

**OPEN
CITY**
Projects

R.V. BURGESS PARK

Photo: Michi McCloskey



R.V. Burgess is a 3.7-acre park located in Thorncliffe Park, one of Toronto's most densely populated and multicultural neighborhoods. The park is a small but meaningful space that serves as the backyard for residents who live in the surrounding apartment buildings. A dynamic energy comes from the playground where children run around and young mothers sit and watch over them while exchanging news. With unique amenities and programming, including North America's first outdoor tandoor oven and the Friday bazaar where local vendors sell cultural food, clothing and accessories, the park attracts a diverse group of visitors. clothing and accessories, and an outdoor tandoor oven the park attracts a diverse group of visitors.

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 park is situated at the heart of the neighbourhood and has numerous entry points that connect to the surrounding residences, schools and community centers. The asphalt pathways were made in response to the natural movements of park users who stop to use the space on the way to their destinations. Large rocks and benches provide seating that give people a comfortable way to spend time in the park. The market, community garden and playground invite people in to be part of its activity. The densely packed playground offers opportunities for children, and their parents, to connect with each other across cultural groups.

R.V. Burgess Park was not always such a vibrant and well-used space. In the early 2000's, it was a poorly maintained space without pathways or a playground. Recognizing the parkland's potential, the Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee (TPWC), championed by Sabina Ali, worked to transform a derelict space into a much-loved park. Along with the TPWC, the local City Councillor and parks supervisor were very active in supporting the community-led park revitalization.



Photo: Michi McCloskey



Photos: Michi McCloskey, Wendy Gold

“We asked the City and the Councillor for a pathway for us and we got that. The next step was garbage bins, there were no garbage bins. We got bins, [then] we got seating.”—Sabina Ali

Once the basic amenities arrived, the programs followed. In summertime, local residents set up brightly coloured stalls for the Friday market, or bazaar, selling food, clothing and other items that provide an opportunity to mingle and generate income for the predominately female vendors. During the rest of the year, various community festivals and events, like the Harvest Festival and the Winter Carnival, take place at the park along with children’s programs and activities that attract and engage users. An outdoor tandoor oven is the most unique amenity at R.V. Burgess Park. Local women work together to make and sell tandoori rotis which attracts local residents as well as the wider community who stay to enjoy the atmosphere and community feel.

“I can bring food to sell, it’s a great opportunity.”

— Narges, market vendor



“It is really the kids that have friends from different backgrounds, it is us that change the minds of the parents.”

— Sara, local youth

The playground brings children together and facilitates interaction across cultural groups. All adults in the park become unofficial parents, watching over the activities and helping whoever needs care. As a result, parents become part of the intercultural exchange.

The play area, cultural foods and traditional clothing sold at the market are all important factors that welcome local residents and visitors from different cultures. Residents have been empowered to take ownership of their park and implement changes needed by the community. As a result, R.V. Burgess Park has become an excellent example of a vibrant, intercultural public space.

TAKEAWAYS

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

Access

Provide safe entry to the space

The park is easy to access at the center of the community. Pathways reflect the routes that people typically use. Easy entry and exit, as well as clear sightlines, make people feel safe to visit. Activities are free and items sold at the bazaar are affordable.

Broad Appeal

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

A range of programs, including the summertime bazaar, fresh rotis baked at the outdoor tandoor oven, seating and the children's playground draw people to spend time in the park.

Welcome

Create an inclusive experience so people feel that they belong

The small-scale park, packed with people and activity, make visitors feel comfortable. A dedicated, accepting group of volunteers help to create a welcoming environment.

Interaction

Promote understanding between people through connection

The vibrant play area makes the park a strong site of interaction for parents and children. Unique amenities, including the bazaar and tandoor oven, connect local residents and visitors from different cultural backgrounds.

Participation

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

Local residents have taken agency to transform the park to respond to the needs of the local community. Residents run the bazaar, tandoor oven and other programs.

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.