

EAST YORK TOWN CENTRE

Photo: Michi McCloskey





East York Town Centre is a shopping mall located in Thorncliffe Park, one of the most densely populated and multicultural neighborhoods in Toronto. It offers nearly everything that local residents need including a community space for family and friends to gather. East York Town Centre functions more like a covered town square than a typical mall. It is not just a location to shop but a destination in itself.

“It is more of a community mall, where everyone knows each other, and people are familiar with each other.”

— Hilal, local teen

Photos: Michi McCloskey

The majority of residents are recent newcomers of South Asian descent, having arrived in the city in the last seven years, but there is also a significant Filipino, Chinese, Greek and Romanian community. Thorncliffe Park has more children under the age of 14 than in any other part of the city and ten percent of the population is under the age of four. The park's immediate surroundings include the largest elementary school in North America with about 2000 students, high-rise rental apartments, a Greek cultural center and a mall.

The mall management has been very responsive to the needs of mall users. A range of shop sizes are made available at affordable rents which has allowed local independents, especially newcomers from diverse cultural backgrounds, to set up and maintain a business. Corporate branding is limited allowing shops to have their own unique signage. Local community arts initiatives are given permission to animate the space and unused storefronts are used for cultural programs. This mixture of accessible space, that supports both local businesses and community programming, makes East York Town Centre a unique public space that encourages diversity and opportunity for intercultural interaction.



The mall is centrally located and easy to get to by foot or by transit. Unlike polished, high-end shopping centres, East York Town Centre has a one-story plaza feel with a human scale created by smaller storefronts and lowered ceilings. Like a vibrant street, many small-scale shop fronts target the local population's needs. Multiple access points, extensive seating and a variety of affordable local independent businesses and services make East York town Centre easy to access for local residents.

East York Town Centre has extensive seating that allows people to spend time in the space and interact with new people. Limited gathering places in the surrounding apartments makes the mall a communal living space that brings residents together for activities and leisure time. The mall's food court plays a key role in facilitating intercultural interaction. Communal seating in the food court lets people sit together and, if the space is full, strangers will often share tables and a meal. It is common to find seniors from different cultural backgrounds gathered around the food court tables chatting for hours.

Photos: Michi McCloskey

Independent shop owners respond to community needs, such as immigration services and traditional foods, which reinforces a sense of belonging. Food is central to the mall's welcoming environment with different cultural cuisines available and a food court that is the main building hub where every entrance point connects. Visitors can meet and eat with family and friends at their leisure.

“A lot of shop owners have been here for many years, so they really get the chance to get to know people who shop in their stores. It is almost like a big family, it allows for connections between people.”

— Arshiya, local youth/resident

The unusual flexibility in how the mall is used has given its independent store owners and users a strong sense of ownership of the space. Together, they have shaped the mall environment and experience along with the community organizations that animate the space. As a result, there is intercultural engagement, a sense of community accountability and cohesion between retailers and shoppers.

TAKEAWAYS

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

Access

Provide safe entry to the space

The shopping centre is easy to access from the surrounding neighbourhood and is within walking distance from the bus stop. Small, independent retailers offer affordable wares.

Broad Appeal

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

Diverse foods, services and programs appeal to a range of cultural groups.

Welcome

Create an inclusive experience so people feel that they belong

Extensive seating allows people to linger and meet others within the space. The human scale of the open marketplace creates a comfortable, welcoming environment.

“The design is nice. People can stay around for a while in the food court, there is no one chasing you out.... One or two times a week I come here to see friends mostly from the same country as me – the Hellenic area. In the winter it is warm, and everywhere else is cold, so people can come and meet here. Also it is cool in the summer. You can come and stay for coffee, meet friends.”
—Dimitry, local resident

Interaction

Promote understanding between people through connection

Mall users develop personal relationships with independent businesses. Diverse cultural foods, public furniture and programs encourage interaction between people using the space.

Participation

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

Independent shops and flexible mall management have given owners and visitors a sense of ownership of the space and an opportunity to transform it including store signage, merchandise, displays, programs and events.

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.