

Allan Gardens Co-Design Conversation Report

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Allan Gardens Co-Design Conversation Report

In the spring of 2020, Saint Luke’s United Church began a community conversation with a number of community stakeholders on exploring ways of making Allan Gardens an inclusive public common. In the July of 2021 we began a co-design consultation *to develop programming in Allan Gardens to optimize its benefit to the diverse neighborhood it serves. Benefit is defined as how an event/program can function to address the cultural, artistic, health, and social needs of the neighborhood.*

Our steering committee includes representatives of the Friends of Allan Gardens, Sherbourne Health, Dixon Hall, Ryerson University Office of Social Innovations, OAHAS (a social service/health agency which provides services to the local Indigenous community) Faith in the City, Raylah Moonias (a local Anishinaabe artist) and Saint Luke's United Church. Emily Martyn, project lead for the City's Downtown East's Redevelopment Project, is aware of our community engagement and is eager to have our findings presented to the City.

Co-Design is a process for bringing diverse members of a community together to develop creative new ideas, innovative approaches to persistent problems, and build alignment and momentum for action (See Appendix 1).

We defined the neighborhood for Allan Gardens as a ten-minute walk, north, south, east, and west. The assumption here is that urban residents normally will not walk more than 10 minutes to access to what they consider ‘their’ park. We understand that Allan Gardens is also a park with municipal and regional wide appeal and mandates.

The Consultation Process

Borrowing from the Tamarack Institute’s approach to co-design process (See Appendix 1), our study flows from sharing community perspectives through deciding a path forward. Each consulted with the groups they work with and whom they were most familiar with.

They asked those they interviewed the following questions as conversation starters. The point was to get their views on what they think will help their group maximize use of Allan Gardens and what policies are not helping in this respect.

1. *What brings you to Allan Gardens?*
2. *If you had unlimited funds, what would you do to improve Allan Gardens?*
3. *What, if anything, disappoints you about Allan Gardens?*
4. *Is there something in Allan Gardens, or something that happens there, that makes you happy?*

Responses

What follows first is a summary of the likes and dislikes, and the changes that different neighborhood groups expressed a desire for. The full report of each group is summarized in Appendix 2.

Our next step will be a public forum where these suggestions are put forward for comment, and suggested changes. Our report will conclude with concrete recommendations on how our object can move forward to **develop programming in Allan Gardens to optimize its benefit to the diverse neighborhood it serves.**

Divergence and Convergence

1. All groups contacted wanted the park to be used by people for various cultural, recreational, artistic health and social activities. While their specific “asks” are different, (that is the people with dogs want improvements to the dog park while the Indigenous folks want permanent space in the Park for a tee pee and a place for Indigenous drumming and dancing), there were many overlapping requests.
2. There were disagreements about the encampments with a minority of those we spoke with wanting the tents removed, while others recognized that those this was not the ideal situation, they wanted the needs of those in the park addressed before they are moved.
3. Security is the issue which has the most divergence. All see safety /security an issue. Some want police presence and more supervision by park staff. Others see police and park officials intimidating and oppressive and want their presence diminished.
4. Similarly, a minority saw the limitation of seating in the park was seen by some residents as an appropriate security measure while many more expressed that this was shockingly inappropriate and contrary to the treatment of so many other parks. They called for expanded seating so they can sit in the park and read or rest, get fresh air, and gather and enjoy the park with their friends.

What is hopeful in spite of this divergence is that everyone spoken enthusiastically expressed the value of park to their health and well-being.

Recommendations

The following are proposed recommendations to take to a public forum:

1. That a neighborhood-based table be established to consult on the development and promotion of events, programs, and general usage of the park. This table would then develop appropriate strategies to cut through City red tape and support the realization of these events, programs, and activities.
2. That a neighborhood-based table be set up to work with the police, park officials, service providers, resident associations, and Indigenous representatives to explore alternatives to policing and strict limits on sitting space that will also ensure safety/security in the park.

Appendix 1

Co-Design Process

Co-Design is a process for bringing diverse members of a community together to develop creative new ideas, innovative approaches to persistent problems, and build alignment and momentum for action.

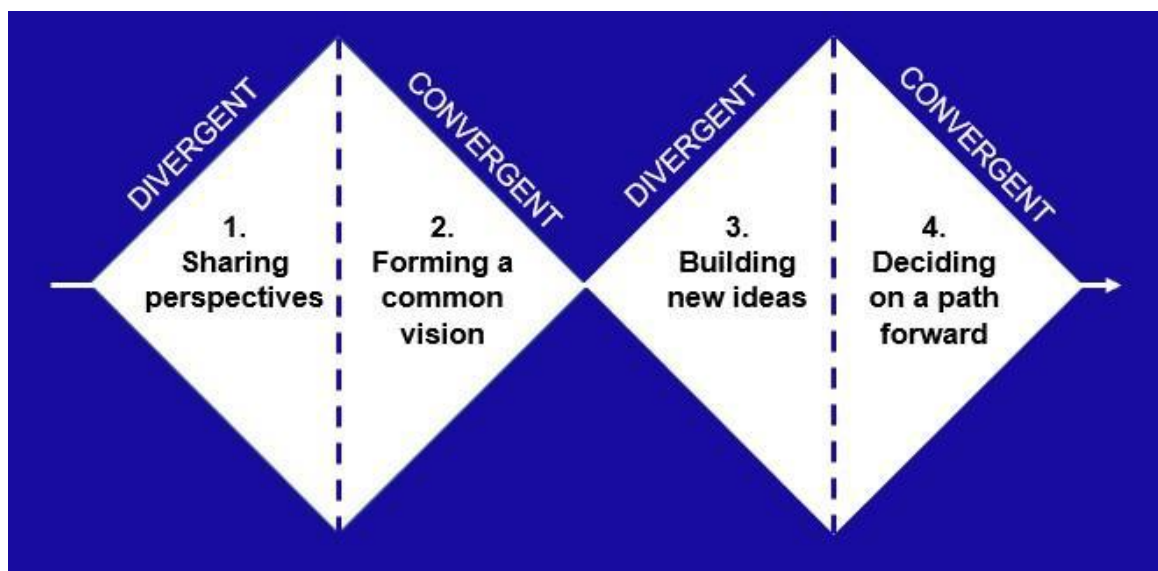
It is based on the following principles:

Community matters. Lived experience is integral. A shared vision offers a unifying purpose. People are inherently creative. Changes made ‘with’ and ‘by’ a community are much more likely to succeed. Working collaboratively helps to share and distribute risk.

We defined the neighborhood for Allan Gardens as a ten-minute walk, north, south, east and west. The assumption here is that urban residents normally will not walk more than 10 minutes to access to what they consider ‘their’ park.

We understand that Allan Gardens is also a park with municipal and regional wide appeal and mandates. Our partner, Friends of the Allan Gardens, has and is working with the City on design and programming to integrate both the local neighborhood needs, and the municipal and regional demands. The work of our co-design project focuses essentially on the use of the park by people in its neighborhood.

Borrowing from the Tamarack Institute’s approach to co-design, our study flows from sharing community perspectives to deciding a path forward:



Each steering group committee member serves or has strong relationships with key groups of the neighborhood community. To gather a range of perspectives, each member consulted with the groups they work with and with whom they were most familiar.

They asked the following questions as conversation starters. The point was to get their views on what they think will help their group maximize use of Allan Gardens and what policies are not helping in this respect.

1. *What brings you to Allan Gardens?*
2. *If you had unlimited funds, what would you do to improve Allan Gardens?*
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4. *Is there something in Allan Gardens or something that happens there that makes you happy?*

Appendix 2

Consultation Reports

OHAS Group Engagement

OHAS engaged with folks from the Native Women's Centre, Anishinaabe Health, Native Fire Council and many of their own clients .

These people come to Allan Gardens for the programs that are there specific to Indigenous needs. They come to enjoy nature and in particular the hawks. They would improve the park with Indigenous art and the removal of the statue of Robert Burns. They would like a dedicated space for a sacred fire and a teepee. One Indigenous artist stated Allan Gardens needs a number of permanent chess and or/other games tables. Many named how much they enjoy the Neechee Healing Circle.

They are disappointed with police presence and the city taking down tents. They are also disappointed with a lack of benches. If they could, they would provide permanent housing for all who camp out in the Allan Gardens.

Sherbourne Health Team Engagement

Sherbourne Health surveyed over three separate weeks in October 2021 folks who live in the park, visit the park, and attend gatherings in the park (ex. Neechee Circle). The results of their survey are found in Appendix 3

To summarize their survey, the folks they talked to see the park as a beautiful greenspace in the city where they can meet and enjoy nature with their friends. They particularly enjoy the Indigenous gatherings such as the Neechee Healing Circle and different drumming and dancing events. Some that are homeless find it a place they can find some sanctuary and safety. Others treasure it as a place to gather and meet and converse with friends.

They would like to see more Indigenous cultural activities, as well as multicultural events. They want more circle areas with benches where people could gather and form community. They want bike racks, and those who are homeless want support for their needs to be found in the park.

This group had issues with the cleanliness of the park. They complained about the fighting, intimidation, alcohol and drug use. At the same time, they expressed disappointment with what they see as a heavy-handed police presence. They want more benches and are disappointed that benches were taken away. They expressed a lack of trust in the City and police officials.

What makes them happy is being able to enjoy nature with their friends in the park and the joy of seeing the dogs in the dog park. They enjoy the drumming and other Indigenous happenings. They feel happy when they see people of all types being unified by the mutual enjoyment of using the Allan Gardens.

Ryerson University Office of Social Innovation

Their representative interviewed a group of neighbouring condo residents in November 2021. There was a lot of consistency in this group: all were seniors, volunteers with Friends of the Allan Gardens, longtime residents of the neighborhood – averaging well over 15 years.

Everyone in this group was a devoted user of the Gardens – both the Conservatory and the park. As apt/condo dwellers with no balconies, it's their primary access to “greenspace;” their pathway, their place of exercise, and recreation. They described things like the edible garden and other FOAG activities were “lifesavers,” especially during COVID. They expressed no concerns about encampments per se; rather they tended to feel that the problems typically attributed to the encampments were largely the result of poor city maintenance: the lack of upkeep – sufficient cleaners, adequate waste baskets, toilets, water fountains and other amenities. The only complaint about the encampments was the increase in trash – especially plastic bags and disposable water bottles from the weekly meal and water distribution. The other consistent complaint was about dog owners outside the dog park who used the lawns and pathways and didn't pick up after their pets.

A common request was for more consistent, predictable programming. They expressed great appreciation for the cultural events which have taken place there, but because there is no network or neighbourhood communication system, “you blink and you miss them.” Need for more ongoing activities to draw people and bring them together on a continuous basis. The park needs to attract and sustain more people. Jane Jacobs was mentioned a few times re: “more people = more eyes on the street.” More trees for shade, a water feature for cooling. The removal of benches was considered an especially perverse step. Active communication systems were needed within the neighborhood, and between the neighbourhood and City staff about events in the park.

They pointed to places like Regent Park, St James Park, Dufferin Grove, Bellevue (Kensington) Park for comparison the volume of activities and facilities - gym equipment, pizza ovens, new benches, wading pools etc. “It's like City Parks wants to send a message: ‘Don't hang out here. It's not safe.’” Fenced in children's playground, e.g. “Dogs are more welcome than poor people.” This group felt a change in strategy on part of city parks would build empathy: demonstrate that there is ample room for all kinds of groups, ages, classes in the park.

In terms of safety, all used the park comfortably but never or rarely after dark, unless there was a public event. In that regard, though, they felt the same way about any downtown unpopulated space at night.

Joint Consultation by Office and Social Innovation and Friends of the Allan Gardens with The Garden District Residents Association

They were very passionate about the park and its potential. Today it seems to them that only the Children's Park area continues to be a welcoming safe space that is used responsibly.

- They have enjoyed the park for a long time, but over the last five years have felt the park has deteriorated in many ways. They feel that the park is currently dominated by gangs which assault, insult, intimidate local park users. They cite numerous incidents of violence. They tend to agree that the removal of the park benches was necessary as every surface was a spot for drug business or other unhealthy activities.
- The creation of the dog park was a vital resource for the community, and for many years they felt it was a healthy and safe meeting space for dog owners. Originally it was a model civic asset; now it is dismal: unclean, unsafe, unattractive. Most of the original users will no longer use it as it has been "taken over" by irresponsible dog owners whose aggressive and untrained dogs make it unsafe for others. They attribute this in large part to the fact that maintenance of the dog park had not been kept up.
- In short, their opinion is that irresponsible people have driven out good people from the park.
- Nevertheless, they agree that strategies and improvements which make the park more attractive and safer to a variety of responsible people are what is needed. For them this ranges from important fixes to the dog park, additional staff for maintenance and cleaning, more trees.

Friends of the Allan Gardens

The Friends of Allan Gardens share the initiative started by St. Luke's Church to canvas the community to optimize inclusive programming within Allan Gardens. Specifically the mandate of the St. Luke's group is to develop programming in Allan Gardens to optimize its benefit to the diverse neighborhood it serves. Benefit is defined as how an event/program can function to address the cultural, artistic, health, and social needs of the neighborhood.

The Friends of Allan Gardens are a charitable not-for-profit organization and they submitted to Council in 2017 a *Refresh* vision document which highlighted the programming and capital improvement opportunities that were evident at Allan Gardens. Many of those opportunities had already been recommended in previous reports, but never achieved.

The Friends have assisted with two successful feasibility studies for additional greenhouses at Allan Gardens and are now in the process of undertaking a third study in collaboration with Ryerson's office of Social Innovation, *Growing in the City*. This third study in many ways mirrors the St. Luke's initiative – what are positive changes that could occur that would enable greater inclusivity and broader uses within the park? *Growing in the City* may take longer to complete, but it is hoped it can build on the findings of the St Luke work.

Current small-scale initiatives that have fallen out from supportive discussions with Raylah Moonias and Dixon Hall are the planning for chess tables and Indigenous bike racks to be funded by the Friends of Allan Gardens and Ryerson University. The Moccasin Identifier project is also being promoted.

Ryerson OSI has introduced a number of public programming events in Allan Gardens, including a children's reading circle and Indigenous Moon Talks.

Recent conversations with others in the Gardens included a meeting with Kelly Breau who has been a strong spokesperson for the Dog Park People. Nick Pezzo of the Garden District Residents also attended. The concerns regarding the Dog Park were the deterioration of the fenced space and a break-down in communication with Parks about appropriate maintenance. Reparation of that space will require terracing to prevent run off, new trees and benches and fence repairs.

Saint Luke's Engagement with Local Residents, Churches and the South Cabbagetown Residents Association

The Saint Luke's United Church engaged with folks in the neighborhood with whom they collaborate in local programs, representatives from the business community as well as people who come seeking help for food and housing insecurity issues. They also connected with the South Cabbagetown Residents Association, and the Christian churches in the neighborhood.

In this mix, common statements were the park is beautiful and could be better utilized than it is by the local community. The business community members contacted see that a vibrant well kept active park, combined with the conservatory, would attract important pedestrian traffic which would benefit their businesses. They were also willing to participate in community events taking place in the park.

Local residents contacted see the park as the only significant greenspace they can access. Programming for all ages in tune with the diversity of the neighborhood was asked for as well as plenty of space and seats for gathering with friends.

For many it is seen as a surrogate back yard or outdoor living room that if developed properly, could improve their overall quality of life. Those seeking respite from their food and housing problems saw it as a place to rest and meet, and a place to access services they need from local service providers.

Contact with the South Cabbagetown Residents' association indicated they want the park for similar active and passive uses. They were opposed to the tents being there, and the security/safety issues they see endemic in the neighborhood. They were willing to be part of an ongoing planning group to determine the future use of Allan Gardens.

Dixon Hall Engagement

Dixon Hall's service provision and collaborative relationships with resident associations in the neighborhood gave them access to a wide range of folks including businesses, poor and vulnerable people in the neighborhood, and homeowners.

Their findings echo the findings of Saint Luke's engagement in that they see the park as an important green space for active and passive recreational use, and community events. They echo the security concerns of many groups contacted, that is some Cabbagetown residents do not always feel safe in their community in general, and the Allan Gardens in particular. They also understand that until the deeper question of providing affordable, comfortable housing is addressed, pressure on the community and the park from alcohol and drug use, violent behaviour will continue.

Appendix 3

Detailed table of results by Sherbourne Health

Allan Gardens Consultation				
Date Completed	1. What brings you to Allan Gardens	2. What would you do to improve Allan Gardens	3. What disappoints you, if anything, about Allan Gardens	4. Is there something in Allan Gardens, or something that happens there, that makes you happy?
October 6th 2021	Spend time with family and friends and the Sunday native dancing Presently, I come to check up on fellow family and friends who are homeless. I once lived in Allan Gardens. Fast forward its all about friendship and helping out others who are going through the same issues	I would improve the landscape More trees, native culture things, other peoples culture as Allan Gardens is for everyone Multicultural	Right now the pandemic that disrupts the park City workers (the city) doesn't do their part to clean Even doctoring the parks its self Cleanliness	Native festivities Feeling mother natures finest- birds, squirrels, rabbits, etc. and some hungry people As a place of gathering and friendship, peace with ones self, sharing, humble
October 6th 2021	Fresh air and to sit with friends	Put a wall with trees around the park so you don't see the traffic	The garbage	Good place to relax with friends
October 6th 2021	I love it here and family here	Make permanent housing places here	People here in park sometimes do dumb things	The family here at camp
October 6th 2021	Love to hangout with my friends and family Place where I can come and meet folks who are pretty much level as me. Very diverse, many languages, be private in public, very calm, feels safe here, accepted, people let me be	Improve our parks set up and good scenery of the camp More circles, where people can come to meet CA, NA, corner people could meet I can see a vision of circles, that can bring people of all kinds together	People that do drugs and people that think they own the camp Pretention- people who walk through here thinking they are more important/ better than the rest of us Covid has shown us how we really do need each other- we are all fellow survivors. Some of us lost our way, our visions, our mind. Can come to Allan Gardens to find each other, find our way	Just peaceful, harmony Drums, Neechi Circle, guitars, singing People of different cultures, sharing and celebrating different ways of being, sharing who they are- who we can be
October 7th 2021	No where else to go	Fence it, more flowers, playground for the kids	The fighting, drugs, and booze	New friends
October 7th 2021	I love Allan Gardens because my dad brought me here when I was 4 and he passed away that year. Most beautiful park in Toronto. I love the squirrels, pigeons, raccoons, and dogs. I love the buildings, drummers and other events about the nature and social life	Bike racks and grass seed. Would not like to see the park change Add outlets	Addicts fighting and loud music and theft	Freedom- I live in a tent and feel so free and safe Drumming, purpose, people walking, cycling, etc. Beautiful gardens
October 21st 2021	Drumming, visit with daughter, gardens	Accessibility to greenhouse and bathrooms	Greenhouse closed	
October 21st 2021	Neechi Circle gathering	If the benches could be brought back then we would be able to sit down when conducting ceremony	Too much police presence (unwanted)	The community is very accepting and happy to be around
October 21st 2021	Drumming, healing, friends	More benches and water fountain		Friends
October 21st 2021	Walk through to see whats happening	Make it more safe for children and campers that are homeless	How others are to disability Don't treat others with respect	The area is beautiful if it can stay respected that would be awesome
October 21st 2021	Walking to an appointment	Large groups that congregate on paths, something for seniors	No live music	The leaf changing colour and the dog park- love dogs
October 21st 2021	Drumming	Benches	Too much policing	Drumming community
October 21st 2021	Neechi Circle and community	More seating	No where to sit	Neechi Circle and community gatherings
October 21st 2021	Drumming every week	More seating for people	Need housing for people that are sleeping in the park	Seeing everyone in the park for drumming
October 21st 2021	Neechi Circle (drumming)	Work out space	Authoritative Harassment	Community minded and centered
October 21st 2021	Drumming	Benches	All the cops	Neechi
October 21st 2021	The drumming on Thursdays The trees, the hawks, nature	Educate those who damage the gardens Po w wows Clean it	People who damage nature The garbage people leave behind	The rabbits The singing and drumming The food Meeting people
October 21st 2021	Anishnawbe Community Greenspace Community and healing	Benches	Surveillance and disappointing they are taking away benches Anxiety around government	Drumming Turtles Unity in the community