

DUFFERIN GROVE PARK

Photo: Wendy Gold





Located in Toronto’s west end, Dufferin Grove is recognized as one of the most community-activated parks in the city. In many ways, the park serves as an urban oasis, full of mature trees along the park’s many pathways and outer edges. The space is always bustling with people of all ages, cultural backgrounds and incomes groups who use it for leisure or to participate in abundant programming. With unique amenities and cultural vibrancy, Dufferin Grove is a good example of public space that fosters a sense of inclusion and community.

Dufferin Grove is a 14-acre park that borders a busy retail street and a secondary school. It is connected to low-rise social housing as well as affluent homes. Historically a Portuguese neighbourhood, there is a rich mix of residents from East and South Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

Photo: Wendy Gold

“You feel like you’re in someone’s backyard. [Dufferin Grove Park] has a culture of inclusion. It focuses on universal activities that aren’t specific to one group.”

— Emily, local resident

“We come to the dinners every Friday night. There’s a common thread that ties groups together through the ritual of breaking bread.”

— *Darin, Craig, regular dinner participants*



“Tables encourage interaction, eating together, kids play together...week after week, you end up seeing familiar faces.”

— *Colleen, Julianne, park visitors*

The park has multiple entry points and close proximity to the subway, making it highly accessible. Winding trails and extensive lawns offer visitors the choice to walk, bike, sit comfortably and picnic. The park lights are kept on until 11pm in the winter to invite people in to use the space and create a sense of safety. Community events are free, or “pay what you can,” and anyone can use the various amenities.

The park is protected from the surrounding city by tree cover and the natural environment. A broad range of activities enable people to use the park in different ways and provides opportunities for people to engage with each other. Extensive seating encourages people to spend time in the space and the basketball courts bring youth together across cultural groups. There is the community cob house and nature-based playground that creates a meeting place for kids and their parents. The variety of activities, amenities and spaces makes Dufferin Grove a vibrant place that offers something for everyone.

Robust programming and unique amenities bring the community together. Volunteers bake pizza using an outdoor oven and dinner is served at long communal tables that bring strangers together to share a meal. There is a community garden, skating rink, fire pits, a farmer’s market, theatre performances and seasonal celebrations that give people an opportunity to gather and engage.

Local volunteers have made a major impact improving the park and act as informal ambassadors who welcome and engage with new park users. The unofficial Friends of Dufferin Grove is a community organization dedicated to taking care of the park and is spearheaded by Jutta Mason who is considered by many to be the soul of its revitalization. For over 20 years, these local residents have played an active role in making park improvements and programming decisions. Despite some tensions with the city, related to residents’ organic and unstructured approach to making change, the park has flourished. Community ownership has helped to transform Dufferin Grove into a vital public space that encourages intercultural interactions.

“All the friends [I have] met in the park are from different places...You have the whole world in one place. It’s about people approaching each other and talking with each other.”

— *Darin, local resident*

TAKEAWAYS

When combined, the following design elements can help inform Design for Diversity:

Access

Provide safe entry to the space

There are multiple access points into the park and pathways formed by users. Lighting makes the park feel safe especially during the winter. Free and affordable activities make the park accessible to everyone.

Broad Appeal

Ensure broad appeal so people feel comfortable and enjoy using the space.

A variety of amenities (fire pits, seating, outdoor pizza oven, skating rink, basketball courts, nature-based playground) and programs (Friday dinners, theatre performances, farmers market) draw the community in to spend time in the park.

Welcome

Create an inclusive experience so people feel that they belong

Gently-worn, comfortable spaces that make people feel at home. Park volunteers and city staff welcome users and help them get oriented using the space.

Interaction

Promote understanding between people through connection

Communal seating brings people together. Nature and food-focused programs connects people from different cultures as it’s something that everyone can share.

Participation

Enable people to take agency and feel a sense of ownership of the place

Local residents have played a key role in driving the park’s design and programming.

About Us.

Founded in 2006, **OpenCity** is a creative lab that explores the design of cities. We’ve spent more than a decade learning about what motivates people from different cultures to spend time in public spaces and connect with others. Our goal is to inspire city-builders and provide them with tools to Design for Diversity.