

Project Summary.

**OPEN
CITY**
Projects

KENSINGTON MARKET

Photo: Michi McCloskey



Kensington Market is a unique, multicultural neighbourhood in the heart of Toronto with a relaxed, bohemian feel. Weaving back alleys connect small streets to the surrounding grid. Single-family homes, a signature of downtown Toronto, are mixed with low-rise condos and small, independent retailers that sell everything from bicycles to used clothing and all kinds of food. Storefronts and stoops extend liberally into the sidewalk, maximizing open spaces for seating, eating, performing and making art and crafts.

Located between Chinatown, the University of Toronto and public housing to the south, Kensington Market is a densely populated low-income neighbourhood compared to the city average. It has a rich history of newcomers and diversity, reflected in the retail, which includes Jewish, Chinese, Latin American and African vendors. The entrepreneurial spirit and artistic collaboration also draws creative people to live in the community and actively participate in Kensington's public life.

Single-family homes, small storefronts and market-like structures line the narrow streets creating visibility for pedestrians and an intimate experience. With few narrow sidewalks, people move into the street slowing car traffic. There is plenty of space and public seating for people to spend time in the area without pressure to buy anything. Affordable rents make it easier for independent businesses to get established and the inexpensive market makes Kensington highly accessible to a broad range of people.

“People paint their storefronts themselves, as they like, so it’s more personal, individual and accessible. They aren’t forced to conform.

— Attilio, visitor



Photo: Wendy Gold

Photo: Michi McCloskey



The colourful streetscape creates a vibrant energy that draws people in and makes them feel free to be themselves. Back alleys and storefronts are canvases in the neighbourhood gallery. The colour, people and symbols reflected in much of the street art celebrates culture and signals tolerance. Vendors play music and serve food from all over the world, making people from different backgrounds feel welcome. The market has something for everyone.

People can choose to shop in the retail stores, listen to music or just people watch.

“It’s a quadrant in the city where people feel comfortable and safe.”

— *Jonah, visitor*

Artists working on front stoops bring people together and spark conversations. Long-time, small retailers know their customers by name and build relationships with the community. As part of the prevalent DIY culture, many of the independent businesses paint their storefronts so that each has its own personality.

People feel free to stop and talk to each other and return to the neighbourhood regularly. Independent retailers build relationships with visitors and, support each other, creating a strong, vibrant community.

What makes Kensington Market an especially unique public space is the sense that ‘anything goes.’ People change the rules and how the space is used. They paint the back alleys, add furniture to the sidewalk and walk in the streets. There is a sense of ownership of the space and change is widely accepted and welcomed.

TAKEAWAYS

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

Access

Provide safe entry to the space

Kensington is easy to reach by public transportation. Affordable retail and activities allow use by a broad range of people. Storefronts and housing that line the streets create visibility and a safe environment.

Broad Appeal

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

The relationship between small buildings and narrow streets creates an intimate setting. There is something to appeal to everyone from retail shops to craft making and music performances.

Welcome

Create an inclusive experience so people feel that they belong

Retail vendors serve food and play music from all over the world making people feel welcome. The street art celebrates culture and gives people a sense of belonging.

Interaction

Promote understanding between people through connection

Artists working on front stoops bring people together and spark conversations. Long-time, small retailers know their customers by name and build relationships with the community.

Participation

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

Small, independent retailers build relationships with visitors who come back regularly. People bend the rules and change how the place is used to suit the needs of the community and express themselves. With little commercial branding, vendors design their storefronts. Residents and visitors paint back alleys, add furniture to the sidewalk and walk in the streets.

“There is an agency for people to [make] change. If I can transform a space, I can own it. I feel way more a part of it and feel like I belong to it.”

— Javid, artist and resident

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.