

OBIAA 2023 AWARDS SUBMISSION

Contact Name: Matthew Mohan	Pillar & Category: Public Realm, Streetscaping and Public Realm Improvements
BIA/Organization: The Cabbagetown BIA	Time period: July – September 2022
Entry title: The Cabbagetown Parkscape Project	
Project description: <i>(two sentences; 50 words or less)</i> The Cabbagetown Parkscape was an immersive public realm project designed and created to build a unique connection to nature on our urban streets, providing vital support to its businesses in post-pandemic recovery. From July to September, residents and visitors alike could stroll through five naturally designed parkettes, where they would discover public seating under shady canopies, spaces designed for entertainment for the community, and plenty of areas for everyone to explore, relax, and play.	

NEED OR OPPORTUNITY

The Cabbagetown BIA is a not-for-profit community agency formed and funded by local commercial property owners and tenants. As one of Toronto’s oldest BIAs, we work in partnership with residents, community groups, social services, and all three levels of government to create a vibrant and thriving business community that attracts shoppers, diners, tourists, and new businesses. We are always looking for new and better ways to serve our businesses and build a sense of community.

Challenge 1, The Impact of COVID-19 on Small Businesses: Before COVID, the “[Walmart Effect](#)” and the “[Amazon Prime Effect](#)” were prominent. These existing foot traffic and sales challenges have been significantly enhanced by the COVID pandemic and cannot be understated. Foot traffic monitoring has shown that our foot traffic has decreased by ~50% since the pandemic started, and growth back to pre-pandemic levels has been slow. COVID-19 left one-stop-shop online corporate retailers more dominant than ever, while the small businesses that did survive were barely hanging on. However, [according to](#) Moneris’ chief sales and marketing officer Jeff Guthrie, retail communities could survive the “Prime Effect” by ensuring that they can provide an experience to visitors young and old. With traditional high-traffic summer events challenging during COVID, we require more covid-safe outdoor programs that bring visitors and tourists back to our small business neighbourhoods. The Parkscape project would encourage visitors and families to explore the community over a few months rather than in a one-day festival, making it appealing in a post-pandemic world. In providing this opportunity for the community to safely spend time outside together, this project would support our small businesses. A similar activation along Yonge Street in 2012 led to a 30% increase in foot-traffic and a 50% increase in revenue for local businesses.

Challenge 2, Lack of Space for Community Events & Live Music: Traditionally, live music venues create spaces that bring people together and provide them with a sense of identity and belonging in their city. Music venues support the economic growth of other business sectors within a city and neighbourhood. [Research from Music Canada](#) found that “music lovers can’t wait to get back to seeing live shows, once it’s safe to do so.” At the same time, some Torontonians are still hesitant about doing their shopping and dining indoors. But we know that it is essential for businesses to host community events in order to drive increased sales, through what is known as [Experiential shopping](#) - the idea that “rather than just going into a shop to browse and to get advice from the sales staff, the in-store experience should be rich and immersive. It’s a term that describes retail spaces where shoppers encounter artworks, live events, cafés, lounging areas, video displays and virtual reality technology.” In a BIA where there is very limited public space at its disposal, particularly narrow sidewalks (narrower than the City minimum standard of 2.1 metres), and few live music venues, the Parkscape Project gives local performers and local small businesses the opportunity to connect with people right on the street. This summer-long transformation provided outdoor space for active community programming and engagement opportunities, including pop-ups, vendors, musical performances, as well as recreational fitness activities. We must be continuously rethinking how we use the underutilized urban space that we do have at our disposal.

Challenge 3, Lack of Greenspace & Public Seating: Having easily-accessible green public space in Toronto is particularly important near high-density neighbourhoods such as St James Town and Regent Park where public space is an important extension of the home. In some areas, residents, especially parents with young children and seniors, can’t easily get to more expansive green spaces like the Don Valley to the east and require more natural amenities. Further, without green spaces within the BIA proper, other residents of Cabbagetown are more likely to leave Cabbagetown for neighbouring space such as Riverdale Park and Queens Park, hurting our businesses. Additionally, Cabbagetown is one of the few, if only, main streets in downtown Toronto that has no benches or seating for visitors. Public seating is vital for attracting people to sit, stay, linger, and spend money in a neighbourhood, as well as supports our street-involved population. Public seating, such as that which would be provided by this project, makes a main street welcoming. Sadly, however, our BIA has faced backlash and oppositions from resident communities in the past for pursuing benches and public seating. The success of this project would act as a catalyst for

future infrastructure improvements by our BIA. The Cabbagetown Parkscape is a bold project meant to inspire people to safely reconnect with nature - and one another - at the end of a long and trying pandemic.

AUDIENCE

Community members included an unweighted but representative mix of business owners/operators, local residents, and local community groups.

Business owners/operators:

- 160 property owners and tenants across 4 major retail categories, including retail, service, and restaurant.
- The majority of businesses are small locally-owned businesses with less than 10 employees. Their strengths are in providing a personal experience in connecting with their customers, which can be enhanced throughout the summer with the Parkscape project.
- Retail and service businesses are targeted by the project for opportunities to connect with new customers, such as workshops, events, contests, or sales right on the streets.
- Restaurants – many of whom have small interiors and low internal capacity - are targeted by the project for opportunities to attract customers for takeout throughout the summer. With outdoor eating areas available for takeout on Parkscape, restaurants can attract more customers that want to eat outdoors.

Residents:

- Median age is 34, but we see the average age quickly aging up and families increasing. Seniors often make use of public parks and greenspace; it is particularly important that installations are accessible.
- Family households 42% vs non-family units 58%.
- Households w children 19% vs households without children 81%.
- Majority are employed by private companies vs government, non-profit, or self-employed.
- Average household income is \$104,185 and median household income is \$69,761
- Most common mode of transportation for residents is the car, so it was important that installations were spread out enough to still have
- Residents of Cabbagetown feel a strong sense of community and often have a higher income to support small businesses. Residents also tend to be very outspoken regarding changes to their neighbourhood and politically-connected, making it worthwhile for developers to build goodwill re sponsorship.
- There are also many social services around Cabbagetown that attract lower income people and street-involved people. Therefore, this project additionally targets those people who are street involved, encouraging them to spend time in a more comfortable space than the sidewalk and encourages them to spread out across the community (using 5 parklets) instead of clustering at one or two corners.

GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

Goal(s):

- Increase public space and greenspace in The Cabbagetown BIA.
- Support the local business community.
- Enhance the visitor and resident experience in The Cabbagetown BIA.

Objectives:

- Have at least 10 businesses test out providing outdoor “experiential shopping” experiences in the Parkscape spaces across the summer.
- For at least 60% of visitors or residents to want to see more live performances and more public space streetscape projects come to Cabbagetown following the project.
- To attract 10-15 media hits about the project in Toronto.
- To add at least 500 new digital followers for The Cabbagetown BIA

IMPLEMENTATION

The idea to repurpose and take over urban curb lane spaces to create vibrant and green park space came to previous Executive Director Rick Matthews in 2021 after seeing the success of the Living Streets Project by Bienenstock Natural Playground in 2012 and the success of the CafeTO patio program in 2020. If we could repurpose this space for diners, why not into an actual park? He applied for funding through a federal grant which was unsuccessful. Following this, he endeavoured to still make this project a success, pulling in the support of various partners. Bienenstock Natural Playgrounds was founded in 2012 to convert denuded,

under-utilized urban properties into catalysts for community development, natural spaces that bring new purpose to our urban environments and optimize for the full spectrum human experience. The Living Streets Project was designed to demonstrate the ease with which we might the unlock community–building capacity in our urban spaces. Bienenstock would be experts in developing the infrastructure and headed the sourcing, acquiring, and installing materials, as well as a timely installation. We also acquired the support of the City of Toronto and the support of then-Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam (now MPP), allowing us to co-opt curb lane and parking spaces for this new project. Finally, we required funding. We reached out and were fortunate to solidify a partnership with sponsors CentreCourt and Fitzrovia, who provided 100% of the funding for the physical parkscape. We presented this as a great opportunity for these companies with nearby developments to give back to the community and build goodwill with local residents, many of whom may considered “NIMBYs”.

Following staff turnover, Executive Director Virginia Gallop took over the project in late 2021. The proposal gained the full support of the entire BIA membership (over 200+ businesses), residents associations and local social service providers. We then secured approval from the businesses and residents most directly impacted in the areas where the park will be installed, who were all hopeful for the project. Some local businesses were happy to donate their potential CafeTO patio spaces for the project. We then developed preliminary designs for the project and secured funding, as well as went through the permits and approvals process. Bienenstock Natural Playgrounds are experts in developing outdoor, natural infrastructure, and they headed the sourcing, acquiring, and installing materials. We made it a priority to ensure that the installations were flush with the curb so that they were fully accessible. They completed the installation at the end of June 2022. [A notice](#) was provided to residents with important information to reduce any negative impacts. Some [speculated](#) that the project was naturally calming for the area.

The natural urban playground was installed in less than four days along Parliament St from Carlton St to Winchester St, allowing for one lane of traffic in each direction. Once installed, the materials were regularly maintained and were refreshed halfway through the project. At the end of the project period, the natural materials that were used to construct the park were repurposed within the community to support local service agencies.

To raise awareness of and promote the project before and throughout, BIA staff shared posts and created curated stories for social media and our e-newsletter (~20,000 followers) and released a press release to Toronto news outlets. Posts contained the hashtag #CabbagetownParkscape and #ThinkInsideThePark to increase recognition and engagement. Our marketing collateral served as an instructional and welcoming notice to visitors. The marketing collateral, featured across numerous mediums, included one 4-ft x 6-ft transit poster; four 21x28-inch public kiosk notices; 100 8.5x11-inch member posters; a webpage banner; 2 promo videos; 10 e-blasts; and all related social media posts.

The BIA invited and encouraged business members to host “Pop-ups in the Park” through the summer, creating limited-time-only naturally immersive experiences. Businesses could forge organic connections with potential clients by engaging with the Parkscape in unassuming ways that leave folks with ideas rather than pressures. Some ideas provided by the BIA included inviting folks to participate in a discounted trial service or demonstrate their services in the Parkscape; or sending out team members with samples on a tray to hand out to the public. As we know, when customers are having fun, they will spend more time interacting with a business and becoming immersed in the brand - and are more likely to part with their money. Multiple business members took advantage of the opportunity to provide experiences and programming in Parkscape to benefit their business, including Timeless Collective, that popped-up a beautiful and stylish retail store in the Parkscape one Saturday; Meridian Bank, that partnered with The Great Mallard County Market to host fun & games like ring toss and gave out fantastic prizes; and Urban Sketchers, that hosted sketching workshops where attendees would sketch passersby, storefronts, and the streetscape. We also hosted Programming in the Park with Parkscape – finally possible *within* the BIA boundary. We put out a Call for Performers and welcomed, award-winning artists, eclectic bands, and even a Ukulele Sing & Play Along for the kids.

Finally, we hosted a one-day “mini-festival” for visitors and residents of Cabbagetown to enjoy the Cabbagetown Parkscape one last time on Saturday, Sept 11. We knew that this would be a most welcomed event following the postponement of the traditional large-scale Cabbagetown Festival which was cancelled due to COVID in 2019. The street was closed within the footprint of the Parkscape and a portion of Carlton Street East, converted into a pedestrian promenade, and featured live music and fun for the whole family.

Costs for 5 Parkscape Installations (sponsor-funded): Site Prep and Removal (\$86,964) + Vegetation (\$25,000) + Surfacing (\$61,372) + Elements (\$57,736) + Other Refreshing and Management (\$75,000) = **\$306,071 + HST**

Costs for Ongoing Activations & Marketing (BIA-funded): \$5,000

Costs for Closing Event: \$14,452

RESULTS

Objectives	Outcomes
Have at least 10 businesses test out providing outdoor “experiential shopping” experiences in the Parkscape spaces across the summer.	13 businesses participated in Po-ups in the Park, setting an example for the rest of the BIA.
For at least 60% of visitors or residents to want to see more live performances and more public space streetscape projects come to Cabbagetown following the project.	90% of all respondents (businesses, attendees, and residents) would or could like to see large-scale public realm projects like Parkscape return in the future. 73% of visitors would like to see more live performances in the future.
To attract 10-15 media hits about the project in Toronto.	20 total media hits about Parkscape. Top performers were BlogTO, CBC News, and CityNews, some of which included onsite video reporting.
To add at least 500 new digital followers for The Cabbagetown BIA.	Social media followers increased by 573 and email subscribers increase by 160 from the start to the end of the campaign.

Other Success Highlights:

1. Visitor experience

- a. Visitor’s overall experience visiting Parkscape was rated very highly.
- b. Nearly 90% of visitors were likely to recommend the project to family and friends.

2. Increased Public Space and Greenspace in Cabbagetown

- a. Added seating for up to 200 people and play space to an urban environment which had nearly no seating previously, *at no cost to the BIA or the City of Toronto.*
- b. Added 200 metres green space including trees, grass, natural seating, pathways and even a naturally hollowed out tree as a photo booth.
- c. Proved to the community at large that public seating in Cabbagetown, rather than being misused, would be actively utilized and enjoyed on a regular basis.
- d. Brought weekly live music and entertainment to The Cabbagetown BIA without the need to close whole streets or roadways, traditionally required during a Festival.
- e. Received a [Certificate of Recognition](#) from MP Marci Ien’s office for our successful contribution to greenspace in downtown Toronto and the TABIA Streetscape Award at the 10th Annual City of Toronto Recognition Awards.

3. Support for Local Businesses

- a. No business owners reported that the Parkscape project had a negative effect on their business.
- b. Multiple business owners utilized the space in order to connect with customers directly on the street, setting an example to all businesses about the importance of providing immersive experiences.
- c. Business owner reported numerous customers using naturalized seating for dining and takeaway.

[Parkscape] is what the streets can look like when you design spaces for people. -MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam

Challenges and Recommendations:

- 60% of business owners were unsure if the Parkscape project effected their business. In the future, would recommend that more is done to encourage businesses to make use of the space.
- While we did increase followers, I would recommend that more money be invested into boosted posts to increase impressions (only 43,000 impressions) and that there is an investment into a Canadian News Wire release to increase media posts.
- Comments in our community survey indicate that there was confusion as to where the funding came from, with many believing that the project was funded through the BIA or city taxes. In the future, on-street signage and additional digital promotions tools should be used to make it clear where funding came from.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

1. The Cabbagetown Parkscape Project Final Report:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1X5qPtP7vd6QWwi4_1rvR80peJQuXisHg/view?usp=share_link

2. Parkscape Promotional Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4Afu0KHizQ>

3. CBC News Article about Parkscape: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/cabbagetown-parkscape-toronto-1.6509387>

4. Enticing Social Post following along with the installation: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CfcGq8aJJR-/>
5. Enticing Social Post of a business owner using the Parkscape project to sell to new customers on the main strip: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CgC4qKyFc1V/>
6. Enticing Social Post of a live music performance made possibly by the project: https://www.instagram.com/p/Cf_m4kHFEfP/