parks and open spaces.

We can learn from others, such as San Francisco's Green Connections plan, which aims to connect parks through green corridors, or Vancouver's West End Community Plan, which looks to laneways and streets to build new green spaces and links. But we can also learn from Toronto examples, such as the Garrison Creek Linkage Plan, which proposed a set of networks between parks along the Garrison Creek corridor, and the planning work done for the green space system now emerging around Fort York.

Or through projects like the West Toronto Railpath and the John Street Cultural Corridor, which create new connections and public spaces along a rail corridor and street, respectively.

Through exploring these and many more examples, we propose eight guiding principles for creating connected parks and open space systems in urban neighbourhoods to help guide the creation of a Toronto framework.



A trail through Birkdale Ravine

1

Proactively plan central green spaces as the heart of networks that connect many different forms of open spaces.

2

Create green connections that become places that connect themselves and can act as links between larger parks and open spaces.

3

Be flexible in design and use so that the space we have can be used efficiently and adapt to changing needs.

4

Broaden the park to include the space beyond its edges so that parks and green space spill out into our streets and sidewalks.

5

Find park space in overlooked and unexpected places such as schoolyards and under overpasses.

6

Empower communities by building new partnership models that allow for more local decision-making and programming to meet diverse needs.

7

Experiment and be nimble by employing quick designs to test ideas and gather feedback.

8

Create collaborations and pool funding sources to bring multiple city divisions on board and find new money for park improvements.



Corktown Common

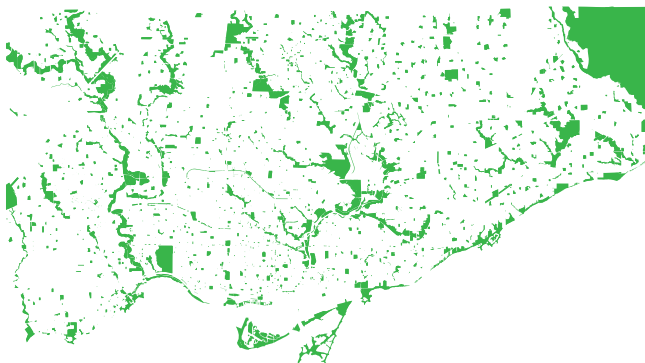
In particular, we look at how to bring this thinking to downtown Toronto given its explosive growth and its unique challenges, including a flood of new residents, intense and fast-paced development, and expensive land. These challenges have led to little new park space being created to serve this new population, putting pressure on existing parks. New parkland must be purchased, but it must be planned as part of an overall connected system.

There are many opportunities to apply creative solutions for downtown to improve and expand the parks and open space system by applying these 8 principles. For example, we can create new social gathering spaces and green linkages in residential and commercial laneways, as well as along bike corridors such as Shaw Street, which connect many parks together. We can also connect community members through new models for park programming and operations to help animate centrally located parks, such as College Park and Allan Gardens. And we can employ flexible designs across multiple open spaces to create new public space corridors that build off existing parks such as Village of Yorkville Park, Cloud Gardens, and a redesigned Yonge Street.

In order to embrace these emerging ideas in Toronto, we must ensure we have the staff resources to carry out the proactive planning and community engagement work needed. We should also explicitly include opportunities to convert streets and laneways to parks and plazas within our parks planning and acquisition strategies and explore the use of Section 42 park levies to help build these connections and new open spaces. And we need to act more quickly, experimenting with pilot projects to ensure open space improvements can occur sooner rather than later. In short, we must be proactive, creative, flexible, and locally responsive to create a parks and open space system that can meet the diverse needs of Toronto's neighbourhoods.

INTRODUCTION

Our city is growing. With this growth comes the need to expand and improve our parks and open spaces to serve new diverse residents—a need that becomes increasingly challenging to meet as Toronto continues to develop and intensify.



Other North American cities are also struggling with these same challenges. Many of them have developed proactive plans and strategies to address parks and open space needs by focussing on green connections, flexible designs, community involvement, and creative solutions. We can draw lessons from these cities, as well as from some of the innovative projects emerging in Toronto, to understand the elements needed for a new way of planning parks and open space systems.

This new way must focus on making connections—connections between different types of parks and open spaces, between communities and partners in those spaces, and between city divisions and resources.

While felt across many communities in Toronto, the challenge of meeting parks and open space needs becomes more acute in denser neighbourhoods, where acquiring new land for parks is hampered by high growth, expensive land, and increasingly limited space.

Between 2009 and 2013, 86% of proposed new residential units were located in neighbourhoods designated for intensification, which includes the downtown, other centres such as Yonge-Eglinton, and the avenues.¹

As neighbourhoods become denser, pressures on the park system grow if new spaces don't keep pace.

To meet these challenges, we need to reframe the discussion about parks to include a broader view of our entire system of open spaces. Parks cannot be planned as isolated green islands within the city. Instead, our parks should flow through our neighbourhoods and connect with each other through a variety of open spaces that serve different needs.

While traditional green spaces must remain at the heart of our communities, and focus must be sharpened on acquiring land and planning for more of them, they must be placed within this context of a wider open space system.

Some of these spaces may not resemble traditional parks. Some are found on streets, sidewalks, schoolyards, and laneways. Some are green, while others are hard surface plazas. Some are filled with community programming, others are quiet or support nature and biodiversity. Some provide opportunities to rest and linger, while others provide connections for pedestrians and cyclists between green spaces. But they all serve the purpose of creating a more connected, diverse, and beautiful public realm.

“Toronto’s public realm—its streets, parks and open spaces—are its shared outdoor rooms where our civic life takes place.”

City of Toronto, Privately-Owned Publicly Accessible Spaces Design Guidelines, 2014²

Key to this is putting the time and resources in place to plan proactively and build community partnerships to help animate and care for parks, ensuring they keep up with diverse needs. And we need to be more flexible and open to experimentation in how we design and fund this network of open spaces, coordinating the work of different city divisions around this goal.

This paper highlights some of the tools and strategies to help begin this conversation in Toronto. It is not a prescriptive master plan that maps out exactly what should occur on what specific piece of land. That work must be done through consultation with communities.



Toronto ravine

Rebecca Alam

First, we propose a set of eight guiding principles for planning parks and open space networks in denser, urban neighbourhoods. These principles are based on emerging directions in Toronto and in other North American cities. We then focus on the unique and immediate challenges facing downtown Toronto neighbourhoods, and how these principles could work on the ground.

With the start of TOCore and the update to the almost 15 year-old citywide parks acquisition strategy, the moment to have this conversation is now. TOCore was initiated by City Planning and brings multiple city divisions together to create a much-needed downtown plan, including parks and the public realm. This study was announced in 2014 and is projected to finish in 2017. It is a major undertaking that will involve much discussion.

We hope the ideas presented here can help frame and inform that discussion, provoke debate, and highlight some of the opportunities that shouldn't be overlooked for creating a more connected system of parks and open spaces.

PLANNING FOR A NETWORK OF PARKS AND OPEN SPACES

Thinking about parks and open space systems is as old as North American parks themselves.

Frederick Law Olmsted (1822 – 1903), most famous as the designer of New York’s Central Park, was not only interested in creating pastoral parks, but park systems. He did this partly through parkways—low-volume roads lined with greenery that strung parks along them. One of the best examples of this is Boston’s Emerald Necklace, connecting six parks along 11 kilometres.

“Parks are critical to the development of new neighbourhoods and we design communities so that parks and public spaces are their spines.”

*Waterfront Toronto*³

Building connections between existing parks, and understanding how the spaces in-between act as connective tissue, can help extend their reach and add to the diversity of open space in the city. Filling in the gaps, as Toronto Chief Planner Jennifer Keesmaat recently noted, multiplies “exponentially the amount of benefit you provide to adjacent neighbourhoods” by increasing people’s access to parks.⁴

Creating such a system in today’s built-up cities, especially their downtowns, is a much different task than in Olmsted’s time. Today we have more development, fewer vacant land parcels, streets oriented toward the car, and park systems that may have developed opportunistically in increments rather than through a comprehensive plan.

In these environments, it’s necessary to understand how the wider open space system of streets, laneways, privately-owned public spaces, hydro and rail corridors, cemeteries, schoolyards, trails, and other pedestrian spaces complement our parks. This is not about relegating traditional parks to a lesser role—these core green spaces are the heart of a healthy park system—but placing them within a larger network.

Physical space isn’t the whole story, though, and quantity shouldn’t be the only way we measure the success of our parks and open space systems.

As Peter Harnik writes in his book *Urban Green*, “It’s not the acreage or park type standard that should motivate cities, but the direct awareness of the need” for different kinds of parks and activities. Instead of setting a standard to measure against, such as certain number of hectares per 1,000 people, he recommends cities “devise a process for meeting the need for picnicking, walking, bench-sitting, bird-watching, cycling, kite-flying, and more in each specific community.”⁵



Finch Hydro Corridor Trail

In other words, what's important is understanding how people want to use their parks and open spaces and devising a plan to meet those desires. This may mean obtaining new spaces, but it also may mean using existing spaces in new and different ways, establishing new connections between parks and the people that use them, and thinking about how the parks and open space system functions as a whole.

This requires creative thinking, community involvement, and different city departments—not just already stretched-thin parks departments—working together.

For example, San Francisco's 2014 Green Connections, a plan to link parks together through pleasant cycling and walking routes, was a partnership between planning, transportation, public health, and community-based organizations. The plan outlined traffic calming techniques, landscaping, green infrastructure, and community stewardship opportunities to accomplish this goal.

"[S]idewalk gardens, intersection islands, street parks, and play streets," the plan noted, "can provide a backdrop for people to meet, gather, stroll, sit, play, exercise, and meditate. In a dense city such as San Francisco, these small-scale interventions can go a long way in building cohesive, livable neighborhoods."⁶

New York's PlaNYC argued that "because the supply of vacant land and capital budgets are both finite, creating new parks will require creative new strategies."⁷ Some of these strategies included reusing streets as parks, building parks on landfills, and redesigning schoolyards to serve as community park spaces.

Other creative ideas are found within Vancouver's recent community plans for the West End, Downtown Eastside, and Mount Pleasant neighbourhoods. These plans identified opportunities such as green linkages in laneways, new plazas or park spaces on streets and lots, and improvements to existing parks.



New York's High Line Park



San Francisco's Annie Alley

Sergio Ruiz for SPUR



City Hall Rooftop Garden

Closer to Toronto, the City of Mississauga, which is experiencing an intensification of its downtown, noted in its 2014 parks master plan that creating new large parks would be difficult. Smaller "infill" green spaces can "contribute to a connected network of green spaces," the report said, adding that these spaces "will likely play a greater role in the future in ensuring continued access to park-like places that fulfill the expanded role of parks and green spaces."⁸

Some cities have begun to experiment with different types of "infill" open spaces. For example, the last six years has seen the amount of street-to-parks programs multiply, with cities inserting new parks and plazas onto streets. Take San Francisco's now famous "parklet," part of the Pavement to Parks program launched in 2009, or New York City's Plaza Program, where organizations apply to convert under-utilized roadway into new plazas. These have spawned similar programs in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Vancouver, Seattle, and many other cities.

What these share in common are a commitment to carrying out a proactive plan and thinking creatively to shape the future parks and open space system of urban neighbourhoods.

WHAT ARE WE DOING IN TORONTO?

The park system in Toronto is over 8,000 hectares and contains a variety of amenities from natural areas to conservatories to golf courses to beaches.

Toronto's 1,600 parks cover 13% of its land area and include the many ravines that thread their way through the city, creating one of Toronto's most distinct features.⁹

While Toronto's Official Plan speaks to the importance of a connected park system, the City needs an overall comprehensive master plan for creating this network of parks and open spaces. However, there are opportunities both citywide and within downtown that are taking shape.

The Pan Am Path is a good example. This 80-kilometre path will cross the entire city by using many existing trails, linking neighbourhood parks along the way. Another example is the proposal to complete a continuous trail through the Scarborough Gattineau hydro corridor, which would link the Don River all the way to Rouge Park. Or take the North Scarborough Green Loop, a citizen-initiated project to link several parks with a walking and cycling trail.

The public right-of-way—our streets and sidewalks—is another huge open space resource for the city. At roughly 22% of Toronto's land area, our streets have great potential to become places in and of themselves, something the Public Realm section of the City's Transportation Services division is tasked with and the upcoming Complete Streets guidelines will help address.



A trail through E.T. Seton Park

In Toronto's downtown, there are a number of exciting projects in the works that build off these citywide opportunities, helping to link downtown to other areas of the city as well (see map on page 19). The City, however, needs a plan to tie these projects together into an overall vision of a connected parks and open space system. The City's TOCore study and Complete Streets guidelines will be important future elements, but there are some existing plans we can learn from.

For example, Toronto's 1996 Garrison Creek Linkage Plan laid out improvements to parks, but also laneways, streets, public art, and signage, to create a better connected system along the Garrison Creek corridor to link a number of park spaces, such as Christie Pits and Trinity-Bellwoods.

"The [Garrison Creek Linkage Plan] recognizes that public streets can be enhanced to function as green pedestrian routes connecting isolated parks to create a system of public open space. It also recognizes that public parks are under tremendous pressure to accommodate a broad range of uses, and that it is critical that new and existing parks be developed and renewed in a coordinated manner to begin to meet this ever expanding public role."

City of Toronto, Garrison Creek Linkage Plan¹⁰



West Toronto Railpath Overpass

Mario Giambattista



Celebrate Yonge

Downtown Yonge BIA

Public realm master plans created by downtown Business Improvement Areas have provided other refreshing ideas through reimagining the role of streets and redesigning existing spaces to be more flexible, including ideas to revitalize laneways around Yonge Street and create public squares along King Street West.

The City is also moving in a positive direction with recent plans such as its 2014 draft public realm strategy for the King-Spadina East Precinct, which identified improvements to midblock connections to expand pedestrian-oriented spaces as well as sites for much-needed new parkland in an area undergoing explosive growth.

WHERE DOES THE MONEY COME FROM FOR PARKS?

The City of Toronto has a number of tools through the development process to collect money for buying new parks and improving existing ones.¹¹ There was nearly \$100 million in the citywide parkland acquisition account in October 2013 and a further \$78 million in different ward accounts for both acquisition and park development. More recently in April 2014, there was \$29 million for the Toronto-East York District and another \$37 million for downtown Wards 20, 27, and 28.

Section 42

- Section 42 of the *Planning Act* allows the City to require 5% of the land area for residential developments as park space or 2% for commercial/industrial projects. If this generates too small a piece of land for a usable park the City can take cash-in-lieu of parkland, with payment equalling the value of the land that would have been provided. This money is split 50/50 between citywide and district accounts and split 50/50 again between land acquisition and park improvements.
- Downtown is designated a Parkland Acquisition Priority Area, which means the City uses the Alternative Parkland Dedication Rate allowed under Section 42. In Toronto, the City takes 0.4 hectares per 300 dwelling units, but the Planning Act allows up to 1 hectare to be taken. In priority areas, any cash received above 5% of the land area goes towards parks or park improvements in the vicinity of the development.

Development Charges

- The *Development Charges Act* allows the City to require payments from developers to help cover some of the growth-related infrastructure costs associated with development. This money can be used for park improvements, but not land acquisition.

Section 37

- Section 37 of the *Planning Act* allows the City to negotiate money for community benefits from developers in exchange for approving increases in the height or density above what current zoning allows. It's a tool designed to help address the impact of high-density development with benefits tied to the development's vicinity. In downtown, parks and open space improvements accounted for the largest number of Section 37 agreements.¹²

THE DOWNTOWN CHALLENGE

“The biggest challenge from my perspective is that there are investments that are needed, in the public realm, in transit, in park space, that are going to be essential to moving forward in the future, if we’re going to maintain the quality of life we have today.”

Jennifer Keesmaat, Toronto’s Chief Planner. National Post, August 27, 2014¹³

The services and infrastructure of Toronto’s downtown are struggling to keep pace with its growth.¹⁵ And downtown Toronto has grown immensely—four times the rate of the rest of the city since 2006. There are more than 200,000 residents in downtown now, which could rise to over 250,000 by 2031.¹⁶ On top of this, City staff estimate that the daytime population of downtown, which includes those who commute into downtown for work or school, is more than 500,000 even without tourists factored in.¹⁷

The issue of rapid growth and densification in downtown was vividly portrayed at a City Council meeting in August 2014 where 18 new towers were approved—a total of 755 new storeys. This highlights how much growth we can expect in the downtown for the next several years, prompting one councillor to call it the “Manhattanization” of Toronto.¹⁸

One of the major challenges of this growth is its incremental nature. In other words, rather than being developed through a master plan that coordinates different elements, development is happening in bits and pieces. As City staff note, this “does not afford the opportunity to address the full range of infrastructure and liveability issues as they arise.”¹⁹



David Crombie Park

Jeff Pawelek, 2011

“[M]any of the existing public realm assets, such as streets, sidewalks, parks and open spaces were not planned or designed to anticipate the current, let alone future, intensity of population and workforce growth.”

Downtown Toronto: Trends, Issues, Intensification, May 2014¹⁴

For example, master planned areas like CityPlace, the St. Lawrence neighbourhood, and many of the new waterfront communities, such as the West Don Lands, allowed for the opportunity to pre-plan the creation of large, central parks and open spaces. And looking farther into the future, the Port Lands will provide another exciting opportunity to create a new community with a parks and open space system as its backbone. But many of these large site opportunities in downtown are gone. What is left are smaller sites in already built-up neighbourhoods, such as intensifying King-Spadina or Yorkville, which don’t often allow for the creation of onsite parkland because sites are too small.

A number of challenges for parks in downtown and urban neighbourhoods stand out:

Land is expensive and difficult to find

Finding suitable space for new parks is difficult and many development sites are too small for a usable park as an onsite requirement. This means the City often takes cash-in-lieu of parkland to buy land elsewhere. Land, however, is incredibly expensive downtown, presenting a huge challenge even when suitable space can be found. In some parts of downtown, land can go for \$30 to \$60 million an acre.²⁰

The City has to pay market value, even for public land

Even land that is already publicly owned can be costly to acquire because it must be sold at market rate. For example, as the Toronto District School Board looks to sell some of its properties, the City is faced with paying market rate just to keep green spaces that already exist—an issue across the city.

The acquisition process is slow and rigid

City staff are not allowed much negotiating room to offer more than the appraised market value of land, putting them at risk of having a landowner decide to hold out on selling to get a higher price. The acquisition approval process can also take six months to a year, which may cause landowners to approach more quick-footed buyers.²¹

There are many competing demands

Existing parks, many of which are smaller in size than in other parts of the city, are strained as population and density rise. Balancing competing demands is difficult in such small, highly used spaces.

Finding room to accommodate all the things people want to do—play with their kids, walk their dog, read a book, play sports, retreat into nature, listen to a music performance—becomes more difficult.

Centrally located parks work hard

Many parks are used by an increasing amount of residents, but also workers and tourists. They are also the site of many events and activities throughout the year, causing extra stress. For example, the City had to put a moratorium on events held in Queen's Park because of the damage they were causing.²²

High-use parks are costly to build and maintain

Because of the amount of activity and intense use, high-use parks require high-quality materials and frequent upkeep. While downtown parks receive more maintenance funding, many are still strained, and a request for extra funding for high-use parks in the summer was rejected in the 2014 budget. When high-quality materials are used, some decry it as a waste of money.²³

Taller buildings cast more shadows

With taller buildings and more development in general, shadowing on parks is another concern. Sunlit public spaces are important not just for people's enjoyment, but also for the health of trees and plants. Other cities have begun to address this. San Francisco, which has a law that protects parks from shadows, recently rejected a downtown building application due to shadowing on a nearby park.²⁴ The presence of the Ontario Municipal Board in Toronto, which can overturn City planning decisions, makes this more difficult.

THE CURRENT PARK SYSTEM DOWNTOWN

Downtown Toronto has some incredible assets to draw from within its parks and open spaces. We have an ever-growing system of high quality, connected waterfront parks and beaches, and trail connections that branch off to many other parts of the city through our celebrated ravine system.

We have an historic conservatory in Allan Gardens and great plazas, such as Nathan Philips Square. And we have parks with large, mature trees and natural areas like Queen's Park and the Toronto Islands, as well as numerous smaller neighbourhood parkettes that offer playgrounds and gathering spaces.

However, although downtown has grown by over about 50,000 residents since 2001, there hasn't been a commensurate increase in parkland.

In a 2013 paper, Sophie Knowles found that just 3.66 hectares of parkland was obtained through acquisition or land dedication in downtown between 1998 and 2012.²⁵ Since then, new parks have opened such as Regent Park and June Callwood Park, with more in development, such as 11 Wellesley. However, many downtown neighbourhoods rank the lowest in amount of parkland relative to those in other parts of the city.²⁶ In the City's 2001 Parkland Acquisitions Strategic Directions Report the entire downtown is labelled as a priority area.²⁷

The largest supply of new parks and open space in the last ten years, which are not reflected in the numbers Knowles compiled, has come through the development of Toronto's waterfront. Waterfront Toronto has opened 23 new or improved public spaces since 2004, including Sherbourne Common, Sugar Beach, and Corktown Common.²⁸



Canoe Landing Park

Jason Paris



Sugar Beach

Mary Flint Crandall

Park Areas in Downtown Toronto



TD Centre POPS



Nathan Philips Square

Paul Tichonczuk

By identifying parks and links between park spaces early on through master plans, Waterfront Toronto ensured a high quality parks and open space network around which development can grow.

Aside from public parks, the downtown is also served by POPS—privately-owned publicly accessible spaces, which are created through the development process. These spaces are open to the public, but owned and maintained by private parties. Approximately 100,000 square metres of POPS have been created downtown since 2000²⁹—equivalent to two Dufferin Grove Parks. Some areas of downtown, like the Financial District, which contains a single small public park, rely very heavily on POPS. While POPS are an important tool in creating open space, it's important to remember that because

they are privately owned and managed they are complementary to the public space system but not a substitute for public parkland.

Downtown Toronto has also been the site of several pilot projects to create new public space within the public right-of-way. For example, the Church Street parklets during the summer of 2013, the temporary public space along John Street as a pilot in advance of a permanent redesign, and the inaugural Open Streets festival which opened up portions of Bloor and Yonge to pedestrians and cyclists on two Sundays in the summer of 2014.



There are a number of projects recently constructed or upcoming in downtown and nearby neighbourhoods that work to forge connections between parks and open spaces or create new open spaces. Many of these connections create links to neighbourhoods outside of downtown as well.

A John Street Cultural Corridor

This project will transform John Street south of Grange Park into a pedestrian-oriented space with wider sidewalks, more trees, and social gathering spaces.

B Lower Don Trail

The Lower Don Trail Master Plan will improve the trail connecting Corktown Common and the waterfront north through the Don Valley ravine.

C Market Street

This street was redesigned in 2014 as a flexible, curbsless street that can accommodate expanded pedestrian space in the summer.

D Gould Street and Willcocks Street Plazas

New plazas were created out of former street space on both the University of Toronto and Ryerson University campuses that offer space for activities and gathering.

E West Toronto Railpath

The railpath extension will see this popular trail extend south of its current College Street terminus to King Street, creating connections and small green spaces along its length.

F Fort York Pedestrian Bridge

This pedestrian and cycling bridge will connect new parks south of Stanley Park over the rail corridor to Garrison Common, Fort York, and the waterfront.

G Queens Quay Boulevard

A significantly redesigned waterfront promenade will link the western and eastern portions of the Martin Goodman Trail through the central waterfront.

8 GUIDING PRINCIPLES

For Creating a Connected Parks and Open Space System in Urban Neighbourhoods

1

Proactively plan central green spaces as the heart of open space networks

5

Find park space in overlooked and unexpected places

2

Create green connections that become places themselves

6

Empower communities by building new partnership models

3

Be flexible in design and use

7

Experiment and be nimble

4

Broaden the park to include the space beyond its edges

8

Create collaborations and pool funding sources

1

Proactively plan central green spaces as the heart of open space networks



How can we start to think of our open space system as a web as opposed to discrete objects in space?



Michelle Senayah, Principal, Senayah Design & Co-director, The Laneway Project

When faced with a limited supply of land for new parks and smaller, intensively used existing parks, proactive planning is key to make the best use of space and money. With a focus on creating a network of different kinds of spaces with central green spaces at their heart, these plans present a vision for moving forward. They are crucial to direct resources and coordinate the activities of various city departments while organizing development in the service of a connected open space system. But they also provide a venue for communities to articulate their own vision for parks and open spaces in their neighbourhood—both the physical location of those spaces and their desired uses. A good plan that prioritizes improvements can help the city invest smartly by ensuring it is spending money on the amenities and spaces communities want, such as off-leash dog areas, playgrounds, community gardens, or naturalized areas.

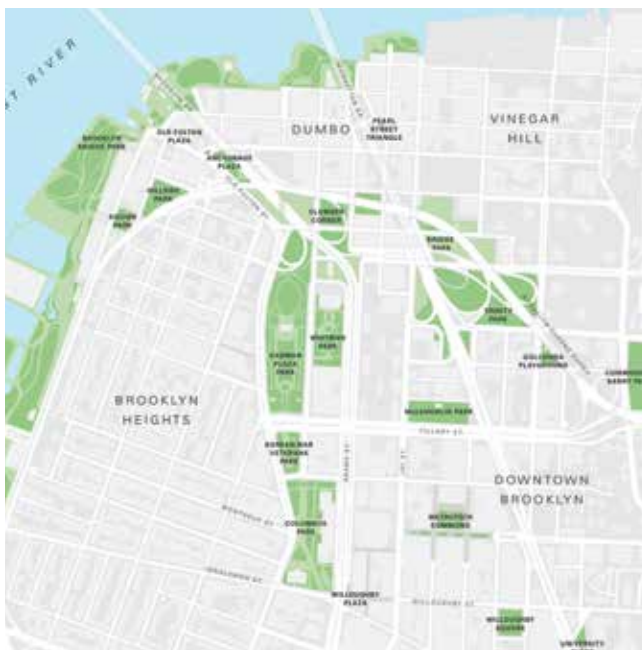
KEY POINTS

- Proactively shape development and open space improvements, rather than reacting to development proposals on a case-by-case basis.
- Understand how the parks and open space system is currently being used by monitoring activity and surveying need within the community.
- Connect various open spaces, such as parks, privately-owned publicly accessible spaces, laneways, streets, rail and hydro corridors, and schoolyards.
- Take advantage of a network of park spaces in a neighbourhood to plan amenities so that no park has to be all things to all people.

CASE STUDIES

Brooklyn Strand, New York

This plan proposes to connect Downtown Brooklyn to the waterfront through improvements to a “series of disconnected parks, plazas and greenways between Borough Hall and Brooklyn Bridge Park.”³⁰ Initiated in late 2014 and carried out by WXY Studio, it identified 8.5 hectares of parks and 23.5 hectares of streets to see how these spaces can work as a connected, pedestrian-friendly, green system. In addition to design upgrades, and improvements to cycling and pedestrian connections, the process also aims to identify activities that could bring more life to spaces the City has called “underutilized and under-programmed.”³¹ In preparation for improvements, existing parks and open spaces in the area were monitored at different points of the day to understand how these spaces were used.



Brooklyn Strand

WXY Studio

Midtown in Focus, Toronto

This approved 2014 parks and open space master plan for Yonge-Eglinton, led by Public Work, “establishes a comprehensive vision and presents a flexible, phased approach for improving parks, open spaces and streetscapes to create a high quality public realm.”³² The process included working with local residents and stakeholders, including engagement techniques such as neighbourhood walking tours. The master plan outlined five “place-making moves” that redefine existing spaces, such as streets, to create new open spaces while focussing on the links between them. It included using building setbacks along Eglinton to create a linear park, creating six small public squares along Yonge Street, a loop of greenways through the neighbourhood to connect green spaces, and redesigning a central north-south street as a shared street and community event space.³³



Midtown in Focus Framework Plan

Public Work

2

Create green connections that become places themselves

“

When you're in downtown and space is at a premium, the ability to use streets to connect small green spaces and stretch that experience means you can double your park experience without doubling your parks.

”

Evan Weinberg, Manager of Policy and Advocacy, Financial District BIA

Creating new connections between existing parks is one way to increase access to parks in denser areas where creating new parks is difficult. Well-designed connections can increase the reach of parks, extend the park experience into the city, and encourage walking and cycling through green, pleasant routes. Connections can be created along rail and hydro corridors, ravines, pedestrian bridges, streets, or laneways. Many cities have plans for a greenway system, which can be both off-street pathways, such as Toronto's West Toronto Railpath, or traffic-calmed streets that work to create a park-like experience by providing wider sidewalks, small planted areas, and seating, so that the routes become a place to both move through and linger.

KEY POINTS

- Green infrastructure and plantings can help connections become sustainable linkages that create habitat, reduce impermeable surfaces, and manage storm water.
- Connections can address both perceived and physical barriers, such as rail crossings, high-speed roads, grade changes, and visual disruptions.
- Laneways can be shared spaces that connect other parts of the open space network, and whose scale allow for multiple types of simultaneous use.
- Park deficient areas can be prioritized for connections that link them up with existing nearby park spaces.
- Connections can use traffic-calming techniques such as bump-outs to include space for seating and landscaping that create a linear park feel.

CASE STUDIES

Comox-Helmcken Greenway, Vancouver

The first phase of the Comox-Helmcken Greenway was completed in 2013 and connects Stanley Park to the Hornby Street separated bike lane, providing a safe, pleasant route to encourage cycling and walking and connect existing parks. The development of the greenway also supports the City's goal of having every resident live within a five-minute walk of a green space by 2020. Park-like elements were introduced along the route through bump-outs

at intersections and mid-block locations, creating spaces for landscaping, gardens, and seating that goes beyond the traditional park bench. The City noted that the "amount and diversity of the plant material installed along the greenway increases oxygen production, reduces rain-water run-off, and provides bird habitat."³⁴ The final phase will extend the greenway to False Creek.

Comox-Helmcken Greenway Seating

Brent Granby



CASE STUDIES

West Toronto Railpath, Toronto

The first phase completed in 2009, designed by Scott Torrance Landscape Architect Inc., follows the Georgetown rail corridor in the city's west end, creating a continuous 2km off-street bicycle and pedestrian pathway between Dupont Street in the north and College Street in the south. The second phase, now under study, will extend the pathway 3km south to connect with the to-be-built Fort York pedestrian and cycling bridge near Stanley Park. Currently there are about 1,200 daily bike trips along the railpath, but City staff estimate that will increase to 6,000 after the extension is built that connects it to downtown. The project will help knit neighbourhoods divided by the rail line back together by creating 14 new access points and "small parkettes that will serve as event spaces and gateways, welcoming cyclists and walkers into a part of the city they were previously barred from."³⁵



West Toronto Railpath

Maril Giambattista

Ruelles Vertes, Montreal

Montreal is home to more than 100 "Ruelles Vertes"—residential alleys that have introduced plantings and gardens cared for by local residents. The program creates green space in neighbourhoods and opportunities for neighbours to socialize.³⁶ Projects are initiated by residents in partnership with local non-profit organizations that are tasked with carrying out the City of Montreal's Éco-quartier program, of which green alleys are a part. For example, in Rosemont the environmental non-profit Soder carries out the program, which includes 20 green alleys projects in 2015. To create a green alley, residents make an application, form a citizen committee to oversee project work, and host a meeting with their neighbours to gauge support. Designs vary, but often involve removing pavement at alley edges to introduce plantings. In some cases, when neighbours agree, a portion of the laneway may be converted entirely to green space, often at one of its ends.



Ruelle Verte in Montreal

Regroupement des éco-quartiers

3

Be flexible in design and use

“

What I think a sophisticated city, an evolved city, has to do is build in flexibility.

”

Elyse Parker, Public Realm Section Director, Transportation Services, City of Toronto

With space at a premium in many urban neighbourhoods, it can be difficult to think about how we accommodate uses that are seemingly in competition with each other—various events and activities, moving traffic, greenery and trees, and quiet spaces. We also need to think about how our public spaces can adapt to the changing seasons to provide welcoming spaces in both winter and summer. It becomes essential then to think about how we can design our existing spaces to be flexible enough to accommodate different needs and uses at different times, using existing space more efficiently and creates a more responsive city that is able to adapt to change.

KEY POINTS

- Eliminating curbs and using special pavement treatments, or raising pavement up to the level of the sidewalk, can visually extend pedestrian space into the street and create a unified experience.
- Flexible designs must take into account accessibility by using visual and tactile indicators to define the edge of a space.
- Small parks, which may have enough space in the winter months, can be redesigned to spill out into adjacent streets during warmer months.
- Movable street furniture, such as chairs or even a stage, can be used to adapt to different programming needs.
- Spaces can be designed to switch to a different use in the winter months, such as a central green space or seating area that can be flooded to create an ice rink.

CASE STUDIES

Bell Street Park, Seattle

Completed in April 2014, Bell Street Park transformed four blocks of a downtown street into a flexible, shared open space by eliminating the curb, introducing new paving materials, increasing greenery, and widening the sidewalk.³⁷ The design done by SvR Design Company had to respond to the utilities that ran underneath the street, which restricted where items like trees could be planted. While cars still have access to the street, it's designed with a pedestrian-first mentality that helps slow driving speeds, eliminate through-traffic, and increase safety for cyclists and pedestrians. The street is now the site of community programming and can be closed entirely for special events. Bell Street Park used money from the City's Parks and Green Space Levy and Parks Acquisition Fund to pay for the project, with an agreement created between different city departments about how to maintain the space.



Bell Street Park music performance
Nate Cormier, SvR Design Company

Berczy Park, Toronto

Berczy Park is a triangular park located to the east of the city's financial district that recently went through a redesign by Claude Cormier + Associés Inc. Flexibility was identified as a key element in the design process as the park is small, irregularly shaped, and must accommodate many different types of uses, including lunchtime workers and a growing number of residents, children, and dogs.³⁸ The final proposal included a redesign of Scott Street, which flanks the west side of the park, turning this street into a flexible shared space. Its curbs will be removed and special paving used so that the park's boundaries can easily be extended into the street when needed. And because it is street space, Scott Street will be able to accommodate different activities, such as food trucks and vendors, that wouldn't be allowed in the park itself.



Berczy Park

Claude cormier et associés inc

4

Broaden the park to include the space beyond its edges

“

The park doesn't end at its boundary, but continues onto the sidewalk, streets, and right up to the thresholds and roofs of buildings.

”

Tanzeel Merchant, Executive Director, Ryerson City Building Institute

Our public right-of-way is the largest public space asset we have—in Toronto our streets account for 22% of our city's area while parks take up 13%. Many cities have begun to think differently about how that space can be used, creating spaces large and small, hard-surfaced and green. Finding opportunities to insert green space into dense urban environments is crucial not only to help beautify areas, but also to create healthier environments for both people and wildlife. These spaces may be built on parallel parking spots on busier commercial streets, side streets, or right on the sidewalk itself, and help to add more breathing space into areas of the city where it can be hard to find a spot to just step out of the stream of movement for a moment.

“A successful openspace system is carefully woven into the overall fabric of a neighborhood's public streets, taking advantage of opportunities, large and small, to create spaces both formal and informal”

Market and Octavia Area Plan, San Francisco³⁹

KEY POINTS

- Calmer side streets can be targeted for improvements where they intersect with main streets in order to address potential concerns over traffic but still provide central public spaces.
- Parallel parking spaces can be used along main streets or intersecting side streets to provide gathering space and greenery on crowded sidewalks.
- A city program, like San Francisco's Street Parks or Vancouver's Green Streets, can allow community members to help care for small green spaces and gardens and bring their own personal touch to the plantings.
- Privately-owned publicly accessible spaces such as courtyards and squares, help fill in gaps and provide gathering spaces.

CASE STUDIES

Parklets and Pop-up Parks, Philadelphia

In Philadelphia, parklets and pop-up parks are an “increasingly popular and low-cost way for cities to carve out green retreats amid the crowded hardscape desert.”⁴⁰ These small interventions use, in the case of parklets, parallel parking spaces along a commercial street, or, in the case of pop-up parks, vacant lots or underutilized roadways, to create fun public spaces. These spaces are often the result of partnerships between community groups, non-profit organizations, and businesses, which pay for and maintain the spaces, but they all remain as public space, free to enjoy. In the case of Philadelphia’s parklet program, which built its first in 2011, residents, businesses, and community groups can apply to install a parklet by showing support from more than half the residents and businesses on a street and signing a maintenance agreement for the space.⁴¹



Philadelphia Logan Parklet
Photographer Ariel Ben-Amos + City of Philadelphia's
Mayor's Office of Transportation

Dundas Street West Parkettes, Toronto

In 2013, the Dundas West BIA hired PMA Landscape Architects Ltd. to implement streetscape and public space improvements on the street between the CNR tracks just west of Lansdowne Street to Rusholme Road. The design included seating and garden areas along side streets, which added many new places to stop and rest along the street and increased the amount of green space. PMA also partnered with “local artists to create unique streetscape elements to create a consistent street character.”⁴² The design won a City of Toronto 2013 Urban Design Award of Merit for Small Open Spaces, and a National Honour in the 2014 Awards of Excellence in Canadian Landscape Architecture from the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects. Similar seating and garden areas are now being created in other neighbourhoods, such as Bloordale to the north.



Dundas West Streetscape improvements PMA Landscape Architects

CASE STUDIES



Gould Street Plaza

Andrew Louis

Gould and Willcocks Street Pedestrian Zones, Toronto

In 2010, the City of Toronto closed portions of Gould Street at Ryerson University and Willcocks Street at the University of Toronto as a pilot to create new pedestrian plazas that could act as central gathering spaces for students. Planters, paint, seating, and amenities such as basketball hoops were installed. Programming such as “frosh week festivities, fairs, farmers’ markets, athletic challenges and food

trucks” animated the spaces.⁴³ An agreement was struck between the City and the universities to maintain the new spaces. The pilots were considered a success, with Ryerson University staff estimating 70,000 students used the space each week and over 40 events were held during the pilot.⁴⁴ The City approved the plazas as permanent in 2012 and upgraded redesigns are now in the works.

5

Find park space in overlooked and unexpected places

“Toronto’s got all sorts of overpasses and roadways, and I think there are places that could be really interesting if enough imagination was brought to bear.”

Greg Smallenberg, designer of Underpass Park⁴⁵

Despite how built-up or crammed a city feels, there is always space to be found. Cities are capitalizing on overlooked and unexpected spaces to create parks and open spaces that help form connections or reuse existing green spaces in new ways. These spaces include infrastructure corridors, rooftops, schoolyards, underneath overpasses, and vacant lots waiting to be developed. For example, Toronto developer TAS has used its development sites to host a fruit stand and flea market rather than let them sit vacant. Often these spaces form barriers both perceived and physical in the city and reclaiming them as well-designed, welcoming green spaces can help bridge these divides and create new connections between communities and existing parks.

“To many observers, schoolyards seem the best, most obvious source of park-like land to supplement the park systems of overcrowded cities.”

Peter Harnik, *Urban Green*⁴⁶

KEY POINTS

- Unique, dynamic public spaces that don’t follow traditional park design can be created because they are responding to very particular situations, such as New York’s High Line.
- Ideally spaces should be at grade, but rooftops, such as Toronto City Hall’s green roof, can offer green space if they are accessible and visible to the general public.
- Cemeteries can be an important source of green space within a community, depending on access and rules on what is allowed (for example, are dogs allowed?).
- School fields and playgrounds are important community open spaces that can be redesigned to meet wider needs outside of school hours.
- Challenges could exist such as access, site contamination, soil compaction, and shade depending on the space.

CASE STUDIES

Underpass Park, Toronto

Completed in 2012, Underpass Park was built by Waterfront Toronto and designed by PFS Studio. The park is located underneath the Eastern Avenue overpass just west of the Don River. The park used artistic design elements such as mirrors and lighting to brighten and humanize the space underneath the overpass and includes seating, a children's playground, landscaping, a skate park, and a basketball court. The park was a key element in integrating the Toronto Community Housing buildings and River City neighbourhood north of the overpass with the West Don Lands developments and the new Corktown Common to the south by creating a comfortable, inviting public link, reducing the perceived barrier the overpass presented.⁴⁷



Underpass Park

Schoolyards-to-playgrounds, New York City

In 2007, New York City launched the Schoolyards to Playgrounds program, which identified "290 schoolyards in areas underserved by parks that could be better utilized."⁴⁸ The goal of the program was to renovate the spaces, if needed, and ensure they were open to the community outside of school hours for use as parks and playgrounds. Since 2007, over 200 schoolyards have been opened or improved. The City maintains the sites afterwards, and partnered with the non-profit Trust for Public Land to oversee the renovation work, which was funded partly by private partners. Improvements include amenities such as "sports courts, play equipment, trees, and benches."⁴⁹



New York City's PS 87X after renovation

David Barker

6

Empower communities by building new partnership models

“We need to empower people in the local community to become more involved in the design and stewardship of their own public spaces. If the local community has meaningful input into the design or modification of the public spaces they use, they will feel a sense of ownership and responsibility for the ongoing stewardship of that space, and this usually leads to better, more beautiful and more useful public space.”

Joe Lobko, Principal, DTAH

No community is alike and the same is true of our parks. Parks and open spaces can, and should, celebrate the diverse voices within neighbourhoods and empower local community members. This is critical in dense, urban neighbourhoods where there are many competing demands for park space. It's the local community members that have their fingers on the pulse of neighbourhood needs and wants and these don't often fit within a standardized, one-size-fits-all approach. Community engagement can't simply be a community consultation when money is available for improvements. It should provide opportunities for meaningful ongoing input and involvement.

Building partnerships to perform certain roles in a park is not about removing City oversight, but tapping further into the potential of the park by bringing people with different abilities and strengths into the process.

These partnerships can take place at various scales and formality, including forming a non-profit organization to manage and operate a park, seeking out specific programming opportunities, and more informal support from local park friends groups and organizations who want to host activities and care for the park's natural environment.

“Places are almost never the product of a singular, evenly-connected community, but the intersection and overlapping of multiple or many diverse groups.”

Project for Public Spaces⁵⁰

KEY POINTS

- Communities should be approached as partners in public space with the City, not simply as users.
- Park friends groups or similar community-based organizations can be supported by giving them the flexibility to facilitate unique, locally-responsive programming.
- Creative ideas can be tested at a local community level by developing partnerships for pilot projects.
- Partnerships should seek diverse voices in the community to contribute and participate in park programming, decision-making, and natural stewardship.

CASE STUDIES

McCormick Park Shipping Container Café, Toronto

Launched in September 2014 as the first shipping container café in a Toronto park, the McCormick Park Café was a response to community desire for healthy, affordable food options in the park, uncovered through a survey that the Friends of McCormick Park completed. This volunteer group then approached their councillor where the idea of using a shipping container was floated. Density bonusing development money funded the capital costs and a partnership with a local non-profit social service agency, Aangen Community Centre, was created to run the cafe. Aangen staffs it with people in need of employment and provides healthy food at a low price point to the community. The café also provides support for programming in the park, organized by the Friends.⁵²

McCormick Park Shipping Container Cafe

Heather Jarvis



CASE STUDIES

Congress Square Park, Portland

Friends of Congress Square Park was formed in 2013 as a response to a City proposal to sell the downtown park to a developer. The Friends employed quick and relatively inexpensive tactics to animate the space, including bringing in food trucks, movable furniture, and free Wifi. The Friends are “dedicated to the arts, public access and community involvement in Congress Square Park as a means to enhance the livability and economic potential of downtown Portland.”⁵¹ Now, the group helps care for and animate the park by partnering with local cultural institutions and artists to bring events like swing dancing, print making, and movie screenings, and even small infrastructure improvements such as planters and sculptural light installations. The next step is working to establish a more formal management partnership between the Friends and the City.



Congress Square Park

The Friends of Congress Square Park

Mint Plaza, San Francisco

Completed in 2009, Mint Plaza is a formerly derelict, city-owned alleyway converted into a permanent, pedestrian-only lively public plaza and gathering space with an innovative stormwater management system. The space was consciously designed to be flexible, with active edges for cafes and outdoor seating while keeping the center free of permanent fixtures to accommodate various uses and activities. Mint Plaza is maintained and managed by Friends of Mint Plaza (FoMP), a California non-profit 501(c)(3) organization. FoMP manage the plaza’s programming, and assume full responsibility for the costs of maintenance and repair using revenue generated from user fees for private events to fund free public events. Programming, including lunchtime food carts and live music, and a flower cart, was introduced to serve the community.⁵³



Concert in Mint Plaza

Rosa Gutierrez

Experiment and be nimble

“When you want to make a big public space move, regardless of what the move is, there is going to be some element of debate and so developing things as pilot projects is a good way to test ideas. It enables you to say this worked, or make tweaks without spending a pile of money on infrastructure”

Andrew Pask, Executive Director, Vancouver Public Space Network

It's hard to know what something will be like until you actually see it for yourself. Using pilot projects to move quickly and test ideas is a great way to communicate ideas, inject some fun and whimsy into a process, create a more collaborative approach to public space, and understand how something works on the ground before committing the money for permanent infrastructure. Some cities even host competitions for public space improvements or have programs that call for submissions, such as Vancouver, which has a summer contest to redesign Robson Square, or Boston's Public Space Invitational, which called for creative public space projects.

KEY POINTS

- Temporary spaces can be created in the spring and summer months when people want more outdoor open space.
- Partnerships with residents, community organizations, and businesses can support creative designs and programming.
- Pilot projects can be implemented even during a planning process in order to showcase emerging ideas and spark conversation.
- Low-cost designs such as paint and planters can be used to move quickly.
- Pilot projects shouldn't remain indefinitely, but come with set timeframes and a commitment to a permanent redesign if something works well.

CASE STUDIES

“Action while planning”, Vancouver

The City of Vancouver launched several pilot projects during the West End Community Plan process as a way to showcase “various public space enhancements to demonstrate some of the potential improvements that aligned with the emerging plan directions.”⁵⁴ These included the Davie Village Plaza, a new temporary public space created on a section of roadway at Bute and Davie Streets through the City’s Viva Vancouver program. Residents helped paint colourful picnic tables and lights were strung up to unify the space. The plaza was in place from July 2013 to September 2014. The City saw this as an innovative community engagement approach, allowing people to see quickly the types of improvements that could come from the planning process underway. Over 80% of people that the City surveyed about the Davie Village Plaza pilot said they supported making it permanent.⁵⁵



Davie Village Plaza

Brent Granby

Celebrate Yonge, Toronto

For one month in the summer of 2012, temporary public spaces were created along Yonge Street between Gerrard and Queen Streets by removing a lane of traffic. The pilot allowed people to experience and imagine what a redesigned Yonge Street might be like with more room devoted to pedestrians and the ability to linger on the street. Businesses along the street helped program activities in 11 different themed areas.⁵⁶ Aside from its whimsical atmosphere, the pilot project allowed the Downtown Yonge BIA to study the traffic impacts of a reduction in travel lanes for a potential project to widen the amount of public space on Yonge Street.⁵⁷



Celebrate Yonge

Downtown Yonge BIA

Create collaborations and pool funding sources

“

The Garrison Creek Linkage Plan has been developed as a model of coordinated, integrated partnership between municipal departments and community interest groups. It integrates land use, environmental, and infrastructure planning to their mutual benefits. It joins together the services of public works, urban design, parks and recreation, to maximize their positive impacts.

”

Garrison Creek Linkage Plan⁵⁸

Parks and open spaces benefit from new forms of partnerships or collaboration between city departments and the understanding that a single project can accomplish many goals. It is the ability to layer multiple objectives on top of each other within public space where the greatest opportunities lie, both for funding projects and for using space efficiently. For example, a park can incorporate storm water management infrastructure into its design or traffic calming initiatives can be used to create small green spaces, and greenways can help meet public health and active transportation goals.

KEY POINTS

- Leverage funding from different divisions to use on a single project, such as water, parks, and transportation.
- Showcase the important role that parks play in public health, biodiversity, and storm water management by publicly recognizing these links.
- Create agreements for maintenance and operation of new open spaces between city departments so roles and responsibilities are clear.

CASE STUDIES

North Minneapolis Greenway, Minneapolis

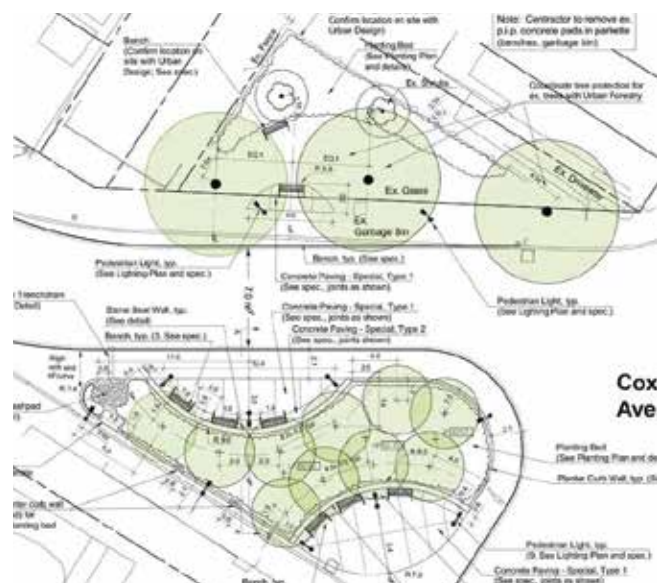
The North Minneapolis Greenway is a proposed project that would create a linear park and greenway through several blocks in North Minneapolis. The greenway would connect parks and green spaces along the route as well as create new mini-parks where selected cross-streets are closed to traffic.⁵⁹ Originally proposed by the volunteer-run Twin Cities Greenways group, the City took up the idea in 2012 with funding from the Minnesota Department of Health to develop an initial concept. The project is currently in community consultation and feasibility study phase, both funded by the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota as part of their focus on promoting healthy living. The benefits identified by the community were opportunities for community revitalization, a decrease in neighbourhood crime, and improved connections to parks, schools, and community centres as well as improved air quality and access to green space.⁶⁰



North Minneapolis Greenway Concept
City of Minneapolis and SRF Consulting Group

Coxwell/Fairford 'Green Streets' pilot, Toronto

The City's Green Streets program, led by Toronto Water and Urban Design within City Planning, is piloting green infrastructure designs at several locations around the city. The project at Coxwell Ave. and Fairford Ave. transforms a 'porkchop' traffic island—a triangular piece of land used to direct traffic—by redesigning it to include a bioretention planting bed, landscaping, trees, and seating areas. The work originated with a request to Transportation Services by the community to improve public safety by discouraging traffic cutting through the neighbourhood. Parks, Forestry & Recreation approved the design, and are supportive of the dual functioning of a new park space with storm water management capabilities. The new space is across from an existing small parkette and will be maintained by parks staff in two years once the contractor is no longer responsible.



Coxwell Fairford plans

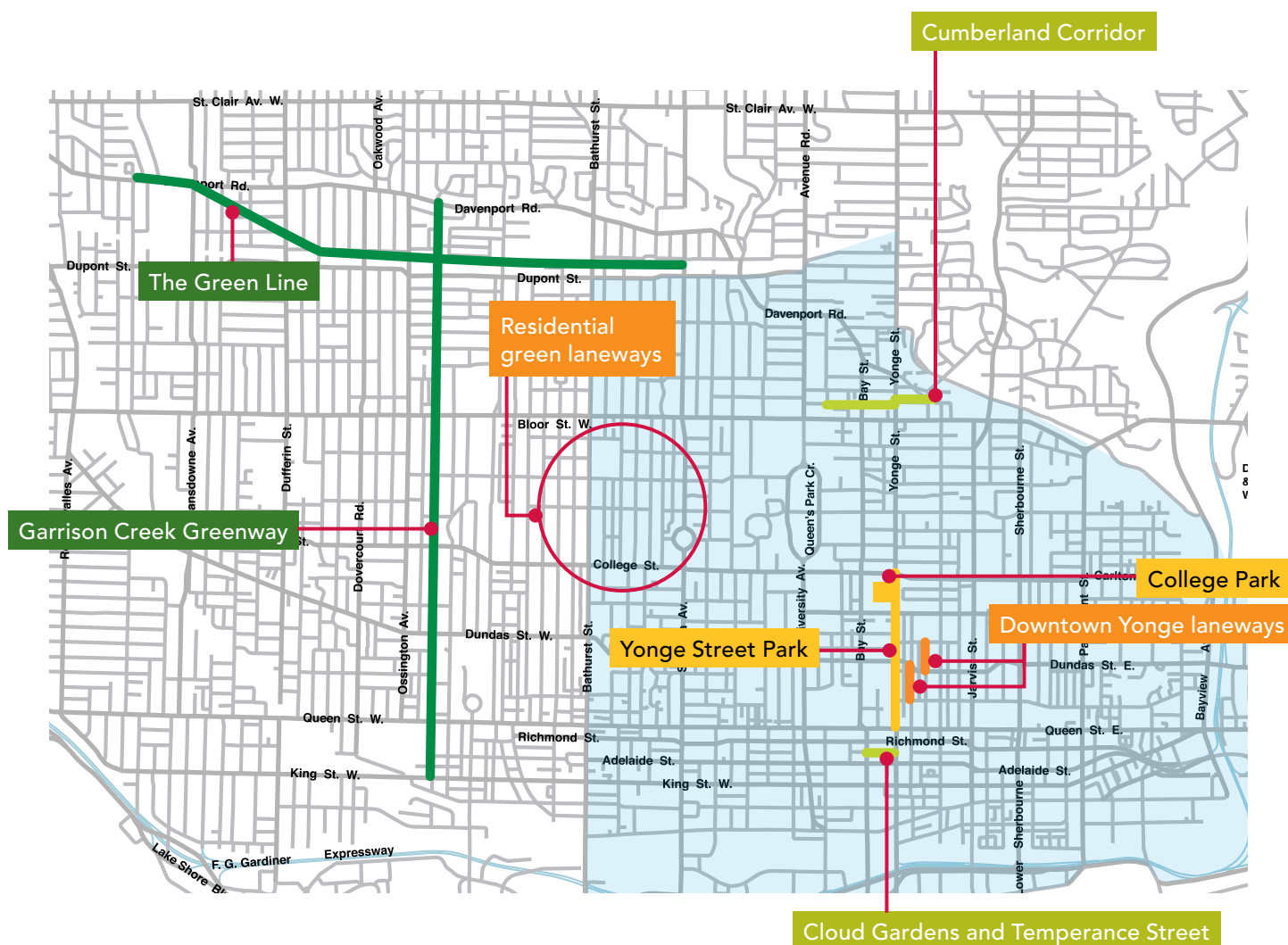
City of Toronto

OPPORTUNITIES IN DOWNTOWN TORONTO

The following opportunities are ones that build off the 8 principles presented in this paper for creating a more connected parks and open space system.

They are ideas that have been proposed by others, and are included here to illustrate the possibilities that exist for new creative thinking in Toronto. Here, we extend beyond the City's downtown boundaries to include Ward 19, which contains many important

parks and open spaces. There are numerous other opportunities not included here, such as decking portions of the rail corridor, building on the potential of University Avenue as a linear park corridor, and better connections with the nearby Don ravine system.



GARRISON CREEK GREENWAY

THE OPPORTUNITY

Reposition the existing Shaw Street bikeway as a greenway that connects multiple parks and pays tribute to Garrison Creek.



Creative seating at commercial intersection along Vancouver's Comox-Helmcken Greenway
Brent Granby



Seating on Vancouver's Comox-Helmcken Greenway outside Nelson Park
Brenty Granby



Planted corner bulge with seating

Brent Granby

Shaw Street is an important north-south route for cyclists and pedestrians, running near a number of parks along the historic Garrison Creek path including Christie Pits, Bickford, Fred Hamilton, and Trinity-Bellwoods. While a contraflow bike lane allowing cyclists to travel both ways on the one-way street was completed in 2014, Shaw Street's potential to connect these parks was not included. The 1996 Garrison Creek Linkage Plan identified Shaw Street's importance as a green connection and proposed sidewalk widening and more trees. Also identified in the plan as a potential greenway was Wellington Street, which should be explored as an east-west connection that could connect several parks through the Financial District and, through Front Street, to Corktown Common and the Don ravine system. A greenway would use way-finding, seating, and landscaping to increase connections between the multiple parks along its length. Many design ideas for increasing greenery and social space along greenway routes can be found in San Francisco's Green Connections plan.

CREATING GREEN CONNECTIONS

THE GREEN LINE

THE OPPORTUNITY

Transform a hydro corridor just north of downtown into a 5 kilometre linear park.



Current condition of the Green Line



Future potential Green Line

Workshop Architecture

The Green Line would create a new linear park just north of downtown starting at Earls Court Park and ending just past Spadina Road in the Annex. The 5 kilometre long linear park would be created by building new parks and linking existing ones within the Dupont hydro corridor. The City has already licensed the land, which is owned by the Province, for nine city parkettes along the corridor and is looking to acquire the licensing for more. The main challenges are disconnections along the route presented by parking lots, fences, grade changes, and roads. A master plan is needed that can coordinate the many different elements required for success, such as bridge connections over the roadways. The Green Line would provide important local park space, but also create connections between communities and into the north part of downtown. Formed in 2014, the Friends of the Green Line is a group of local residents and interested Torontonians working to make this project a reality.

BUILDING OFF EXISTING PARKS

CLOUD GARDENS AND TEMPERANCE STREET

THE OPPORTUNITY

Expand the Financial District's only public park by redesigning an adjacent street as a plaza space.



Los Angeles' Sunset Triangle

LA DOT



The flexibly designed Market Street in Toronto Woodcliffe Properties



Cloud Gardens and Temperance Street current condition

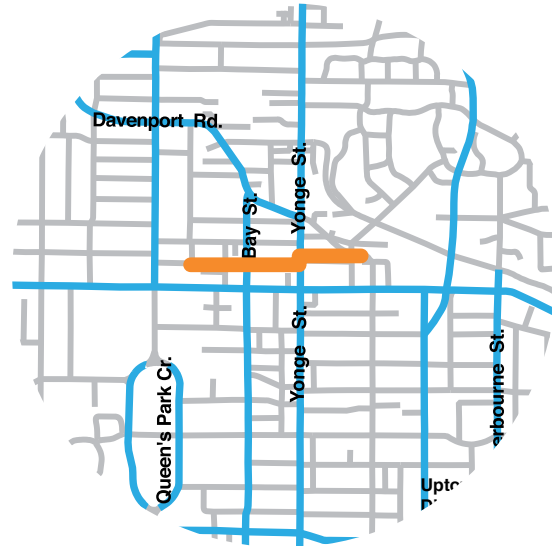
Temperance Street runs along the southern edge of Cloud Gardens, the Financial District's only public park. The park, which boasts a conservatory and water feature, is in need of repair and redesign. As part of this work, Temperance Street could be redesigned to complement the park as a permanent or flexible plaza—an idea proposed in the Financial District BIA's 2013 Public Realm Master Plan. This redesign would help expand public space in an area served mostly by privately-owned publicly accessible spaces. A new design would provide the opportunity to close the street permanently or in the warmer months and help visually extend the small park's boundaries, drawing more people to the space from nearby Yonge and Bay Streets. Until a permanent design becomes financially feasible, a quick intervention with paint, planters, and seating, similar to Los Angeles' Sunset Triangle Plaza, could be explored.⁶¹ Other small parks in Toronto could benefit from redesigning an adjacent street to become a part of the park, such as Anniversary Park in Corktown. This idea builds off work the City is already doing in the redesign of Berczy Park (see page 27).

BUILDING OFF EXISTING PARKS

CUMBERLAND CORRIDOR

THE OPPORTUNITY

Connect existing small parks in Yorkville within a unified corridor that includes a new park and pedestrian plaza.



Cumberland Street current condition



Cumberland Street Reimagined

The Planning Partnership



Transform Cumberland Street into an exciting public corridor and unique destination

**CUMBERLAND
RE-IMAGINED**

Cumberland Corridor map

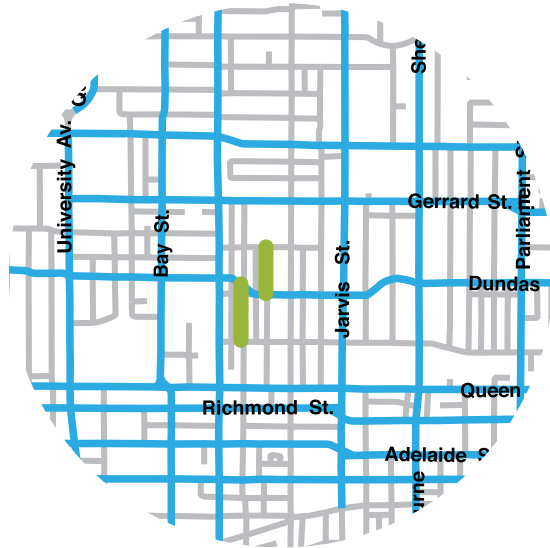
The Planning Partnership

The Bloor-Yorkville neighbourhood has recently seen many applications for high density development, which will put further strain on the existing small parks in the area. The proposed Cumberland Corridor would address this lack of new open space by building off the existing smaller parks in the area. It would create an open space corridor that would connect the existing Village of Yorkville Park to Asquith Green in the east, by creating a new park where the existing Bay Street Subway Station is located and by pedestrianizing a portion of Cumberland Street to create a plaza. The Cumberland Corridor idea was jointly developed by the Bloor-Yorkville BIA, the ABC Residents' Association, and the Greater Yorkville Residents Association, and designed by The Planning Partnership.

DOWNTOWN YONGE LANEWAYS

THE OPPORTUNITY

Revitalize commercial laneways around downtown Yonge Street as places for public art, greenery, and seating.



Downtown Yonge Street
laneway current condition
Downtown Yonge BIA



Linden Alley in San Francisco
Niall Kennedy



Mural in downtown Yonge Street laneway

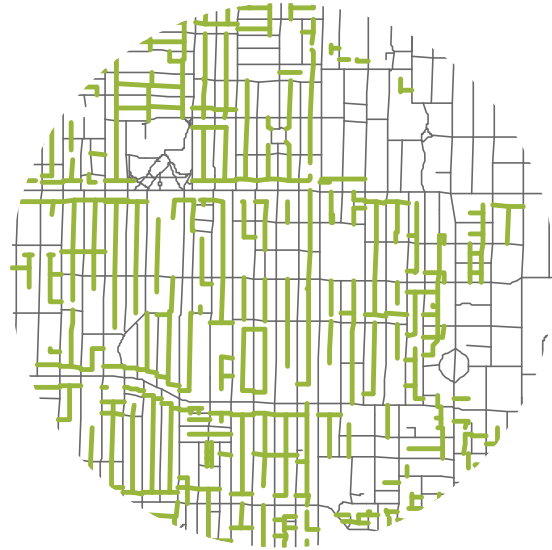
Downtown Yonge BIA

The Downtown Yonge BIA has been working with the City and several community partners on proposals and designs for improvements to two laneways, Victoria Lane and O'Keefe Lane, to create more pedestrian-friendly spaces with improvements such as café seating, greenery, and public art. Both laneway projects connect with existing public spaces—the Gould Street plaza in the case of Victoria Lane, and Yonge-Dundas Square in the case of O'Keefe Lane. Servicing, garbage collection, and working with a variety of business owners present major, but not insurmountable challenges. This project could help create a template for how laneway improvements work in other commercial areas with similar use and conditions.

RESIDENTIAL GREEN LANEWAYS

THE OPPORTUNITY

Capitalize on the numerous residential laneways and small parkettes in downtown residential neighbourhoods by creating laneway park connectors.



Full green alley conversion in Montreal
Regroupement des eco-quartiers



Laneway planter box treatment
Arrondissement de Villeray-Saint-Michel-Parc-Extension



Toronto residential laneway
*Michelle Senayah,
The Laneway Project*

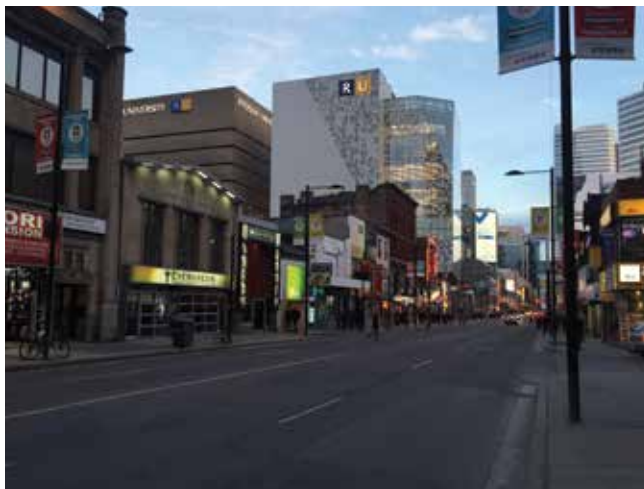
Many downtown residential neighbourhoods, such as Harbord Village, are rich in laneways that provide garage access and are already used as pedestrian and cycling connections and places for informal play and social gathering. There is an opportunity to identify potential green laneways that could link up with the neighbourhood's existing small parkettes, providing both increased access and green space—an idea that has been implemented through Montreal's Ruelles Vertes. This work could build on the Laneway Puncture demonstration project initiated by The Laneway Project and the David Suzuki Foundation in partnership with the City in Ward 19 where small landscaping improvements will be made to laneways that will be cared for by local residents.

CREATING AN ANIMATED, CENTRAL SPINE

YONGE STREET PARK

THE OPPORTUNITY

Create significant new public open space that turns Yonge Street into a place to linger with connections to nearby parks.



Yonge Street current condition



NXT City Prize winning design

Richard Valenzona

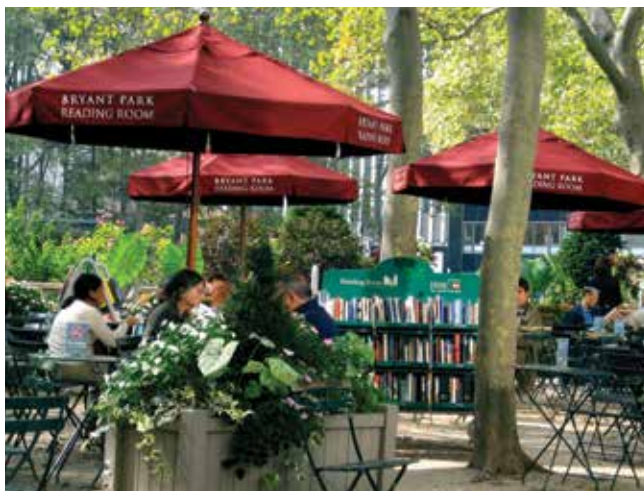
In 2016, Yonge Street is scheduled for major water main replacement, presenting an opportunity to redesign Toronto's iconic central retail street as a pedestrian-oriented space that provides more room for people and connects nearby green spaces. In fact, the winning entry from Richard Valenzona in Toronto's inaugural NXT City prize was a redesigned Yonge Street as a shared, curbsless street with wider sidewalks, increased tree plantings, and special paving designed to invite people to see the street as a single public space—many of the same ideas presented in Seattle's Bell Street Park. This idea follows on the heels of a 2011 study initiated by local councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam, which proposed more pedestrian space along the strip.⁶² The Downtown Yonge BIA's Celebrate Yonge pilot project and the associated traffic impact study will feed into Yonge Street's transformation. The street should also be redesigned to better connect with nearby parks, which are currently somewhat hidden, such as College Park and McGill and Granby Parkettes, and provide a site for unique community programming as was showcased during Celebrate Yonge.

CREATING AN ANIMATED, CENTRAL SPINE

COLLEGE PARK

THE OPPORTUNITY

Transform College Park into a lively, animated green hub through community-led programming and partnerships.



Bryant Park reading room

Jack Dorsey



Bryant Park Ping Pong
Kevin Jarrett



Summer music concert
in College Park
Downtown Yonge BIA

College Park is arguably one of Toronto's most urban parks, surrounded on all four sides by buildings and providing important green space for residents, workers, and tourists in a prime downtown location. Currently in disrepair, the park will be undergoing construction for a new design in 2016/2017, presenting an opportunity to create a renewed focus on the park's potential as a central, animated green space, much like New York City's much-loved Bryant Park. Building off the success of park friends groups in other Toronto parks, a community advisory committee with representatives from nearby residents and businesses could help focus energy on the park, working with the City to deliver programming. For example, the Downtown Yonge BIA holds a summer music series in the park as well as exercise programming, and a new advisory committee that included residents could build on this work. Another opportunity includes Grange Park, which is connected to the Art Gallery of Ontario and already has an advisory committee that has helped guide its impending redesign.

FOCUS ON GREATER FORT YORK: A MODEL FOR BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL PARKS AND OPEN SPACE SYSTEM

Toronto has lacked a signature major downtown park on the scale of a New York's Central Park or London's Hyde Park. However, thanks to creative partnerships, a focus on connections, and proactive planning, the green space system surrounding Fort York—referred to here as Greater Fort York—is becoming that signature park space, presenting a huge opportunity to continue to build on.

Until recently, the Fort York neighbourhood felt like a lost, neglected area separated from the rest of the city. Home to Molson's Brewery and St. Mary's Cement, the neighbourhood was a place you passed through to get elsewhere. The Gardiner Expressway cut through the area, isolating the Fort and creating a dead zone. There were few residents and little sense of community.

But over the past 15 years thousands of new residents have arrived, creating a new, dynamic neighbourhood with the 17-hectare green space of Fort York at its heart. The Fort is evolving into a key connector of neighbourhoods north and south of the expressway and a pedestrian and bike friendly green corridor from Trinity-Bellwoods Park to Lake Ontario and from Roundhouse Park to the Exhibition Grounds.

Andrew Stewart, Chair of the Fort York Foundation, a charity devoted to restoring and promoting the Fort, notes that the emergence of Greater Fort York's green space network benefits the Fort as well. The area is one of the largest urban archaeological sites in Canada, the location of British military facilities since the 1790s and aboriginal settlements before that. "It's Toronto's premier historic site, but it's also an amazing urban green space," he notes.⁶³



Performance at Fort York

Fort York



June Callwood Park



Potential park space underneath the Gardiner

David O'Hara

Good planning in the early 2000's was at the core of Greater Fort York's green space network. Reacting to proposals calling for exploding development that threatened to completely overshadow the Fort, community activists partnered with City staff to develop an open space plan for Fort York and Garrison Common in 2001 and a public realm plan for the Fort York neighbourhood in 2004, both by DTAH.

These plans laid out a strategy for a parks and open space network to be built out over time that respected the Fort and connected it to other neighbourhoods and the waterfront. The plans identified a need for a bridge connection over the rail tracks that would eventually become the planned Fort York Pedestrian and Cycling bridge, tree-lined streets and cycling routes, the Gardiner as an opportunity to create a unique urban place, and a development structure that respected views and reduced shadowing on green spaces. Importantly, these plans took a wide-angle lens and provided a framework for a system of parks and open spaces that would become the heart of this growing neighbourhood.

"Fort York for years has been buried behind rail and expressway. It's just been hidden for years, and you're seeing some of the major pieces of a decade's worth of planning falling into place."

David O'Hara to Toronto Star, July 14, 2014⁶⁴

Thanks to this proactive network-focussed planning, the 17 hectares of Fort York is now at the core of an approximately 40-hectare open space corridor spreading in all directions.

NORTH

In August 2014, the City approved the South Niagara Secondary Plan, which included designating just less than 3 hectares of additional parkland north of the Fort. When built, these new parks will fill in the gap between Stanley Park and Garrison Common, connected through the Fort York Pedestrian and Cycling Bridge. Stanley Park then leads up to the gates of Trinity-Bellwoods Park.

WEST

There are important connections to be made to extend the reach of these green spaces into the Liberty Village neighbourhood, which, while it contains Liberty Village Park, is low in parkland.

EAST

Mouth of Creek Park will be constructed west of Bathurst. The Puente de Luz Bridge leads into North Linear Park along CityPlace and emerges into Canoe Landing and Roundhouse Parks. A proposed linear park along Wellington Street would provide another eastward connection to link Victoria Memorial and Clarence Squares.

SOUTH

June Callwood Park and Gore Park connect to Coronation Park, Lake Ontario, and the new park being constructed by the provincial government in a former Ontario Place parking lot.



Potential park space underneath the Gardiner

DTAH

Aside from a growing number of connected park spaces, the inventive programming that the City's Arts and Culture Division is delivering—the operator and oversee of Fort York—is a key element in Greater Fort York's status as an emerging central park space. Music festivals, theatre, interactive art installations, large-scale food festivals, and community picnics are introducing new people to the site and bringing in revenues to support the Fort's operation. "It's about building awareness," said David O'Hara, Manager of the Fort York site. "There aren't many major cities in North America that have their founding landscape intact in the core of the downtown."⁶⁵

Greater Fort York has also benefited from active community partnerships and stewardship from groups like the Friends of Fort York. Besides playing a strong role in protecting and enhancing the Fort, the Friends were a key community partner in developing the green space plans over the past two decades, calling the plans "a major step forward in capturing the potential for sustained city-building that can take place over the next decade."⁶⁶

While important work is being done through pedestrian and cycling connections, a key remaining element is to link Greater Fort York to other adjacent densely built communities to improve access to this significant parks and open space system that reaches many residents in growing nearby neighbourhoods.

For example, the extension of the West Toronto Railpath will add an important connection, allowing cyclists and pedestrians from just south of St. Clair Avenue West to travel to the area on an entirely separated path. Adding to this emerging network is the proposed The Well development on the lands south of Wellington Street between Draper Street and Spadina Avenue. If approved, this development proposes to re-establish the historical linear park link between Victoria Memorial Square and Clarence Square, helping the cluster of parks around Fort York extend east into the bottom of the King-Spadina neighbourhood. Finally, the Shaw Street bikeway adds another connection to a number of parks and neighbourhoods to the north and links in with the proposed Green Line just north of Dupont Street.

The Gardiner Expressway, which runs on an elevated roadway just south of Fort York and Garrison Common, could also become an important open space by greening the land underneath to create usable park space. This would extend the work done for the newly opened Fort York Visitor's Centre, which opens underneath the Gardiner as well as connect with the newly finished June Callwood Park to the south. In much the same way as Underpass Park, the new visitor's centre is already making people reimagine the spaces under the Gardiner as dynamic open space, not a concrete barrier.

Building out the park network in the Fort York neighbourhood represents an unparalleled opportunity in Toronto's downtown to make connections between the waterfront and the rest of the city, the City's cycling infrastructure, cultural and historical institutions, and new neighbourhoods.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Explore new park funding, programming, and management models that can respond to the pressures of urban neighbourhoods.



Regent Park

Heather Jarvis

Buy new parkland

- New park space must be acquired to help meet the growing need for green space, especially in the downtown. To date, the City has not been adequately spending money that it has collected for parkland acquisition through levies on development. The City should focus on acquiring larger downtown park spaces, rather than spreading out acquisition funding for smaller spaces. Larger parks are more difficult to acquire by other means, such as on-site dedications and public right-of-way conversions, and could help spur more public and political support due to their size.
- The City should also explore more flexible park acquisition rules in response to the realities of the downtown real estate market by, for example, allowing staff to negotiate beyond appraised market value.

Engage with and empower communities in parks and open spaces.

- Consider new park operation models that involve community members directly in park decision-making, fundraising, and programming to ensure these spaces live up to their potential and meet diverse needs. Use the relationship framework developed for the Association of Community Centres, which are managed by a hybrid City/non-profit citizen board,⁶⁷ and park friends groups as a starting point.
- Particularly within open spaces created on streets and in laneways, there are opportunities for the City to partner with residents, non-profit groups, and local businesses in construction, programming, and maintenance. For example, while the City has developed a parklets program,⁶⁸ it has been low key with no uptake to date. The experience of programs such as Vancouver's Viva Vancouver, Los Angeles' People St., New York's Plaza Program, and San Francisco's Pavement to Parks offer compelling models for successfully promoting streets-to-parks opportunities and partnerships. The City could consider a grant to help offset the capital construction costs in order to reduce barriers to entry for particular communities

The Province and City should review the use of Section 42 park levies to offer more flexibility

- Currently Section 42 funding is used for park improvements and land acquisition as allowed by the Planning Act. However, in downtown, where land prices are extremely high, it may be prudent in some cases to explore the use of that funding for alternative park improvements and open space creation. For example, using Section 42 funding, at least in part, to create linkages directly between park spaces, such as pedestrian bridges, as well as creating new parks and plazas on streets and laneways.

Recognize the important role schoolyards play as green space

- The current funding formula for Toronto District School Board does not recognize the use of schools for important community uses, such as green space. Additionally, the Province charges the City market rate for any land declared surplus, putting the City in the unfortunate position of needing to buy already public land just to keep it as green space. The Province needs to work with the City to develop a solution that recognizes the diverse role that schools play in communities, including as local green spaces, and, in situations where school sites are declared surplus, allow the City to buy green space at below market rates to ensure these important amenities are kept in public ownership.



Village of Yorkville Park

Jake Tobin Garrett

Increase maintenance funding for high-use parks

- When something is more heavily used, it requires more upkeep. Extra stress is put on high-use parks in dense neighbourhoods such as downtown, which are used by an increasing amount of residents, workers, and tourists, as well as for events. Despite this, a 2014 budget request for extra summer maintenance dollars for high-use parks, which stemmed from recommendations in the Council-approved 2013 Parks Plan, was turned down.⁶⁹ This should be included within the 2016 budget.
- Additionally, consider pursuing funding partnerships with local BIAs, as is currently done with streetscapes, to supplement City maintenance work and keep heavily used parks well maintained.

Proactively plan and design for a flexible, connected parks and open space system.

Invest in community-driven neighbourhood parks and open space plans.

- In order to address the needs of neighbourhoods that are experiencing growth or change, we need to proactively plan at the neighbourhood-scale. Only by laying out a vision for land acquisition, connections, and amenities can we begin to prioritize and coordinate these toward a common goal of a connected system that serves different user groups, ages, and abilities.
- Parks and open space planning should be based on an assessment of park use and needs that goes beyond typical consultations to include observations and data collection of actual use and movement between parks. This can help the City adapt to the changing use of parkland and identify challenges or opportunities that may have otherwise been missed, whether this is the need for more seating, increased accessibility, special programming, or new sport facilities.
- Engaging communities within this process should lay the groundwork for potential future partnerships related to programming and stewardship with residents and other organizations.



Humber Bay Shores Park

Use parks and open space systems as the foundation of neighbourhood development.

- A connected parks and open space network should be used as the core organizing principle for development, cycling infrastructure, pedestrian and streetscape improvements, and green infrastructure. Thinking about parks and open spaces first, rather than afterwards can uncover hidden opportunities for building out this network. For example, how can cycling routes connect with green spaces? How can city infrastructure be incorporated into green space, such as the storm water system in Sherbourne Common or the flood berm in Corktown Common. How can new public space be created through traffic calming and pedestrian-related improvements?

Identify a network of greenways that can link existing parks and open spaces.

- Through the development of the TOCore Study, the Complete Streets guidelines, and the update to the Toronto Cycling Plan, the City should identify a network of greenway routes that can create safe, pleasant links for cycling and walking between parks and ravines. These could include upgrading existing bikeways, such Shaw Street, to include elements such as landscaping, green infrastructure, and small social spaces. Routes that create better access to our ravines and hydro corridors by integrating with those existing trail systems should be a priority.
- Toronto should take an example from other cities and brand greenway routes with names, such as the Garrison Creek Greenway for Shaw Street, to establish a unique identity, much as it does with its trails.

Include streets, sidewalks, and laneways within parks and open space planning.

- We need to revise our policy and planning documents to recognize the public right-of-way as an important element in parks and open space planning. Currently the Official Plan does not recognize the potential to create open space and park linkages using the city's more than 250 linear kilometres of public laneways.⁷⁰ It also does not recognize streets as a potential source of new park space. Opportunities to reallocate space in the public right-of-way should be a part of the update to the City's parks acquisition strategy.

- Transportation Services or related staff should be included upfront in park redesigns where improvements to the public right-of-way could act as a complement. For example, with smaller, heavily used parks, we should explore how to incorporate the surrounding sidewalks and streets to extend park edges—an element that should be part of the City's Complete Street guidelines for streets that border parks. The integration of a redesign for Scott Street into the park design process for Berczy Park provides a model for moving forward with future park redesigns.

Move quickly on improvements and experiment with new ideas

- Any parks and open space plans should identify opportunities for pilot projects, in addition to longer term improvements, that can be implemented quickly and inexpensively, potentially through community partnerships. These pilot projects can help build momentum toward permanent changes by making them visible and building a constituency of supporters, reducing the possibility that good ideas sit on shelves due to lack of funds. We need to see improvements now, not five or ten years from now.
- Holding a public design competition is a good way to generate buzz and develop temporary open space solutions that can test different ideas. While Toronto's inaugural NXT City prize in 2014 asked for general creative public space ideas, a competition that identifies a specific site so the winning idea can be built, as Vancouver does with the Robson Square competition, would present a tangible public benefit.

SOURCES

The content of this report was informed by conversations with Toronto city councillors and city staff, as well as key individuals representing the planning, architecture, business, community, and development fields, within Toronto and in other North American cities. Wherever quotes appear that are not attributed to other sources they are the result of a personal conversation with the author.

A review of plans, strategies, and reports related to parks and open space planning was also undertaken. Below is a list of select resources for those interested in further exploring.

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About the Author

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