

An architectural rendering of a park structure, possibly a walkway or bridge, with a curved, ribbed roof and wooden supports. The structure is set against a background of trees and a light sky. The rendering is oriented vertically on the page.

Ground

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# Parks

Landscape  
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Quarterly

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# Parks and Place Making

Linda Irvine in discussion with Fung Lee about cultural research conducted for parks planning in Markham

01/ The Pebble Mosaic Path is a specialized artform from Asia that stimulates the feet and improves balance and circulation.

IMAGE/ Gerry Lavery of Aquilo Mosaics

02/ Markham is one of Canada's most culturally diverse and fastest growing municipalities.

IMAGE/ Town of Markham

03/ The Town has created a Diversity Action Plan to ensure that all residents feel welcome and that they belong.

IMAGE/ Town of Markham

04/ The Pebble Mosaic Path is one example of how parks can respond to diverse cultural traditions and expressions.

IMAGE/ Schollen & Company Inc.

05/ Pebble placement includes "special surprises" such as a whimsical dragon.

IMAGE/ Town of Markham



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**Fung Lee (FL):** Could you give some background on the parks research you're involved with?

Linda Irvine (LI): The Town of Markham is one of the fastest growing and culturally diverse municipalities in Canada. This is a very recent but rapid shift. Right now, approximately 57 percent of our residents are foreign born with 65 percent considered visible minorities. In terms of our ethnic cultural breakdown, about 34 percent are Caucasian, 34 percent Chinese, 17 percent South Asian, 3 percent Black, close to 3 percent Filipino, and about 8 percent other. We also have diversity in other areas: 11 percent of our population is comprised of seniors, and that's obviously going to grow as baby boomers age.

The municipality has created the Markham Diversity Action Plan and it's currently out in a draft form for community input. The title is "Everyone Welcome" and it really is a sincere desire of our Town to ensure that new and old residents feel welcome and that they belong. Based on this, Council has identified four major areas as priorities: youth, seniors, persons with disability, and newcomers. That's not to say there aren't other aspects of diversity, but these are the four main areas that Council has identified as focus areas. Within that, obviously, there are numerous sub-themes—access, affordability, communication, housing, navigating government, and transportation...

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Based on this Diversity Action Plan, the Town is committed to working towards providing services, facilities, and programs that better serve all of its diverse communities. That's the broad goal. The plan contains over 60 recommendations that will guide departments in figuring out how to provide services, engage with the community, and move the Diversity Action Plan forward. Whether you're in the recreation department, are a transportation planner, or you're working at the front counter, you are expected to look at your work and the services that you provide through the lens of the Diversity Action Plan.

Since my job is to oversee the design and development of all new parks in Markham, it is my responsibility to figure out how our design processes, and the way we look at park design, may have to change in order to respond to different cultural needs or traditions and ensure that cultural expression is an important part of park development.

**FL: What kind of specific research did you do? Were there any specific parks programming or public consultation that you did in prep for this? Where did you start?**

LI: Fortunately, I didn't have to start from ground zero. Recently, the Town completed a new Integrated Leisure Master Plan. This plan is updated regularly and is a



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document that sets the strategic direction for culture, recreation, libraries, and parks. Essentially, this document provides a snapshot of the community and identifies certain goals and objectives that the Town needs to address, and the initiatives and actions that are necessary in the near- and long-term in order to meet these objectives. Through this study, the Town undertook considerable community



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consultation and was able to identify both emerging and well-known needs within the community in these respective areas. Not surprisingly, the top recreation activity is walking for leisure. More interestingly, however, is that the second top recreation activity is social gathering and being with family in park spaces. This reflects a major shift in how our residents—largely because many are newcomers and foreign born—are using and responding to our parks and open spaces. They often come from traditions where parks are not just for active recreation but they're really used as "outdoor living rooms"—a place to go with your family and friends to socialize and celebrate, whether you are eighty or eight months.

Survey responses from this study are an invaluable source of information that I can build on. The other aspect is that each of



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our park design processes involves community consultation and community meetings. Because we reach out to the community in different neighborhoods in each and every park project, we feel that we are able to keep pace with and understand the changes that are happening.

**FL: Intimately?**

LI: Yes, intimately. Residents provide input on the designs and provide valuable feedback: what they like and what they don't like; what they want and what they don't want. A couple of years ago we were working on a neighborhood park that was envisioned as more of a passive park, but rather than have a playground, the com-

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munity, which was largely Asian, said, "Why don't we have a pebble mosaic path?" To be honest, it wasn't something that was even on my radar because mosaic pebble paths are a specialized art in China, Taiwan, and Japan. Pebble mosaics stimulate and massage the feet; it's really like reflexology. You take off your shoes and you walk on the pebble path and your feet get massaged. It reduces your blood pressure, improves balance, circulation, and helps with stress and pain. Because the community asked for it, I said, "Well, this sounds like a great idea... we'll look into it and research it. I think it's something we can do, if it is within our budget." The residents knew what to do when it was completed.



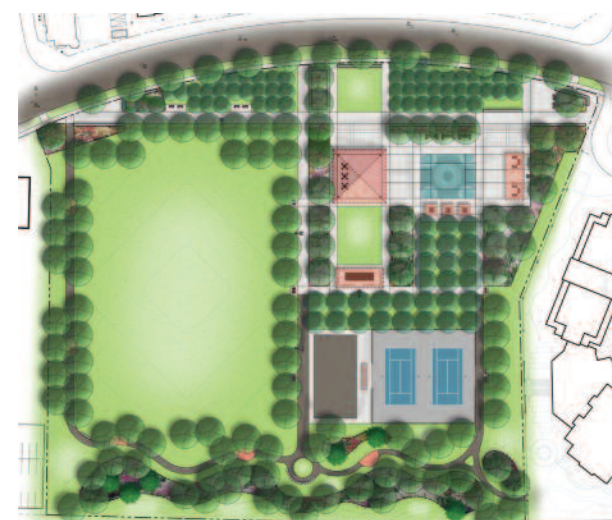
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**FL: They took their shoes off right away?**

LI: They took their shoes off and they walked all over it. For me, this is a really significant project because it shows that the Town is prepared to really listen to its residents and demonstrates how open it is to looking for innovative ways to express cultural meaning in park design.

**FL: Are there other projects that demonstrate the application of this new approach to park design?**

LI: Right now we're doing a community park that is more complex in nature. It has both active and passive recreation. We have brought in a Toronto firm, OpenCity



Projects, to assist us in doing more comprehensive research than simply relying on a community meeting and the input that we receive there. Their mandate is to undertake research on cultural patterns and traditions to help us create cultural connections within the park experience that will appeal to the Town's extremely diverse population now and in the long term. Their work is the research foundation for our ultimate park design. It involves literature research and precedent study research to help us understand people's needs and how they use outdoor space. They are looking at the changing demographics in Markham and have interviewed selected residents—individuals from India, China, Persia, and a fourth-generation Canadian. They asked residents about what they want to do in parks, their views on nature, their views on outdoor space, and what they like to do.... Because of the inclusion of this research, we have been able to bring a little more rigour to this project, as well as more defensible processes to it.

**FL: Were there any particularly poignant items solicited from the research or interviews?**

LI: One of the residents they interviewed said that "the park should be a place with meaning; a place that's relevant to the community and attracts them to use it.... A place that's for everybody that will bring the community out for a reason." For us, this statement reinforces that we're on the right track with our approaches and our mandate for inclusivity.

OpenCity Projects divided their findings into cultural segments: Indian, Chinese, Persian, and Canadian (including native Canadian) and in each of these key cultural areas, they looked at space and philosophy, health and wellness and leisure. They developed a matrix where, under each of these cultural drivers, they looked at different cultural behaviours, traditions and expressions that ultimately will find their way into the park design as appropriate.

**FL: Can you give an excerpt from this matrix?**

LI: For example, in China, two of the cultural drivers around wellness are feng shui and chi, which means life breath. The matrix describes the characteristics of particular cultural traditions and includes images that help us understand how these could be translated into built form.

One of the major components of this research is to better understand how various cultures organize and use outdoor space as an "outdoor living room." Of significance is that through discussions with our residents, and this research, we are reshaping our notions and ideas around social seating, social interaction, communication, and family engagement. As well, our consultants are helping us create a design *attitude*—which includes principles that the park should be authentic, inclusive, progressive, and vibrant. From these principles, they are also articulating a recommended design direction and materiality for specific park features.

**FL: Did any of the research or interviews suggest actual park designs from abroad? Or is that relevant at all because obviously we're not going to have the same materials or types of spaces in China that we would apply here necessarily. But did they look into that kind of research at all?**

LI: Well, our consultants picked images of public space from around the world that reflected what they heard the community saying or what was revealed in their literature research. It wasn't about "well, here's a park from China that we really like and now we want to replicate it here." We really are trying to dig deeper into different social, behavioural, cultural, functional, qualitative, and experiential aspects of parks, universally.

**FL: A person emigrating here will find it important to build community here, so, obviously, social gathering, even though it's probably important in their original home too, is almost even more critical here because they're trying to develop their network, their new community here, in a public space no less.**

LI: You are absolutely correct. However, it is important to us in our pursuit of park design with a cultural basis that we not be too literal, or to reduce our design response to clichés such as "putting in a pagoda or a goldfish pond." To me, that's not what it's about. It's really fundamentally about coming up with appropriate physical responses, innovative spaces, and new design approaches that respond to cultural meaning in ways that are reflective of, and appropriate to, our context, our situation, and realities of today. I believe that if we create great cultural spaces, then regardless of your cultural background, you should be able to feel welcome and included. To do so, we must continue to look at world cultures, to find our universality as human beings, and to look at our differences, to find our common ground. And that's the genius of the pebble path. Even though its original traditions came from Asia, everyone can appreciate it. At the end of the day, it's about transcending individual differences to find the humanity in all of us.

BIOS/ LINDA IRVINE, OALA, IS MANAGER, PARKS AND OPEN SPACE DEVELOPMENT FOR THE TOWN OF MARKHAM, RESPONSIBLE FOR OVERSEEING, MANAGING, AND COORDINATING ALL NEW PARK DEVELOPMENT WITHIN THE TOWN AS WELL AS MANAGING SELECTED URBAN DESIGN PROJECTS. SHE SERVED AS PRESIDENT OF THE ONTARIO ASSOCIATION OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS FROM 2005 TO 2007 AND AS PRESIDENT OF THE CANADIAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS FROM 2009 TO 2010.

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WITH THANKS TO MATTHEW MILLS FOR TRANSCRIBING THIS DISCUSSION.

06/ Artist Dawn Dale paints flowers, florets, and benevolent insects on park pathways with local residents.

IMAGE/ Town of Markham

07/ OpenCity Projects undertook cultural research and community interviews to help inform the master plan and park program for Leitchcroft Community Park in Markham.

IMAGE/ Kenneth J. Hoyle, Landscape Architect

08/ Artist c.j. feury collaborated with the Mayor's Youth Task Force to create an art installation which draws a parallel between ecology and cultural diversity.

IMAGE/ Town of Markham

09/ A temporary art installation celebrates the diverse voices and often unheard stories of Markham's multi-cultural youth.

IMAGE/ Town of Markham