



Figure 1. Spence Neighbourhood Association employees and funding partners pose with their new community greenhouse.

Constructing a Community Greenhouse: Experiences in Planning Urban Agriculture

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1.0 Introduction

Food insecurity is an issue affecting many neighbourhoods across Winnipeg, often due to issues of proximity, expense, or cultural incompatibility. Some community organizations have looked to urban agriculture as a creative solution to this problem, including the Spence Neighbourhood Association (SNA). After several years of careful planning and overcoming obstacles, the Spence community greenhouse at 685 Maryland Street opened in 2021. Since then, the greenhouse has become a place of education, employment, and—most importantly—food production.

“It was the community who identified the greenhouse as a need. It’ll be a place where people can learn about food, grow food and also get paid a fair wage to grow food.”

- Mandalyn Unger, SNA (Piché, 2021)

2.0 Background and Context

Food Insecurity and Urban Agriculture

Access to quality, affordable, and healthy food in Winnipeg varies by neighbourhood. Tens of thousands of Winnipeggers live within geographical food deserts: areas of the city with no major grocery stores, leaving residents to travel long distances and spend additional money to meet these needs (Nicholson & Marcoux, 2015). Even outside food deserts, many neighbourhoods are served only by corner stores and other small retailers, offering food at marked up prices with limited options for fresh produce (Nicholson & Marcoux, 2015). Urban agriculture has been utilized as a partial solution to this issue.

The City of Winnipeg defines community gardens as “an open space that a group of citizens voluntarily manage where horticultural activities are practiced” (City of Winnipeg, n.d., p. 1). Urban agriculture is seen as a way to reduce stress on grocery budgets, employ existing farming skills among newcomers, and improve the health and mental well being of participating gardeners (Kroeker, 2017). Among the barriers to urban agriculture, climate and the availability of suitable land remains a significant challenge (Kroeker, 2017). Strategic intervention is needed to mitigate this obstacle.

Spence and the SNA

The Spence neighbourhood is one such Winnipeg neighbourhood which suffers

from food insecurity. Spence is a diverse neighbourhood with a prominent population of Indigenous peoples and newcomers, increasing the demand for “culturally appropriate” food (Lamoureux, 2020, p. 6). The SNA has turned to urban agriculture in an attempt to meet this need. Founded in 1997 as a non-profit dedicated to housing, the SNA has since expanded their scope to include outcomes for health, youth, and the economy (SNA, n.d.a). Community gardening is not new in the neighbourhood. Residents have grown food communally in raised flower beds and tended fruit trees and bushes in the area for many years (Piché, 2021). Winnipeg’s climate restricts outdoor agriculture to a seasonal activity, limiting the quantity of food that can be grown in a year. To address this issue, the SNA looked toward creating a community greenhouse, something not seen anywhere else in Winnipeg’s downtown (Piché, 2021).

The Cumberland Corridor

The concept for the SNA greenhouse has roots in planning the Cumberland Corridor, an area of oddly-shaped boulevards along Cumberland Street between Maryland and Balmoral Street, which resulted from Cumberland Street cross-cutting the city’s original parcel fabric (HTFC Planning & Design, 2018).

Improving and reimagining the Cumberland Corridor has been a priority of the SNA since 2005. In 2018, HTFC Planning & Design prepared

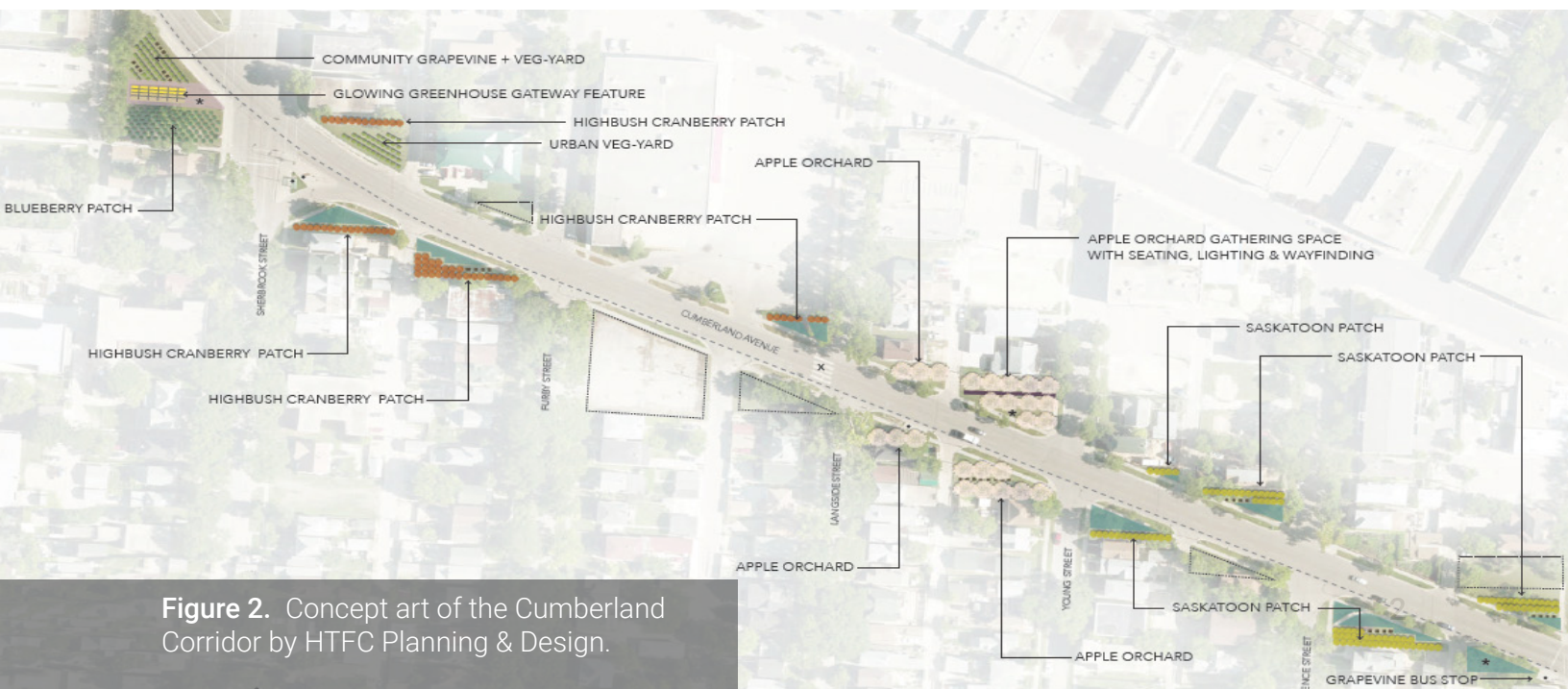


Figure 2. Concept art of the Cumberland Corridor by HTFC Planning & Design.

a conceptual design for the Cumberland Corridor. Public consultation during the design phase revealed a desire among residents for more gardening opportunities. To meet this desire, the plan proposes extensive planting of fruit trees and bushes along the corridor, as well as an additional community greenhouse that would serve as a “glowing greenhouse gateway feature” to the corridor (HTFC Planning & Design, 2018).

3.0 Case Summary

With residents recognizing the potential to develop the collection of empty lots along Cumberland, one of the community’s ideas was to use the space for growing food (Lamoureux, 2020). The vision of what the greenhouse could accomplish has generally remained consistent from its inception. Community input shaped the vision during the creation of the SNA’s 5-year-plan. The SNA’s Environment and Open Spaces volunteer committee, responsible for developing and maintaining local green spaces owned by the City, uses this plan to inform future programming and other opportunities (SNA, n.d.b).

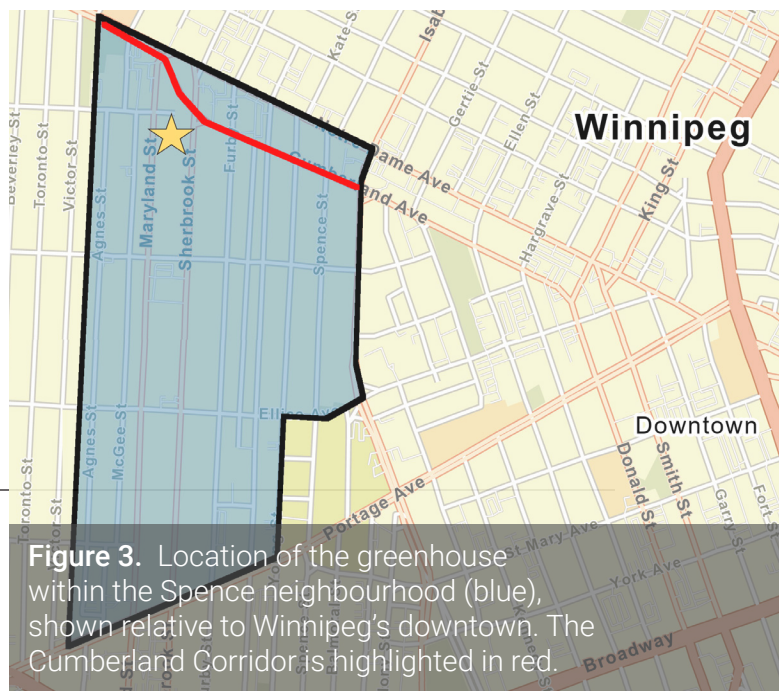


Figure 3. Location of the greenhouse within the Spence neighbourhood (blue), shown relative to Winnipeg’s downtown. The Cumberland Corridor is highlighted in red.

as a social enterprise, one which could cover the associated operational costs, and a place to employ community members (Lamoureux, 2020). This vision was carried forward by Olivia Michalczuk, a trained planner and the SNA staff member who pushed the project forward to completion. Michalczuk credits the committee as critical to the project’s success, as well as the relationships she formed with planning mentors at the City of Winnipeg. Assistance from the mayor’s office, city councillors, and the zoning department was also sought and received during the development process.

With the greenhouse’s official opening in 2021, many aspects of the original vision are underway. The greenhouse is already a place to grow food away from cold weather, though it is too early to reflect on the successes and challenges experienced in its first winter season. However, there is much more to the greenhouse than food production. The creation is a function of consultation with the public, listening to ideas, and following through on that advice. It is an exercise in creating functional uses for odd and unusually sized public lands. The greenhouse also demonstrates the possible returns on investment for projects with small footprints: the fight against hunger, economic growth through job creation, and the value of accessible, purposeful public spaces.



Figure 4. Another community garden plot maintained by the SNA.

In total, it took three consecutive 5-year plans for the greenhouse to transition from a plan to reality. Recent plans identify the greenhouse as a place to grow food, a nursery for plants to adorn the corridor, and as space to educate community members (HTFC Planning & Design, 2018). The greenhouse has also been envisioned

4.0 Outcomes

Three specific outcomes from this project are highlighted in this section: the realization of the greenhouse, the creation of programming, and the process of creating a social enterprise.



Figure 5. The greenhouse seen during the construction of its foundation.

Opening the Greenhouse

The greenhouse was revealed to the public in October 2021 after many years in development. The structure covers 450 square feet and features electricity, running water, and heat to ensure operation year-round (Piché, 2021). The greenhouse is situated between two apartment buildings and a park, which draws a lot of foot traffic to the site. This was anticipated, as the location successfully operated as a community garden for over 10 years. Many of the returning gardeners are loyal to the soil, having long since proved the viability of urban agriculture in the Spence neighbourhood. The site also maintained fixtures of the grounds. This includes an apple tree, bushes, and a medicine garden used for growing sacred herbs (Piché, 2021). Immediate plans for the greenhouse include offering education, training, and employment, while also attempting to combat food insecurity as crops mature (Piché, 2021). A larger piece of the future plans for the greenhouse includes the production of salsa for profit.

Greenhouse Programming

The SNA uses their website to post updates about activities at the greenhouse, to keep the

community engaged, and to share opportunities to get involved. Over the 2021-22 winter season, the SNA created a series of “Greenhouse Winter Workshops” (SNA, n.d.c). These workshops cover a variety of topics designed to encourage people to participate with the community greenhouse or grow their own gardens. Topics include tips for growing plants in small spaces, the benefits of hydroponics, seed sharing, and how to grow start seeds indoors ahead of the spring outdoor gardening season (SNA, n.d.c).



Figure 6. Tomato and jalapeno pepper plants being grown for salsa production.

Salsa Production as a Social Enterprise

While it was originally hoped the greenhouse would be able to help feed all residents in need, recognition of constraints prompted the revision of these goals. There is simply not enough capacity to produce the amount of food required for this objective (Strategy Made Simple, 2021). The greenhouse will instead be used primarily to grow key ingredients for salsa, which is to be sold for profit toward the costs associated with the greenhouse and other SNA expenses (Strategy Made Simple, 2021). To explore the feasibility of this project, the SNA commissioned a business plan based around the concept of selling their salsa. The plan for salsa production is extensive and makes considerations about every step

of the process from growing the crops to marketing the product, each with community at the centre. The SNA, in concert with their stakeholders, decided this would be the best way to support youth and provide employment in their community (Strategy Made Simple, 2021). Youth are expected to learn transferrable skills in gardening, food preparation, logistics,

marketing, and sales (Strategy Made Simple, 2021). The social enterprise is not just an investment in the community through employment. The generated revenue will support community programming under the direction of the SNA, and excess produce is to be distributed to the community (Strategy Made Simple, 2021).

5.0 Lessons Learned

The SNA's community greenhouse has revealed several lessons for planners and community organizations alike. Among them are the importance of public and private partnerships, recognizing opportunities which may support planning initiatives, and perseverance in the face of setbacks and other obstacles.



Figure 7. Initial setup of the greenhouse.

The Importance of Partnerships

The first lesson is to create strategic partnerships which can assist in the planning process. Community non-profits often rely on grant funding and volunteerism to achieve their goals, which ultimately foster a sense of community. This project was born out of both the SNA's objectives as a community-focused organization and by listening to needs of residents. Funding to build the greenhouse came from the Red River Co-op and the Government of Manitoba's *Building Sustainable Communities* program (Strategy Made Simple, 2021). Seeds, soil, and containers have been donated to SNA by various local businesses (Lamoureux, 2020). Community members

are responsible for upkeep of the greenhouse, programming the activities that occur within, and upholding the overall vision for the project (Lamoureux, 2020). The greenhouse is a shared space belonging to people of Spence. Without the work of SNA employees, volunteers, community members and external funding, the community greenhouse would not have been possible.

Recognizing Opportunities

The second lesson is to recognize opportunities which support higher-level goals. The SNA has multiple guiding principles which are supported through the community greenhouse project: providing community members opportunities to participate in the SNA, positively impacting youth, and supporting economic development (SNA, n.d.a). The first principle is upheld by allowing community members to create and participate in the activities of the greenhouse, including holding "open hours" every Thursday afternoon (SNA, n.d.d). The second principle is upheld by incorporating existing programming offered by the SNA. Participants of the "First Jobs 4 Youth" program were identified as potential workers to help run the greenhouse before it was even constructed (Lamoureux, 2020). The third principle is upheld by the proposed salsa production social enterprise, which allows for the greenhouse to generate a profit in the second year of operation (Strategy Made Simple, 2021). This holistic approach to strategizing combines existing assets with new opportunities to meet community needs.

Persevering Through Adversity

The third lesson is in perseverance. The community greenhouse project has been several years in the making. Michalczuk, who took control of the project in 2018, faced

many obstacles along the way. These included organizing funding, seeking a zoning variance to build a secondary structure, and acquiring a research grant to explore the social enterprise aspect of the project (Lamoureux, 2020). Further challenges to the project included the COVID-19 pandemic and the roadblocks of “bureaucratic red tape” related to the rezoning and permitting process (Piché, 2021). The variety of challenges allowed Michalczuk to draw on nearly all areas of knowledge gained in planning school. Michalczuk also cites knowing when and where to ask for help as the

most important skill a new planner can have, especially when working in the non-profit sector.

To create the community greenhouse, many moving parts had to come together at the right time. By building strategic partnerships, recognizing opportunities to align goals, and pushing through hardships, the greenhouse was able to come to fruition approximately 15 years after it was first proposed.

6.0 Conclusion

Success can be measured in several ways. The community greenhouse project initiated by the SNA has succeeded in their vision to create a commonly held place to grow food year-round, employ community members, and educate the community. In some ways, just opening the greenhouse at all after years of planning is a success in itself. Planners should take note of how the greenhouse demonstrates the big impact small projects can have for communities. Creating impactful partnerships with public and private stakeholders, recognizing opportunities to align organizational goals, and the dedication to seeing the project through a long development process each contributed to the successful opening of the greenhouse.

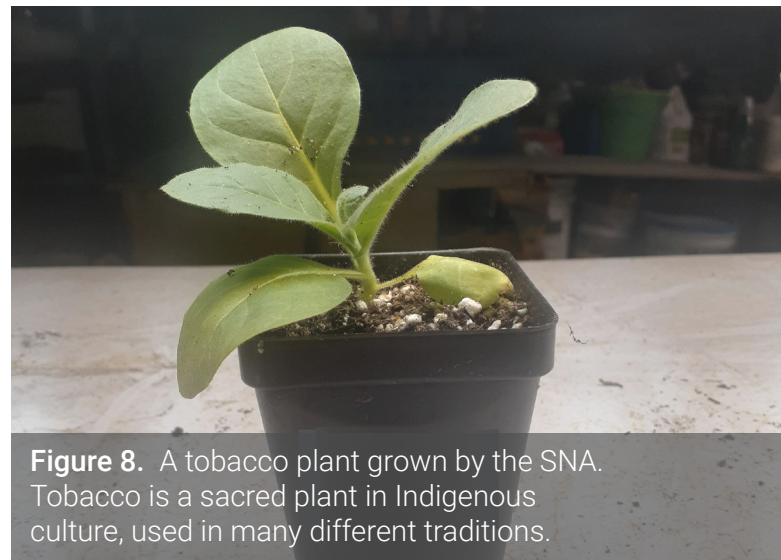


Figure 8. A tobacco plant grown by the SNA. Tobacco is a sacred plant in Indigenous culture, used in many different traditions.

7.0 References

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Figure List

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Figure 2. HTFC Planning & Design. (2018). *Cumberland corridor conceptual design*.

Figure 3. Created by author.

Figure 4. HTFC Planning & Design. (2018). *Cumberland corridor conceptual design*.

Figure 5. Spence Neighbourhood Association. (n.d.e). *Community Greenhouse*. <https://spenceneighbourhood.org/program/community-greenhouse/>

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