

A Story in Placemaking

Creating a multi-cultural space through engagement and design in Winnipeg's Central Park

Abstract

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Winnipeg's Central Park is located in the inner city. A community of new-Canadians with diverse cultural backgrounds surrounds the park. High density apartment complexes and office buildings envelopes the park's four corners. Although rich in history, the park is victim to social ills. Residents are stigmatized with Central Park's reputation of crime, violence, and gang activity. Because of this, Centre Venture along with a number of private and non-profit organizations undertook the redevelopment project in 2008. Today, the park's unscrupulous history is only a shadow of its past. A multi-generational, multi-culture, and mixed-income group of people enjoy the park and all its amenities. In collaboration with Tom Janzen from Centre Venture, this case-in-point examines the Central Park Revitalization project as a 'best planning practice' in engaging a diverse community, placemaking and designing a multi-cultural place. This research identifies the methods used in the engagement process and the how the people's vision is applied to the design. Lastly, the research evaluates some of the results of the project based on how people use the space today.

Introduction

Placemaking is the process of creating spaces with meaning. The concept is a contradiction of modernist urbanism's placelessness. The intention of placemaking is to create quality spaces in the public realm. Upon entering a space, people look for a sense of belonging and remedy against alienation, safety, security and orientation (Aravot, 2002). The concept dictates the need to contribute to community life through public spaces (Aravot, 2002) and is relevant to any scale (Alexander, 1977).

Topophilia is the romantic idea of great love for space. Stemming from quality placemaking, topophilia invokes people to have emotional attachment to spaces (Norton, 2006).



THE WADDELL FOUNTAIN, CENTRAL PARK

Built in 1912, the Waddell fountain is a monument to Emily Margaret Wadell. She directed her widower to spend \$10,000 for the fountain's creation if in case he would like to marry again after her death. Photo: Winnipeg Downtown Places (2010)

But how do you create places that invoke topophilia, and who defines the meaning of the place? Planners often resort to community engagement to help answer these questions. It is through engagement that the design and functions of spaces can appropriately fit the needs, aspirations, and values of the people who would mostly use and benefit from the space.

This case-in-point explores how Winnipeg's Central Park Redevelopment used public engagement in placemaking for a multi-cultural community. The result is a space that is meaningful to the community with the capacity to evoke topophilia

Background

Located in Downtown Winnipeg, Central Park was created in 1894 with a cost of \$20,000. As Winnipeg experienced massive growth in the 1880s, middle class houses started to appear in the city's core. By 1893 the city's governance was concerned with the quality of life in the city and the first Parks Board was created and purchased

several lands for parks. The Parks Board bought the land from the Hudson Bay Company and transformed a once boggy field to a natural space with grass and a few trees. The area quickly gentrified but during the 1950s suburbanization took its toll. Wealthy families moved to the suburbs and their houses were divided into smaller units or demolished to make way for high-rise housing developments.



Aboriginals, Immigrants and Refugees are among the residents of Central Park neighbourhood. Photo: Winnipeg Free Press (2012)

Today, the Central Park neighbourhood serves as a starting point for many immigrant and refugee families. In fact, the residents who live around Central Park speak more than 40 different languages (SpeakUpWinnipeg, 2010).

The area is among the densest part of the city as a result of the built form, which is mostly composed of high rise apartments. There are around 15,000 people per square kilometer (SpeakUpWinnipeg, 2010).

As a result of high incidences of low-income in the neighbourhood and other social ills, the area also experienced high crime rates. People were often afraid to be in the park especially alone and at night. People were stigmatized with the park's reputation.

Project Background

The Central Park Redevelopment started in 2006 when CentreVenture Development Corporation



The community's Central Market showed governments and financiers their presence and involvement in the neighbourhood, which lead to the redevelopment of Central Park. Photo: Christian (2007).

found an opportunity to improve the park. CentreVenture's goal was to create a collaborative project that address the issues in the park and provide a high quality space. The space should satisfy the recreational and community building needs of the residents. The simple vision was to create a place that people wanted to use.

The project consisted of the following collaborations:

- CentreVenture provided the project management
- Scatliff+Miller+Murray Inc. Provided the landscape and design
- PCL Contractors provided construction management.
- David Penner Architect managed the building architecture
- The City of Winnipeg focused on the preservation of the Waddell Fountain, which is an important landmark of the park.

Engagement Process

In addition to the design and project management, the community engagement was done in partnership with Knox United Church. The public engagement process ran from

July 18 to August 1, 2008. One-on-one meetings with 34 local groups in coordination with community leaders were held. An open house was then held at Knox United Church in May 2009 to present to the community the planned design, which was informed by the community engagements and was attended by approximately 50 people

Engagement to Design



Central Park resident discussing the need for places to play. Photo: Winnipeg Foundation (2011).

The engagement process informed many of the amenities that were installed in Central Park. This ensured that the park was a place that the community wanted to use,

that it was not alienating, and it reflected some aspects of their culture. Most notable amenity is the green turf, which serves as a soccer field. Originally, the design team wanted to put a stage in the middle park. However, the resident's disagreed with the idea. Most of the immigrants loved and played soccer and



The soccer pitch allows residents to play their favourite sport in warmer months. Photo: SpeakUpWinnipeg (2010).

clearly voiced this during the engagements.

An open air market, which is also known as the Central Park, operate during warmer seasons and provide the community with various cultural goods.

Of course, the design did not all reflect aspects of a multi-cultural community. It also contained some imagery of their adopted Canadian culture in the form of a toboggan hill.

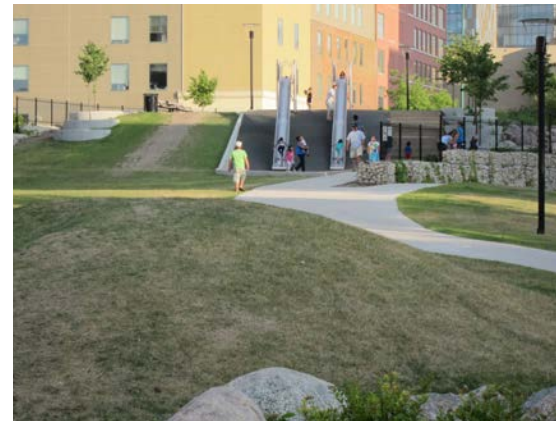
The soccer pitch is made of synthetic grass and can easily be flooded in the winter to create a skating rink. This allows the community, especially the New Canadians, to experience a new activity that they may not have in their counties.

Other design considerations include the removal of picnic tables and benches. In the past, the benches in the middle of the park served as venues for dealing illegal substances according to the observations and the community. So in the redevelopment only a handful chairs along the streets were kept, which are easier to monitor illegal activities.

Lessons Learned

Through the process of redeveloping Central Park, there are several lessons that were learned. These lessons may be applicable to many if not all planning and design projects that can influence a large number of people.

People like to see familiar things: One of these lessons is that people are more likely to use spaces that they are familiar with. Being in a new culture either by choice or by force can lead to alienation. By including the people's



Slides in the summer and toboggan in the winter: this man made hill is multipurpose and is well-loved by children and their parents. Photo: SpeakUpWinnipeg (2010).

input and reflecting that in the design, the redevelopment project emanated a sense of belonging to those who are most likely to use the park.

Input creates ownership:

When people see their ideas drawn on a paper as part of the plan and then built on the ground, they feel that they



Raymond Ngarbouli is a CEDA Community Development Coordinator, one of the engagement leads, and recent immigrant. He engaged with more than 300 people to help inform the Central Park Redevelopment project. Photo: Winnipeg Free Press (2012b).

contributed to the project. People believe that have invested their ideas and that the resulting development belong to them. As a result, the residents are more willing to take care of what they have and ensure that it remains beautiful and a symbol of a vibrant community.

Engagements relieve tension:

During the planning and engagement redevelopment process, there were many

concerns raised by different groups of people. Some of the people were concerned that the 100 year old park would be transformed to something totally new and that it would lose its historic character. However, by engaging these people and hearing their concerns, the designers were able to ensure that the park retained much of its original character while adding new amenities. The design reflected the historic character in the Waddell fountain and retention of most of the large American Elms

Creation of new opportunities:

Because the design reflects the needs of the people, other uses for Central Park surfaced as a derivative. The Central Market existed prior to the development of the park and was enhanced after the project. Different community organizations have started to create soccer leagues to play in Central Park.

Creates community awareness:

Through the engagement process, the Central Park community were educated of the development process. They learned the different responsibilities of the people executives involved, where the funding is coming from, and many more.

Because of this they became more active and vigilant with the process. The people learned that the design can be a democratic process. The developers also knew that because they consulted the people, they would need to reflect their ideas in the design or risk disappointment.



The Waddell fountain: part of the development team's vision is to preserve the history of the place, which is represented by the representation of this grand fountain. Photo: SpeakUpWinnipeg (2010).

Conclusion

The Central Park is an important landmark in Winnipeg and the neighbourhood it services experiences some of the greatest challenges of urban living. Multiculturalism is a big aspect of the neighbourhood and projects that create public places must reflect this characteristic.

By engaging the community, Central Park is able to embody of user's memories of their home country, their passions, loves, and dreams in a new world. The redevelopment created a place that is meaningful to a community of people.

Although there are more challenges CentreVenture together with the community and various partners is facing, the people now have a successful venture they can be proud of and pull inspiration from.



The next generation cooling off in the Central Park splash pad. Photo: Winnipeg Free Press (2012a).

Resources

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Special thanks to Tom Janzen for Co-researching this case study and providing valuable leads. I would also like to thank Raymond Ngarbouli whose stories and community involvement served as an inspiration in writing this report. Finally, this project would not have been possible without the support of Martin Sandhurst and Paul McNeil.
