

Project Summary.

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LEITCHCROFT PARK

Water feature design: Dan Euser Waterarchitecture
Stainless steel umbrellas design: Ron Baird

Photo: Michi McCloskey





Just north of Toronto, Markham is a major destination for Canadian newcomers. More than sixty percent of residents are born outside of the country, making it one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world. The Leitchcroft neighbourhood sits between three major highways making it easy to access. Located in one of Markham's most intensified new communities, Leitchcroft is characterized by a mix of mid and high-rise buildings along winding streets that make the neighbourhood feel protected from the buzz of the city.

The municipality planned for an eight-acre park that would serve as the core public space for the neighborhood and larger city. City Councillor Erin Shapero saw an opportunity to connect the planning process with diverse communities that would ultimately use the public space. OpenCity Projects was engaged by Markham's Planning and Urban Design Department to address this key design challenge—how to create an experience that would be welcoming and well-used by residents from diverse cultures.

Photo: Michi McCloskey

We began our work with site visits and comprehensive research on the neighbourhood's demographics, key cultures, and history. We searched for other global examples of public spaces designed specifically for culturally diverse communities but found very few. This result came as a surprise, making it clear that we needed to bring new perspective to traditional planning and landscape design practices.

We took a unique approach to engaging with residents in a city that had favoured town hall meetings to share largely top-down development plans. We created a new model that included conducting one-on-one interviews with residents to understand their needs, expectations and past memories of parks. Residents were selected to represent the neighbourhood's demographics and largest cultural communities including those from Indian, Chinese and Persian backgrounds.

To ensure that the final designs were relevant and meaningful, we engaged in an ongoing dialogue with residents. Those interviewed became part of the Leitchcroft Park Steering Committee and participated in a series of workshops to validate our cultural research insights. In addition to meeting with the Steering committee, we held forums to share our work with the larger community and presented our findings to city council. This rich conversation about culture, and how it could translate to the park design, helped to facilitate consensus rather than slowing the process down as many expected.

Our recommendations informed every aspect of the park design including meeting places, pathways and navigation, lighting, materials, seating and other amenities. We also delivered overarching creative direction to guide the design team in bringing our cultural strategy to life and creating a cohesive experience.

“In Hong Kong, there are many places to meet and sit down. Chinese people don’t sit on the ground.”

— *Leitchcroft resident*

Based on our research insights, that water has a universal appeal for different cultures and ages, the park was built around a playful water feature. The sound also helps to mask noise coming from the adjacent highway.

A series of pavilions provide shaded seating which we learned is of key importance to residents, especially from Southeast Asian backgrounds who do not like to be in the sun. The built structures also set the aesthetic for the park with a subtle Asian influence. Residents from across cultures said they would use large, shaded gathering spaces for events like meals. They were also accustomed to having smaller meeting spaces with seating for more intimate activities.



Photo: Michi McCloskey



We learned that most residents were dissatisfied with the generic nature of Canadian parks. The use of real wood creates a more natural, distinctive environment and is a reminder of the rural barns that once stood at Leitchcroft.

Built-in exercise equipment supports fitness especially for the large number of seniors in the community. The park includes amenities for a range of activities including basketball, tennis courts and a soccer field.

“Every park in Canada is the same. How come?”

— *Leitchcroft residents*

Our approach set a groundbreaking precedent for public engagement and cultural research in Markham. We are proud that our work has helped to create a culturally relevant and inclusive park. This new approach to Design for Diversity represents a shift in thinking, around how we build public space and who we build it for, providing a model for other communities to create meaningful, well-used public spaces.

Photo: Michi McCloskey

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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.