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ISBN

9798189264733

Author

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Publication Date

2026-08-25

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Natural Alliances:

Greening, Growth, and the Private Production of the Public Realm

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Urban Planning

by

Claire Sophia Nelischer

2026

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2026

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Natural Alliances:

Greening, Growth, and the Private Production of the Public Realm

by

Claire Sophia Nelischer

Doctor of Philosophy in Urban Planning

University of California, Los Angeles, 2026

Professor Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, Chair

As green space becomes more central to both urban growth and sustainability agendas, new parks are emerging from disused infrastructure, funded, designed, and managed by philanthropic donors. These collaborative park governance strategies promise to deliver ecologically responsive and culturally vital green spaces, but raise critical questions about the spatial justice implications of private power in the production of public space.

This dissertation explores the drivers, modes, and implications of philanthropic participation in the material and discursive production of urban parks and green spaces. Centering on three embedded cases of donor-led parks in Toronto, Canada – The Bentway, The Meadoway, and The Art Trail – I investigate, first, how philanthropy reshapes the production,

design, and governance of urban green spaces, and second, how these politics, processes, and outcomes implicate park justice. I use interviews, policy and media discourse analysis, and urban design analysis to investigate the three parks as material sites through which design and programming strategies are deployed and as processes through which power is wielded and resisted.

Drawing from theories of the production of space, urban political ecology, and urban justice, I probe the interrelations between urban environmental imaginaries and actual urban landscapes. I find that local environmental governance discourses and global policy mobilities naturalize the value of philanthropy-led park production, and in doing so, shift expectations amongst policymakers and the public regarding how parks ought to be made. With donor participation framed as a broadly shared social and environmental good, counter-narratives are constrained; donor power neutralizes dissent and diminishes alternative visions of urban environmental development. As philanthropy infuses the park-making process with new power relations, I argue this may divert public resources away from equity-informed park needs and exacerbate distributive and recognitional injustices across park systems. I offer policy and planning recommendations to address these risks.

The findings contribute to theoretical understandings of how private power operates through multi-scalar processes of urban environmental change. Critical attention to how discursive representations of greening, growth, and giving produce material changes in urban environments can reveal spatially uneven effects and uncover more just alternatives.

The dissertation of Claire Sophia Nelischer is approved.

Kian Goh

Roger Keil

Vinit Mukhija

Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2026

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my doctoral advisor and dissertation committee chair, Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to research and teach alongside you, and to benefit from your guidance and mentorship. I feel lucky to have learned from you. My sincere thanks to my committee members, Kian Goh and Vinit Mukhija, who encouraged me and challenged me in the right measure; our conversations always left me with fresh insights, and, even better, fresh questions that helped push this project forward. Special thanks to Roger Keil, who was so generous with his ideas, and who always made me feel that my own mattered.

cityLAB has been a warm and welcoming intellectual home for me at UCLA. Thank you to Dana Cuff for creating and sustaining this interdisciplinary space filled with the brightest (and kindest!) researchers and students. I am fortunate to have worked alongside many talented cityLAB staff, past and present, including Yang Yang, Manos Proussaloglou, Gus Wendel, Carrie Gammell, and many others, as well as our partners at Heart of Los Angeles.

My experience with UCLA's Urban Humanities Initiative – first as a student, then instructor, then associate director – shaped how I understand, explore, and act in the city. I have deep gratitude for my friends and co-instructors, Gus Wendel, Doğa Tekin, and Nidia Bautista, and all our wonderful students over the years. Learning with and from you has been inspiring, encouraging, and always, always fun. My thanks also to Dana Cuff, Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, Maite Zubiaurre, and Todd Presner for setting this experiment in motion.

To my dear friends and closest collaborators in the UnCommon Public Space Group, Andrés Ramirez and Gus Wendel: thinking and working and dreaming alongside you two has made me a better scholar. I am proud of what we have done together and excited for what's next. To my friends in the writing group, Emma French, Hilary Malson, Madeline Wander, Pamela

Stephens, and tamika butler: being in community with you, even if on the computer screen, has sustained me. A special thank you to my classmates and friends Greg Preston and Tom Bassett, who don't fit into the categories above, but whose kindness and care certainly deserves recognition here.

Thank you to my family. Your love and support have been absolutely vital. I simply could not have done this without you. Especially Kate, who taught me everything. And Mark, who asks the best questions.

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) through a Canada Graduate Scholarship–Doctoral. I am grateful for additional support from the Luskin School of Public Affairs through the Edward Hildebrand Canadian Studies Fellowship, and for research and travel grants from the UCLA International Institute and the UCLA Canadian Studies Program. I also wish to thank the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs for support throughout my doctorate.

Portions of this dissertation have been adapted into several outputs, currently under review. Chapter 5, in part, has been adapted into an article, currently under review for publication in *Cities*. Other portions of the dissertation have been adapted into a book chapter, currently under review for publication in the edited book *New Companion to Public Space*.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In urban policy agendas and urban imaginaries, the role of parks is transforming. For nearly two centuries, parks have been seen as crucial urban environments for learning, recreation, and play, and sites of social relationships, communication, and the practice of democracy (Cranz, 1989; L. H. Lofland, 1998b). Today, while still associated with public life and the public interest (Madanipour, 2019), parks and green spaces are increasingly central to both urban growth and urban sustainability agendas. As new parks emerge from disused infrastructure, urban design strategies aestheticize post-industrial landscapes of decline and advance new city-nature hybridities (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2015; J. J. Foster, 2023; Loughran, 2016). Meanwhile, images of a green, livable city are deployed as vehicles for investment and place marketing, boosting local economic development and growth (Birge-Liberman, 2010; Jon, 2021; Loughran, 2017).

This tension between seemingly oppositional environmental and economic objectives of contemporary urban green spaces materializes not only in urban landscapes, but also in the planning and governance of parks: how states, citizens, and private sector actors understand and engage with park production. Since the modern, industrial era, parks have been broadly considered a public asset, for which the state is primarily responsible. But increasingly, nonprofit organizations and philanthropic foundations fund, develop, and manage parks projects. These collaborative park production and governance arrangements promise to deliver exceptional, ecologically-responsive, and culturally-vital green spaces, above and beyond public sector capacity. But despite "commonsense" understandings of green space as universally beneficial and of civic philanthropy as benevolent (as critiqued by Angelo (2019), Wolch (1990), and

others), donor-led park production upends normative public/private and state/society boundaries in park spaces and related planning processes. These parks also raise critical questions about the spatial justice implications of private power in the production of public space.

Parks are important sites where transformations in the meaning and governance of public space coalesce and are made visible. Thus, they represent critical contexts in which to investigate impacts. What can donor-led green spaces tell us about the politics of urban park making today? My dissertation explores the drivers, modes, and implications of philanthropic participation in the material and discursive production of urban green spaces. I investigate three cases of philanthropy-led parks in Toronto, Canada and their production, design, and governance. I situate this investigation in the context of urban environmental governance in Toronto, and in relation to global policy mobilities regarding park design and governance. My investigation is driven by two main research questions:

- 1) *How does philanthropy reshape the production, design, and governance of urban parks and green spaces? And*
- 2) *How do these politics, processes, and outcomes implicate park justice?*

These questions are ultimately about the interrelations between urban environmental imaginaries and actual urban landscapes. Accordingly, I investigate the three parks as material sites through which design and programming strategies are deployed and also as processes through which power is wielded, and possibly, resisted. I engage three subquestions: First, I consider the *drivers*, or how discourses about philanthropic engagement in park production are developed and mobilized and how they gain power to shape how we think about parks. Second I consider the *modes*, or the processes through which these park projects are developed and designed, and how this differs from conventional, state-led processes. Third, I examine the

implications, or the distributive and recognitional justice outcomes of these realized park projects for surrounding communities and park systems.

Parks, place, philanthropy, and power

Civil society participation in park making is not new. Indeed, organized philanthropy, volunteer groups, and nonprofit organizations have historically played important roles in urban public parks, donating private land, supporting recreational programming, and contributing capital funds for monuments, bandshells, and other park improvements in US cities (Cranz, 1989; Loughran, 2020). But since the 1980s, scholars have noted a qualitative transformation in *how* these groups participate in urban park production (Campbell et al., 2021; De Magalhães & Carmona, 2006; Joassart-Marcelli et al., 2011). Civil society actors – from large philanthropic foundations to community groups and individual volunteers – today assume more central roles in the design, development, and management of urban parks, and have ushered in new modes of collaborative green governance (Gibson et al., 2018).

Public-nonprofit park collaborations are now common in many North American cities, but are highly varied. On one end of the spectrum, local stewardship groups participate in the development, management, and operation of shared public spaces; on the other end, coalitions of powerful philanthropic, corporate, and government interests align to transform particular urban sites into landmark parks, attracting investment and tourism and serving as emblematic examples of the success of the city in the late 20th century. Across the spectrum, these urban public space governance strategies have arisen in response to shifting political-economic conditions, shifting state-society relationships, and shifting urban imaginaries, unfolding at multiple scales, which

together create the conditions in which these new governance strategies are made possible and considered necessary.

The relatively recent increase in the power and participation of civil society actors, including philanthropic donors, in urban park production has been broadly attributed to two interrelated forces: at a political-economic level, the ongoing privatization, decentralization, externalization, and devolution of public services in general, and the "nonprofitization" of parks in particular (Rigolon & Németh, 2018); and at a sociocultural level, the growing importance of green space in urban imaginaries and urban policy (Angelo, 2021; Wachsmuth & Angelo, 2018). These divergent conceptualizations of the meaning and function of urban green space carry important implications for how parks are understood and acted upon by residents, the state, and the private sector. New, collaborative governance arrangements trade on ideas of parks as central to shared visions of the green, healthy, socially vital city, and facilitate nonprofit and philanthropic participation in the production, design, and governance of urban parks and green spaces.

The positioning of urban parks as vehicles for *both* socio-ecological and economic development objectives is an ecological modernization process in action. As Keil and Desfor argue, this approach to "greening capitalism" allows multiple social and economic objectives to be integrated "under the flag of environmental protection" (2003a, p. 28). Through the strategies of ecological modernization, an initiative to protect and conserve, for example, an urban river, is not a technical exercise but one in which varied economic, social, and political interests are negotiated and resolved (Keil & Desfor, 2003).

In Canada, the role of philanthropy in public space production has historically been relatively less pronounced than in the U.S. (Park People, 2017b), and Canadian cities remain

relatively underrepresented in the literature. However, the recent introduction of several new, high-profile, and celebrated urban park projects involving philanthropic donors in Toronto suggest a shift in the role of philanthropy in urban park governance. This shift is notable in two ways. First, unlike many large U.S. cities, Toronto does not share the long history of philanthropic engagement in park development, due in part to a legacy of stronger public sector support, aided by municipal property tax revenue, for public parks, and the relatively less developed philanthropic sector overall (Park People, 2017b). Second, and relatedly, there has been widespread public support for recent new developments in collaborative park governance in Toronto (MaRS Solution Lab & City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2021).

Toronto is a city of lively political debate surrounding the role of the private sector in developing and managing public space. Recent conflicts over the private redevelopment of provincially-owned waterfront lands at Ontario Place into a spa, as well as the threat of a Billy Bishop airport expansion onto Toronto Island, illustrate fierce local opposition and organized civil society resistance to the privatization of public space. By contrast, public discourses around philanthropic engagement in park development in Toronto have been largely celebratory, suggesting a growing acceptance of and enthusiasm for philanthropic participation in park making amongst public sector and elected officials interested in economic development and growth, amongst donors interested in social and environmental impact, and amongst the public interested in enhanced park spaces and services.

Ideas about who ought to be responsible for park making are further complicated by Indigenous and nonindigenous conflicts over land, ownership, and public/private distinctions. Canada's Indigenous population, over half of which today resides in cities (Nejad et al., 2019), continues to be dispossessed from their territories and traditional homelands in most major

Canadian cities, including on "public" lands such as parks (Blomley, 2004). Colonial claims on urban land, realized through spatial production and planning, are reflected in urban parks, in particular (Ramirez, 2025). Despite growing scholarship and activism challenging the legitimacy of public ownership over parkland and the various forms of exclusion it engenders, particularly for historically dispossessed Indigenous communities, contemporary park planning and design processes often fail to recognize and respond to Indigenous social and cultural presence in cities (Nejad et al., 2019). Even as municipalities are compelled to challenge settler-colonial ideologies in planning and policymaking (in part in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) calls to action), urban Indigenous populations continue to be marginalized in planning processes and are absent from civic memory and materiality in urban public space (Wall, 2016). This constrains possibilities for an "Indigenous placemaking" that rejects settler-colonial authority and instead centers Indigenous processes and aspirations in park planning (Nejad et al., 2020).

It is in this context of contested claims to land, competing conceptions of the social, economic, and ecological value of parks, and varying ideals about the role of the private sector in producing public space that my dissertation intervenes. The goal of my study is to investigate the politics surrounding philanthropy in park production – as a means through which private actors make claims on public spaces – and to advance understanding of the relationship between new forms of public space governance and public space justice.

Sites

I explore three parks in Toronto, Canada, each with varied strategies toward philanthropy-led park production. Toronto is a generative context in which to explore these

research questions, given the region's relatively recent rise of philanthropy-led park production, when compared to many US cities. Furthermore, extant literature on the subject is focused heavily on several paradigmatic, primarily US-based cases. By introducing new cases in Toronto, this study will add variation that allows existing theory to be tested and extended in unique cultural, political-economic, and geographic contexts. Within the political context of Toronto, I focus on three embedded cases, each of which are illustrative examples of high-profile urban parks produced by major philanthropic donations within the last decade in Toronto: The Bentway, The Meadoway, and The Lassonde Art Trail. These park projects share strong similarities in the scale of donation, public profile, and emphasis on infrastructure reuse. They also differ in important ways, including in the donor's role in initial project visioning, geographic context and scale, urban design emphasis, and community engagement approaches, relationships that importantly shape the analysis.

The Bentway

On a Sunday in June 2025, I approach The Bentway on foot from Fort York Boulevard, the street-level artery that runs parallel to and just south of the elevated Gardiner Expressway, delineating the southern border of the linear park. I proceed past the Fort York Visitor Center, peeking out from underneath the Expressway, across the small parking lot, and toward the western most end of the public space. Here, the series of massive concrete pillars – or "bents" – and the platform above that together create a sweeping colonnade under the elevated expressway are interrupted as Strachan Avenue intersects with the Gardiner. Dubbed "The Strachan Gate," this is one of several key "rooms" at The Bentway, each with their own programmatic purpose and design language to assert a sense of place space while reinforcing linkages along the whole linear expanse of the public space. The Strachan Gate is one of the most distinctive and recognizable elements of The Bentway, with a set of stepped bench seating leading down to a platform, creating an amphitheater nestled below the bents with vistas stretching along the entire length of the public space.

The Strachan Gate was designed to be a space for gathering and performance, and today, that intention is clear, as hundreds are gathered for the world premier performance of Sand Flight, an original performance by Norwegian choreographer Ingrid Fiksdal involving eight contemporary dancers, a fifty-member choir, and a massive, 17-foot sand dune, created in the shade under The Bentway. This ticketed event, priced on a suggested, pay-what-you choose scale, is hosted as part of The Bentway's 2025 summer program of public art, which focuses on the dynamics of urban sun and shade in the context of climate change.

After checking my ticket and settling onto the bleachers that have been installed for the performance, I scan the seats around me. Overall, the buzzing crowd has a look that is very downtown, very hip, and very white. While there is some age diversity - many older adults, some young children, and lots of people in between – the racial diversity of the audience gathered for this performance at The Bentway is markedly different from what I have seen on other days in this space, and even more different from the crowd I encountered on the streetcar on my journey here.

The performance, which involves eight dancers slowly traversing the expanse of the dune over the 50-person choir's ethereal accompaniment, is intriguing but somewhat challenging for the audience – many of the children in attendance grow restless over the course of the one-hour performance, and several adult attendees quietly exit well before the piece concludes. After the applause fades, the crowd flows out from the fenced in, ticketed area, setting out on bike or on foot back into the city. (Field notes: Toronto, June 15, 2025)

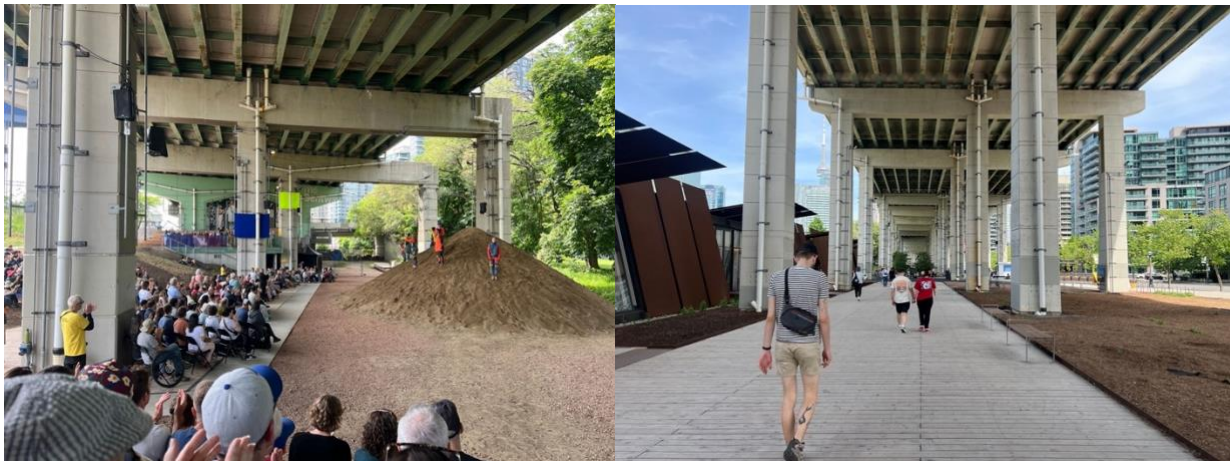


Figure 1 (left) Sand Flight Performance at The Bentway, June 2025. Photograph by author.

Figure 2 (right) Under The Bentway, June 2025. Photograph by author.

The first case site is The Bentway, a small, linear park constructed on City-owned land under an elevated expressway in a high-density, downtown neighborhood of Toronto. The Bentway was initiated in November 2015 by a \$25 million philanthropic donation from the Judy and Wilmot Matthews Foundation, a small family foundation with a history of quietly supporting local projects related to education, medicine, the arts, and the public realm (City of Toronto, 2018c). The Matthews approached the City with \$25 million in capital funding and a preconceived concept, developed privately in collaboration with top urban designers and landscape architects, to transform a 1.75 km stretch of publicly-owned land under Toronto's elevated Gardiner Expressway into a new park (Keenan, 2015; Waterfront Toronto, 2015a). At the time, this represented the largest donation of its kind in the City's history. The project was widely celebrated in the media and received overwhelming enthusiasm from elected officials, agency staff, and business and civic leaders.

While owned by the City of Toronto, the land in question was not previously designated as parkland and was inaccessible to the public, with no plans to integrate it into the adjacent public realm. The City of Toronto and Waterfront Toronto quickly mobilized public resources and procurement processes to advance the park's development (City of Toronto, 2016b; Waterfront Toronto, n.d.-b). Following a high-profile public engagement process in which the donors and their selected design team were centrally involved, The Bentway was ushered through an expedited design and construction process and opened to the public in early 2018. Today, The Bentway is managed by The Bentway Conservancy, Toronto's first urban park conservancy, partially funded by the park's original donors. Under the conservancy's close management, the park today is heavily programmed with curated public art, events, and public

programming, and has received only minimal criticism regarding its impact on unhoused populations and suggestions of gentrification (Gordon & Byron, 2021; Hess & Stevenson-Blythe, 2022).

The Meadoway

On that same summer day, my approach to The Meadoway is decidedly different. After crawling my way along Highway 401, the major expressway that connects the now mega city of Toronto, I descend into east Scarborough, along the suburban arterial roads, past the big box stores and strip mall plazas, to Bellamy Road. I park on a bungalow-lined side street and secure a bicycle from a nearby Bike Share dock, recently expanded to include more stations in suburban neighborhoods, and I set off cycling.

It is a pleasant, early summer day, the temperature in the low twenties (Celsius) and the sun shining through a sky lightly dotted with clouds. I enter the multi-use trail, marked here only by a faded "The Meadoway" logo painted on the asphalt. As the trail winds gradually through the meadowlands, I pass joggers, dog walkers, and people on bikes – some solo, some families with small children, and some in pairs. As I continue cycling east, just past Daventry Road, I come along a series of allotment gardens, where gardeners are quietly watering, weeding, and tending to their plots. A woman chats with a man as they point to a recently planted bed, and another man holding a garden hose waves hello as I pass by. The people I encounter along The Meadoway – the walkers, the gardeners, the cyclists and the joggers – visibly reflect the dramatic racial, ethnic, and age diversity of the surrounding neighborhood, Scarborough.

As I continue cycling east, every few minutes the dedicated trail is interrupted by a city street – a well-marked bicycle and pedestrian crossing with signals and stop lights ushers me safely over busy Markham Road, followed by an unsignalized crossing over Brimorton Drive, where traffic is quieter and sightlines better. As I make my way up a gradual hill back into the meadow, I notice a new sound swelling: a steady, low hum emanating from the many electrical wires threaded between the massive transmission towers. Here, this electrical buzz from the wires overhead joins together with the buzz of the insects in the meadow below, the wind whistling through the grasses, and the floating birdsongs. Together with the faint drone of traffic in the distance, I take in this soundscape that is entirely unique to The Meadoway, and indeed, to the past ten years. (Field notes: Toronto, June 15, 2025)



Figure 3 (left) Entrance to The Meadowway from Bellamy Road, June 2025. Photograph by author.

Figure 4 (right) Overhead wires at The Meadowway, June 2025. Photograph by author.

The Bentway has been credited for inspiring renewed interest in so-called "city building" initiatives amongst Toronto's philanthropic community (Rider, 2022a) and for spurring park donations of a similar scale. The Meadowway is one such project, and the second case site: a new linear park, currently under development which, once completed, will transform a 16 km stretch of publicly-owned land beneath an electrical corridor into a greenway for recreation and ecological protection (The Meadowway, n.d.-c). Located in Toronto's inner suburb of Scarborough – part of the "urban fringe" reflecting something between the archetype of the central city and the new suburb (Keil & Young, 2009) – The Meadowway serves a residential area with a significant low-income and new immigrant population by connecting a network of new and existing public spaces, schools, neighborhoods, and businesses with a multi-use trail.

The project is the result of nearly a decade of advocacy, piloting, and planning by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA), the public agency that owns and manages the land (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2018b). In 2012, with grant support from the Weston Foundation and local park advocacy group Park People, TRCA launched a small pilot project to revitalize the underutilized space beneath an electric transmission corridor to

create habitat for butterflies, birds, and pollinator species (The Meadoway, n.d.-b). Over time, the pilot developed into a larger, more ambitious effort to transform the entire 16 km corridor into a network of trails and natural features to support both community use and biodiversity (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2018b). In 2018, the project received a \$25 million donation from the Weston Family Foundation, a large, nation-wide philanthropic foundation with a history of supporting projects related to conservation (Weston Family Foundation, n.d.) With a total proposed budget of \$85 million, funded in part by the City of Toronto and the TRCA, this initial donation was critical to advancing plans for The Meadoway in the context of scarce public budget and limited resources to support its capital development (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2018b). To date, the project is estimated at 60% completion, with 10 km of multi-use trails completed and 40 hectares of native meadow habitat already restored (Adler, 2023; The Meadoway, n.d.-b).

The Lassonde Art Trail

A few days later, I visit The Port Lands, where, for the first time, I can see clearly that The Lassonde Art Trail is coming to life. I secure a bicycle from a Bike Share station near the Don River, following the Lower Don Trail along the course of the river to where it meets the lake. I pass by Corktown Common, the spectacular new park on the western edge of the mouth of the Don River, developed by Waterfront Toronto as part of a massive flood protection effort in the West Don Lands neighborhood. I continue east through the dense, mixed-use district made possible by these flood protection efforts, and past the Distillery District, one of Toronto's most notable adaptive reuse projects, developed in the early 2000s as a commercial and residential center anchored by former industrial buildings transformed into creative and retail space.

As I cycle under the elevated Gardiner Expressway – where The Bentway unfolds further to the west – I see Lake Ontario on the horizon. Where I had been travelling through blocks lined tightly by tall office and residential buildings, here space expands on all sides of the well-marked bicycle lane. I continue on across the Keating Channel on the new Cherry Street North Bridge, its elegant white curving lines reminiscent of a

wishbone, the bright yellow paint that lines its underside marking my place on the site. Construction vehicles and trucks rumble by, sending dust into the air. As I look southeast, the landscape I have seen in so many maps, plans, and renderings is coming to life. I see the undulating path of the river mouth extending toward the lake, the banks planted with small trees and connected by pedestrian bridges. I see the concrete laid for the pathways through the park, and larger rock forms laid for seating. I see the organic shapes of the play mounds and the giant owl sculpture of the future playground in the distance.

For so many years The Port Lands and its network of public spaces have seemed to be just an idea, an imagination – advocated by dedicated Torontonians, debated on the floor of City Council, discussed as a hot topic in the pages of the local newspapers – and now, this massive, almost unfathomable effort of engineering and design and political will is taking its material from here on the waterfront. At its center will be a new waterfront public art trail. (Field notes: Toronto, June 20, 2025)



Figure 5 (left) Bridge crossing in the Port Lands, June 2025. Photograph by author.

Figure 6 (right) Biidaasige Park and path construction, June 2025. Photograph by author.

The latest addition to Toronto's collection of high-profile, donor-funded park projects is The Lassonde Art Trail, the final case site in this study. This new, outdoor public art trail was planned alongside a series of new waterfront parks as part of Waterfront Toronto's massive, multi-decade project to transform The Port Lands, a 400-hectare former industrial site on Toronto's waterfront. The Lassonde Art Trail introduces a free, open-air route connecting a new

collection of permanent and temporary outdoor public art works to be sited along a trail through a new, 16-hectare expanse of Biidaasige Park on Ookwemin Minising (formerly Villiers Island). A new nonprofit organization, The Lassonde Art Trail Foundation, will fund the acquisition of new permanent works to anchor the trail, curate a rotating collection of installations from local and international artists, and operate the space (Waterfront Toronto, 2022c). The Lassonde Art Trail is supported by a \$25 million donation to the City of Toronto by the Lassonde Family Foundation, representing the single largest arts-related gift ever received by the City (City of Toronto, 2022c). With Waterfront Toronto completing the park space, the entire donation is dedicated to programming: \$10 million is earmarked to commission two new permanent artworks as part of a juried process, and the remaining \$15 million to establish the nonprofit organization to manage the Art Trail, with the goal to seek additional sustaining funding (Waterfront Toronto, 2022c).

The project was announced in June 2022 by the Lassonde Family and Waterfront Toronto, the agency responsible for developing new parks and public spaces as part of The Port Lands, alongside the City of Toronto, which will eventually assume management of the parks once they are complete (Waterfront Toronto, 2022c). Early press releases framed the project as important for attracting residents to this new waterfront neighborhood, establishing the new series of public spaces as a destination for all, and forging connections with the existing network of waterfront parks (Waterfront Toronto, 2022c). While plans for public art in the new public spaces in The Port Lands had been in development, this announcement marked the first indication that a major investment would help realize this vision (City of Toronto, 2022c).

Strategies and methods

Theoretical approach

I explore these three cases, the interrelationships among them, and their relationships to local environmental governance and global policy discourses. My analysis considers both the material and discursive production of urban green space: the uneven spatial impacts of urban greening and how particular socionatures are socially constructed and mobilized. This analytical strategy is supported by a theoretical framework that emphasizes the processual, multi-scalar, and power laden nature of urban green space production. The framework integrates three key lenses: the production of space, urban political ecology, and theories of justice.

First, understanding space, and in particular, urban green space, as socially produced through everyday, historically- and geographically-contingent socio-ecological processes helps us to see how changing structural and cultural conditions are expressed in the everyday life of parks (Gandy, 2022b; Lefebvre, 1991). Second, urban political ecology emphasizes the relationships, and indeed the inextricable interconnections, between the uneven spatial distribution of environmental goods and the ideological construction of urban nature, reading everyday urban landscapes as representations of structural conditions and social imaginaries and, importantly, power (Angelo, 2019; Kaika et al., 2023b; Keil & Boudreau, 2006). Finally, urban justice frameworks uncover inequities in processes and identify power relations in the built environment (Low & Iveson, 2016; Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003). Understanding urban green space as produced through land, labor, capital, social relations, representation, and aesthetics creates openings for resistance to the dominant symbolic and material production of urban parks.

A note on green space

Throughout this study, I use the term "urban green space" to denote a range of spaces, at a range of scales, that may include more or less urban vegetation and "natural" elements, more or less built infrastructure and "hard" elements. I have elected to use the term "green space" for two primary reasons. First, the term includes parks, such as urban parks, linear parks, and regional scale parks, but also accommodates those publicly-accessible spaces that are not strictly defined or zoned as "parks," such as trails and green infrastructure. There is little consensus in the definition of "green space" (or "greenspace"), ranging from green space as "nature" to green space as "urban vegetated areas." But as Taylor and Hochuli (2017) suggest, contextually-specific definitions may ultimately prove more meaningful and operational in research applications. Here, a more expansive definition of urban green space encompasses the three case sites despite their differences in material, design, location, and scale.

Second, I have elected to use the term "urban green space" to gesture to the (often uninterrogated) cultural association between "green," "sustainable," and, ultimately, "good," which Angelo (2021) explores in depth. "Urban green space" captures spaces explicitly featuring vegetation (trees, gardens, etc.) and delivering ecosystem function, as well as spaces featuring built infrastructures understood to deliver environmental and social benefit – what Wachsmuth and Angelo (2018) term the "green and gray" forms of urban nature that represent urban sustainability.

While typically featuring some vegetation, urban parks are not necessarily "green." Indeed, the three sites I explore in this dissertation have not been purely "green" in many decades. The parks that have been produced on these sites demonstrate a range of ways in which "nature" is integrated into "the city" in publicly-accessible open spaces, retaining associations

with sustainability and environmental goods while also introducing new social uses and associations.

Methodological approach

I use an embedded case study approach to explore each site in depth and situate this exploration within local and global structural and socio-environmental conditions. My methodological approach integrates strategies from extended case method (Burawoy, 1998b) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2001) to examine the relationships between collaborative park governance and the uneven production of urban public space, and the ways in which private power is mobilized, obscured, and resisted in the design and programming of urban parks.

I integrate several qualitative methods to investigate the drivers, modes, and implications of philanthropy-led urban park making, to understand both the production of urban parks and their implications for immediate park justice and park making practices more broadly. My aim with this particular mix of methods was to explore the interrelationships between environmental discourse, environmental design, and environmental governance, and what they together tell us about urban politics, power, culture, and space. Between January 2024 and June 2025, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 36 participants, in addition to seven informal interviews, representing a range of actors engaged in park making: designers, donors, policymakers, public agency staff, elected officials, park advocates, and community organizers. I reviewed over 200 policy documents, including planning and design documents, meeting minutes and decision documents, policy briefs, and press releases. I also reviewed 99 news articles from local media pertaining to the three parks. Finally, I conducted a series of field visits to observe and analyze the design and use of the realized parks. This methodological strategy

revealed the ways in which power operates in and through processes to produce uneven urban landscapes, and also revealed openings for more just visions to take root.

A note on the state and civil society

Given this study's focus on the relationship between the state and the nonprofit sector, it is important to note the complex overlap between governance institutions and actors in both local government and in civil society in Toronto. The work by Boudreau et al. (2006) on metropolitan governance restructuring in Toronto highlights the role of civil society mobilization, primarily led by economic and political elites, in creating a new city-regional political space in which to articulate a growth-oriented agenda. Leaders in business, politics, and bureaucracy in Toronto form coalitions around local economic development issues and advocate for policies and projects to attract investment and talent to the city, including public funds for infrastructure investments in recreational spaces and in building a safe, clean, and vibrant public realm. Given the power and influence of elite interests in regional governance, Boudreau et al. frame Toronto's new regionalism as "a networked, project-based space with elastic boundaries" (Boudreau et al., 2006, p. 42). This blurring of boundaries between state and civil society highlights the challenge of drawing distinctions between local governance institutions and philanthropy.

So it is important to clarify how I conceptualize the relationship between "the state" and the philanthropic sector. Drawing from the investigation by Davies and Blanco (2022) into collaborative "state-market-civil society partnerships," I conceptualize the state as "a multi-scalar set of institutions that spans the local/municipal to regional and national territories and beyond," underpinned by historical and contextual specificity (Davies & Blanco, 2022, p. 3). For this study in particular, "the state" refers to several relevant public institutions and agencies that govern park production at the municipal and regional scales, namely the municipality of the City

of Toronto and its divisions, agencies, and corporations, Waterfront Toronto (a tripartite government agency that manages development along Toronto's publicly-owned waterfront lands), and the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (a regional conservation authority formed by and representative of multiple member municipalities tasked with natural resource management and environmental protection). The three parks explored here were each developed through complex exchanges and partnerships between these institutions, and between these institutions and civil society organizations and philanthropic actors, highlighting the importance of intergovernmental relations and the frequent crossover between governance institutions and civil society at both the municipal and regional scales in Toronto.

Dissertation structure

This introductory chapter introduces the global and local context of the problem and the theoretical and methodological approach I take in response.

In Chapter 2, I establish a theoretical framework through which I conceptualize and analyze the "problem" of philanthropic participation in green space production. This chapter provides the necessary theoretical framing through which to understand the issue of donor-led park making and what questions ought to be asked, and to underpin the analysis that follows in the subsequent chapters.

Extending from this framework, in Chapter 3, I delve into my study design and methods in more detail.

Chapter 4 provides necessary context on urban environmental governance and collaborative governance in Toronto, highlighting the structural conditions, cultural shifts, and

mobile policy discourses that have shaped how philanthropic partnership has emerged as a strategy for park production in Toronto.

In Chapter 5, I explore the drivers of green space philanthropy: how urban parks have emerged as a policy problem and philanthropic participation as a policy solution, in response to political-economic and socio-environmental changes at the local and global scales.

In Chapter 6, I analyze the modes of collaborative park production: how philanthropic power reshapes the planning, design, and governance processes through which urban green spaces are produced, and how this implicates procedural justice.

In Chapter 7, I interrogate the implications of donor-directed green space: how philanthropic power reshapes the material landscapes and programming approaches of realized green spaces, and how this shapes possibilities for recognitional and distributive justice.

In the concluding Chapter 8, I highlight the empirical insights, theoretical implications, and policy and planning recommendations emerging from this study, and offer some avenues for future research.

Key findings

In examining the discursive and material construction of urban green space, I uncover several findings about how ideas about parks and philanthropy are produced and mobilized in planning processes and in actual urban landscapes, and their implications for spatial justice.

First, I find that structural, cultural, and environmental changes at multiple scales have transformed in recent years how Torontonians think about parks and about philanthropy, reshaping both the material and discursive production of green space. Local park advocates and global policy networks frame the public sector as fundamentally unable to meet the critical need

for new and improved parks amidst rapid growth, and philanthropic partnerships as the ideal market-based means to advance creative park projects, particularly urban infrastructure reuse projects, as a natural solution to the parks crisis. As Wachsmuth and Angelo have argued, the assumed benefits of urban greening have become "a new policy commonsense" (2018, p. 2201). I argue that the value of philanthropy-led approaches to urban park design and governance has become *naturalized*, obfuscating underlying concerns over green gentrification and democratic decision-making. This shifts expectations amongst policymakers and the public regarding how urban parks ought to be made.

Second, while I find no uniformity in donor-led strategies for park making, each case representing a different reorganization of responsibility from the state to donors, I find that this reorganization does indeed carry implications for procedural justice. Philanthropy infuses the park planning and design process with new power relations. The ability of donors to shape conversations, visions, and the parameters of participation may indeed constrain the possibility of meaningful participation in park making. As philanthropic investments in parks are *naturalized* as a broadly shared social and environmental goods, the possibility of counter-narratives to emerge through planning and design processes is limited, thereby *neutralizing* dissent and alternative visions for park spaces and programs. When directed toward urban environmental development, donor power constrains alternative visions of socionatural change.

Third, I find that collaborative governance indeed enables the political, cultural, and financial power and interests of donors to be embedded in park design and programming. However, the outcomes for communities are, as yet, inconsistent and unclear. Where donors have a strong vision for community-guided design and programming, and an eye to equity, these projects may indeed improve access to and representation within park spaces. But these projects

are not required to adhere to established park equity measures or plans, blurring the boundary between public and private spaces, services, and budgets. This carries the risk of further diverting public resources away from equity-informed needs and towards donor-responsive stances, deepening distributive inequities across park systems and recognitional injustices in local neighborhoods. This advances our understanding of the nature, risks, and constraints of philanthropic power in urban park making.

Theoretical implications

Synthesizing these findings and extending from existing theory, I offer an emerging analysis of how local park-making strategies are influenced by and implicate global processes of socio-environmental change (Gandy, 2022b): how the participation of philanthropic donors transforms the discourses through which parks are understood, the processes through which parks are produced, the material sites of the parks themselves.

I argue that donors mobilize their political, cultural, and financial power to advance park projects and related collaborative governance strategies that transform the use and symbolism of urban infrastructure as *inherently* equity-enhancing. Donors have considerable power to shape discourses about the need for and benefits of their own participation in park making, which carries direct spatial and social implications in park spaces and programs. Through global flows of policy ideas, local philanthropy-led parks, and their particular design emphasis on post-industrial urban infrastructure reuse, are connected to global processes of urban image making and uneven development.

As philanthropic participation in park making is *naturalized*, and counter-narratives and alternative claims to green space *neutralized*, what appear to be "natural" transformations in the design and governance of urban parks actually constitute planning processes and public

environments embedded with private power. The material production of urban green space is subject to discursive representations of greening, growth, and giving. The assumed goodness of urban greening and the assumed benevolence of civic philanthropy together depoliticize and obfuscate how private power operates in and through urban environmental change and governance. Critical attention to this dynamic can uncover its spatially uneven effects and more just alternatives.

Practical implications

Analyzing realized and possible future injustices in philanthropy-led park making suggests several promising pathways toward more just park planning, design, and governance. I offer the following strategies for local governments seeking to harness the emergent potential of collaborative park production models while mitigating potential procedural, distributive, and recognitional injustices.

1. Increase the transparency of early park visioning processes and introduce standard processes and practices for public engagement in donor-led park projects to expand the opportunity for community visions to be centered in early development.
2. Offer network-building support and grant programs as pathways to connect philanthropic donors with existing community-led park initiatives, led by communities with experience, knowledge, and connections to local neighborhoods. Supporting community-based park programming, in particular, led by locals with knowledge of and connections to their neighborhoods is a promising opportunity to redistribute power in the park making processes.
3. Make critical capital investments and enhancements across park systems to secure a baseline of public support for park spaces and infrastructures, and direct donors toward

opportunities to add a "layer" of programming atop existing park spaces and expand reach and relevance to diverse communities.

4. Create robust policies and procedures to evaluate donations against demonstrated park equity needs in individual neighborhoods and across park systems. Such policies would shift local governments away from a responsive stance and toward more productive collaboration with donors that aligns with public processes and priorities and attends to distributional inequities.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

How do political, economic, and cultural forces, structured globally and expressed locally, frame contemporary changes (and possible futures) in the production and governance of urban green space?

This chapter sets out a theoretical framework through which to understand and analyze emerging strategies of civil society-led urban green space production and governance at the local scale. This theoretical framework offers a "system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs and theories" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 39) that frames the phenomenon, identifies the issues that require understanding, and informs the study design. This chapter focuses on the multi-scalar structural and cultural contexts in which contemporary urban parks and green spaces are planned, designed, and experienced; the chapters that follow will each highlight the theoretical and empirical literature necessary to frame their respective topical concerns.

I begin by discussing structuralist perspectives on urban political economy and power relations and their uneven sociospatial expressions in the built environment, specifically in urban green spaces. I discuss critical social perspectives on urban social-ecological relations and their expressions in public discourses around these urban green spaces. Asserting the fundamental interconnectedness of these perspectives, I highlight urban political ecology as a critical approach that problematizes and reconciles dualisms between nature and the city and between the material and the symbolic.

I conclude by synthesizing a theoretical perspective from which the "problem" of urban green space is understood and explanations untangled in the chapters that follow. Grounded in

the theory of the production of space, this framework uses an urban political ecology lens to consider the interrelations between the discursive and material construction of urban green space, and uses frameworks of justice to assess the equity implications of particular modes of urban green space planning, design, and governance.

Power, culture, and green space

A new vision of state-society, nature-city harmony is taking material form at the edges and in-between spaces of the urban landscape (J. J. Foster, 2023; Keil, 2020b; Stanford, 2025), as new public green spaces emerge from disused infrastructure, envisioned and stewarded not by public parks agencies, but by civil society partners. Like many other urban infrastructures, parks and green spaces are illustrative contexts in which politics, power relations, and sociospatial inequalities are enacted and made visible (Angelo & Hentschel, 2015). To trace the impacts and implications of this particular form of civil society-led urban green space production requires an investigation into the historically- and culturally-specific interconnections between urban imaginaries, urban landscapes, and urban environmental governance (Gabriel, 2014).

To do so necessitates integrating two lenses through which the production and experience of the urban built environment have typically been understood: first, political economy perspectives that emphasize the relationships between land, labor, capital, and politics that produce uneven value in urban space; and second, symbolic economy perspectives that emphasize the cultural meanings and representations of the city that shape discourses, perceptions, and experiences of and in urban space (Zukin, 1996). When integrated—indeed, understood as inextricably interwoven—these perspectives help us to see how the power of capital and the state, together with conceptions of cities and of nature, are expressed in the material and

discursive landscapes of the city. Such an integrative analysis of the production of urban space, as modeled by urban political ecology, enables us to uncover the everyday "interpretations and interpenetrations of culture and power" (Zukin, 1996, p. 43) that shape the built environment and green space, in particular.

Political economy and the built environment

Urban neoliberalization and uneven development

Contemporary shifts in the form and governance of urban green space, including the growing influence of philanthropic and other nonprofit partners in park production, can be understood as one contemporary manifestation of the broader structural transformations of neoliberalization. The dominant political and economic doctrine of neoliberalism emerged in North America and Western Europe in the late 1970s in response to the perceived crisis of post-Fordist deindustrialization (Jessop, 2002). Despite a rhetoric of *laissez-faire* state *retreat from* markets, neoliberalism involves "a paradoxical increase in intervention" (Jessop, 2002, p. 454) as state power and resources are actively mobilized *on behalf of* markets (Peck, 2008; Smith, 2002; Webber, 2002). Reflecting the particularities of the local scale and of the present moment, recent shifts in green space governance can be understood as an extension and transformation of this same mobilization of state resources on behalf of markets, illustrating how neoliberalism marches on as "an always mutating project of state-facilitate market rule" (Peck & Theodore, 2019, p. 245).

As many have argued, neoliberalism is not an abstract political-economic and ideological project unfolding at a global scale. Instead, it is powerfully expressed at the urban scale. Its projects directly intersect with the everyday lives of urban dwellers as dramatic social, economic,

and political restructuring and rescaling extends market logics, competition, and commodification deeper into local policies, institutions, and everyday life (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Jessop, 2002; Keil, 2002; Peck & Tickell, 2002). As centers of power and capital, cities play a key role in the remaking of political-economic systems and related spatial expressions, and are thus strategic environments in which neoliberal policies are enacted and revised; the city is where "the dirty work of globalization (and neoliberalization) is done" (Keil, 2002, p. 238). And so the city is where we see some of the most emblematic projects of neoliberalism brought to life, including the privatization and reorganization of public services and the reshaping of public institutions to emphasize competition and market relations (Peck, 2012).

It is important to highlight here three key characteristics of urban neoliberalism, each of which is evident in recent shifts in urban park production and governance. First, rather than sudden state retreat, neoliberalism is *processual*, ongoing, and evolving; it must be understood processually, as "neoliberalization" (Peck & Theodore, 2019). Through this process, the retrenchment, deregulation, and dismantling of the welfare state is coupled with the creation of new market-oriented institutional arrangements, governance regimes, and regulatory reforms that extend the market deeper into urban policy, urban space, and urban life (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). Peck and Tickell (2002) frame this contradiction as "roll-back" and "roll-out" neoliberalism. Second, urban neoliberalization is not monolithic, but rather *path-dependent*, expressed in varied forms, scales, and temporalities responsive to local cultural, political, and regulatory contexts (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). Patterns can be clearly discerned, and yet the processes are infinitely adaptable across time, space, and scale (Brenner, 2019). The projects of neoliberalization are not only variegated and spatially uneven, but also provisional, often interrupted by local struggles and contestations and never fully realized (Peck & Theodore,

2019). Finally, urban neoliberalization is fundamentally *spatial*, expressed through the uneven production of value across urban landscapes (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). Here, the local state plays an important role in mobilizing urban space as an arena for growth as it prepares the urban built environment to be optimally flexible and responsive to development. States "discursively constitute, code, and order the meaning of place through policies and practices that are often advantageous to capital" (Webber, 2002, p. 177), using spatial strategies including urban renewal policies, zoning codes, and tax incentives to produce uneven landscapes of stigmatized and (re)valorized spaces in the city. In the ongoing process of neoliberalization, the role of the state is not eroding but shifting; as state institutions define, delineate, and reorganize urban space for development, they act as key "animators and mediators" of urban sociospatial restructuring (Brenner, 2019, p. 23).

In Toronto, ongoing processes of neoliberalization reflect the city's local cultural, political, and spatial dynamics. In the context of intensifying competition with other major North American cities, the local government has advanced a creative city agenda that uses local arts and culture as tools for economic development in the downtown core (attracting investment and tourism) and neighborhood pacification in low-income areas (enhancing "urban security" in "at-risk" neighborhoods) (Leslie & Hunt, 2013). In the context of an intensifying housing crisis, the local state has launched successive efforts to "revitalize" public housing and to remake these stigmatized spaces into socially-mixed, viable sites for private investment and housing production (Careless, 2024). In the context of perceived "neighborhood crises" that stigmatize already disadvantaged areas of the city, public-private partnerships are advanced as necessary interventions to improve public spaces and services, ignoring the structural issues causing these spatial inequalities (St. Louis-McBurnie et al., 2023). In the context of austerity urbanism,

successive City Councils have eroded investment in public services and restructured service delivery, exacerbating sociospatial inequities across lines of race, class, and income (Fanelli & Thomas, 2021). In each of these examples, urban parks and public spaces are implicated in the neoliberal city.

The political economy of park development

If the city is both a target and incubator for the political and ideological strategies of neoliberalism (Webber, 2002), then urban parks and public spaces are vivid sites of socio-ecological transformation; sites in which neoliberalism's material, regulatory, and everyday effects are manifested (Keil & Desfor, 2003). Since the 1980s, scholars have charted how the social, political, and economic transformations of urban neoliberalism have reshaped the state's role in the provision of public goods in general and of urban public and green space in particular. The many noted changes to the form and experience of urban public and green spaces include privatization (Katz, 1998; Kohn, 2004; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1993; Mitchell & Staeheli, 2006; Németh, 2009), increased control and regulation (Ehrenfeucht & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2011; L. H. Lofland, 1998a; Mitchell, 1995; Smith, 2005), securitization and surveillance (Banerjee & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2013; Davis, 1992; Low, 1997; Mitchell, 2003; Németh, 2012; Sorkin, 2007), and consumption-oriented urban design and theming (Boyer, 1992; Harvey, 1989b, 2006; Smith, 1992; E. Soja, 1992; Sorkin, 1992; Zukin, 1995). Adding to these varied spatial and regulatory shifts, the rise of alternative green governance models and the integration of parks into green growth agendas have reshaped the role of green space in urban policy and ushered in a new role for civil society in the production and management of these spaces.

Alternative green governance

As the local state transforms from its traditional, managerial approach to a new, entrepreneurial approach, cities have become testing grounds for new forms of urban governance, including private sector management strategies emphasizing efficiency and economic competitiveness (Harvey, 1989). Local governments increasingly pursue market-based solutions for developing, managing, and delivering public services, including alternative governance strategies such as public-private partnerships and governance-beyond-the-state arrangements (Swyngedouw, 2005; Wolch, 1990). While applied to a broad range of public services, these arrangements are illustrated in the governance of urban environmental issues and assets, where market-driven regulatory approaches and a greater openness to civil society participation have gained ground (Keil & Desfor, 2003). These arrangements are illustrated also in urban parks and recreation services, where provision is increasingly undertaken by or in collaboration with the private sector (Low & Smith, 2006). In urban parks, we see the twinned processes of "roll-back" and "roll-out" neoliberalism (Peck & Tickell, 2002) clearly unfolding: cuts to public spending on parks and environmental assets are paired with the introduction of new public-private partnerships and alternative governance arrangements to "fill the gaps," with civil society groups and private actors stepping in to develop and govern urban parks and green spaces (Harnik & Martin, 2015; Németh, 2009).

Greening for growth

As the traditional, managerial, subsidy state transitions into a new, growth- and development-driven entrepreneurial state, it not only redistributes responsibility for public space governance to the private sector, it also repositions urban green space as a potential site of value creation. Facing increased inter-place competition for corporate investment, employment growth,

and tourism, urban policymakers refocus on promoting "the speculative construction of place rather than the amelioration of conditions within a particular territory" (Harvey, 1989a, p. 8). Local place identity is mobilized to attract investment and development, and in the process, urban parks and green spaces become more than just central to the social and physical health of cities, but also central to urban revitalization agendas. Parks are deployed as symbols of urban livability, vitality, and place identity, particularly in de-industrialized central city areas. As a result, parks are integrated into urban growth agendas, employed strategically by policymakers to lure highly mobile global capital, to anchor real estate investment, and spur an "urban renaissance" in declining neighborhoods (Smith, 2005).

Policymakers do not lead these efforts alone; local government officials collaborate with civic leaders and business elites to generate and mobilize the discourses that position parks and green spaces as symbols of urban rehabilitation (Lang & Rothenberg, 2017; Loughran, 2022; Mullenbach et al., 2021). These actors mobilize policy, public dollars, and private capital towards select park projects with the aim of attracting growth and promoting local economic development (Connolly & Lira, 2022; Wachsmuth & Angelo, 2018).

It is clear that urban green spaces are not just about greening; as Keil & Desfor (2003) argue, ecological modernization, as a contemporary approach to nature under capitalism, involves the convergence of environmental goals with economic interests, thereby framing environmental issues as potential "win-win" situations. Through this neoliberal greening strategy, environmental discourses expand to accommodate many other social, political, and economic projects, and environmental policy itself becomes more deeply embedded within broader urban growth goals (Keil & Desfor, 2003). Ecological modernization is an instructive

frame through which to understand how urban parks and green spaces have come to accommodate social, environmental, and economic objectives.

Critical analyses of urban greening

The neoliberalization of urban park production and governance, visible in both the rise of alternative green governance models and the integration of parks into urban growth agendas, has produced notably uneven sociospatial impacts. Critical analyses of urban greening extend theories of uneven development in the capitalist city (Smith, 2008) to investigate urban parks and green spaces, specifically. In these analyses, uneven access and green gentrification are two constructs commonly used to frame the understood effects of urban green space development in contemporary cities.

Uneven access

Decades of research, extending from environmental justice traditions, shows how green space benefits and burdens are unevenly distributed, often following spatialized racial and class patterns. Critical analyses reveal that green spaces in lower-income communities of color are less numerous and of lower quality when compared to the environmental privileges enjoyed by wealthier and whiter communities (Anguelovski et al., 2019). Contemporary patterns in green space production, including the "reshaping and refocusing" of public space governance (De Magalhães & Carmona, 2006) and the integration of parks into urban growth agendas, have further exacerbated already highly uneven landscapes of park access and quality, with deleterious effects on park equity (Low & Iveson, 2016). Much analysis has focused on the complex and somewhat contradictory equity impacts of the private and nonprofit sectors, which have since the 1990s deepened their engagement in the provision, management, and control of urban public green space (Joassart-Marcelli et al., 2011; Wolch, 1990).

Alternative park governance arrangements like public-private partnerships, park friends groups, and nonprofit conservancies redistribute responsibility for park provision from the public sector and towards private actors and organizations, who increasingly control park spaces and related decision-making processes (Katz, 2006). While in some cases, these nonprofit-led green space production can open pathways for participation and community self-determination (Elwood, 2002; Rigolon, 2019; Roy, 2011), scholars have documented more detrimental effects. By subverting democratic processes and mobilizing public and private resources towards investment in particular "elite" parks (Loughran, 2014), while other parks remain disinvested (Brecher & Wise, 2008; Harnik & Martin, 2015; Katz, 1998, 2006; Perkins, 2009, 2010, 2013), alternative green space governance arrangements may privilege the private interests of powerful stakeholders over the public good, and further exacerbate unevenness in park access, quality, and distribution (Gazley et al., 2018; Joassart-Marcelli et al., 2011).

Green gentrification

Analyses of green gentrification similarly highlight the spatially uneven social and economic outcomes of park investments in post-industrial cities, focusing more specifically on the relationship between urban environmental change and residential displacement and segregation (Anguelovski et al., 2019, p. 1065). Interrogating private and nonprofit as well as public investments in urban green space, green gentrification analyses emphasize not only deepening distributional inequities in park investment, but also these investments' role in increasing adjacent land values and hastening gentrification and displacement, particularly for low-income communities of color (Rigolon & Collins, 2023; Rigolon & Németh, 2018). Targeted green interventions can create "enclaves of environmental privilege" in certain neighborhoods that exclude low-income, minority, and other vulnerable residents. These

conditions may be produced *unintentionally*, through a failure to directly address existing social vulnerabilities and affordability issues, or *intentionally* and strategically, by deploying state-led strategies like rezoning and tax incentives to attract investment (Anguelovski et al., 2019, p. 1065).

Green gentrification scholars highlight how urban sustainability and greening efforts have been commodified in the neoliberal city (Anguelovski et al., 2022; Rigolon & Collins, 2023; Sax et al., 2022). While greening policies advance an environmental ethic and are often framed as apolitical and design-oriented, offering public benefit to all, environmental planning agendas that omit equitable development and environmental justice goals exclude the most vulnerable populations from realizing associated benefits. Despite a "cultural master narrative of parks as a universal good" (Mullenbach et al., 2021, p. 2), investments in parks and green spaces often fail to serve poor, racialized, and otherwise marginalized communities, instead benefiting the wealthy and powerful and in some cases resulting in regressive change through further gentrification and displacement. So while urban greening may indeed provide diverse social, environmental, and economic benefits to some, under the conditions of capitalist urbanization, it often exacerbates inequalities and sociospatial vulnerabilities for others.

Urban imaginaries and the built environment

Cultural representations of urban space

Commonly used constructs to understand urban green space in relation to sociospatial change – including uneven access and green gentrification – emphasize political and economic factors without interrogating the social and cultural forces that importantly shape the material landscape and experience of the city (Zukin, 2009). In addition to structural explanations of the

effects of neoliberalization on the production and experience of urban green spaces, social analyses are critical to understanding how power, ideologies, and representations are wielded through discourse to transform everyday urban life and landscapes (Keil, 2002).

The production of space through capital investment and the production of symbols through discourse can be understood as two productive processes that together fuel urban growth and change (Zukin, 1996). Here, it must be emphasized that representations of the city are not merely symbolic but are actually *productive*: these ideas do not just *reflect* changes in the built environment, but actively *advance* its restructuring and reshaping. Through investment decisions and state-led policies and plans, along with related discourses around growth and public benefit, the material form of the city and its changing representations are co-constitutive.

Representations and symbols are embedded in everyday discourses, and these discourses sustain particular processes of urban development that powerfully shape everyday life and urban space (Wilson, 1993). Cultural representations of urban space—symbols, images, and rhetoric—articulate social and political power, and reflect the values and interests of powerful actors (Mele, 2000). As these representations circulate, they shape public consciousness and come to shape actual struggles over urban space, including how changes in the built environment, through policy, planning, development, and investment, are "proposed, rationalized, legitimized, and contested" (Mele, 2000). Historically, symbolic representations of the city, including inner city decline (M. Greenberg, 2008; Wilson, 1993) and urban authenticity (Zukin, 2009), have been deployed (primarily through newsmedia) alongside economic and political power to transform both the material production and the experience of urban space. Similarly, representations of nature in the city are woven into the political and economic processes through

which urban environments, including parks and green spaces, are produced, and into struggles for alternatives.

Parks as urban symbols

The contemporary mobilization of sustainability discourses in urban entrepreneurial agendas illustrates this link between the symbolic representation of nature in the city and the political and economic processes through which urban environments are produced and contested. The urban public realm, including sidewalks, plazas, and most notably, public parks, is broadly understood as necessary to support urban life and civility (L. H. Lofland, 1998b). The many benefits of public space have been long extolled: as an environment for learning, a venue of pleasure and play, an arena for communication and the practice of democratic politics, a setting for the enactment of social relationships and conflicts, and ultimately, a space that transforms everyday citizens into cosmopolitans (Cranz, 1989). Parks, as a particular form of urban public space, serve as an emblematic example of these functions, providing a material space for human interaction and thereby linking social, psychological, and spatial ideas about difference, tolerance, civility, and urbanity (Loughran, 2017). Parks also hold significant political symbolism in liberal democracies, reflecting the power and benevolence of the state and associations with universal access, agency, and the public interest (Madanipour, 1999).

As with public space, nature in the city is nothing new; natural and park-based approaches have long been proposed as solutions to a range of urban environmental, political, economic, and social problems. Historical geographers have traced how the development, design, and use of urban parks and green spaces have changed over time in response to pressing urban needs: the picturesque pleasure grounds of the early urbanizing metropolis sought to offer respite and leisure for the middle class; the small parks and playgrounds advanced by the social

reformers of the early 20th century aimed to support working class immigrant recreation, assimilation, and morality; the post-war suburban recreation facilities facilitated racial-spatial restructuring (Birge-Liberman, 2010; Cranz, 1989; Loughran, 2017). Since the turn of the millennium, as deindustrializing cities sought to aesthetize landscapes of decline and advance new city-nature hybridities, parks are framed as "imbricated spaces" that combine natural and built environment elements in new ways (Loughran, 2016). This more recent shift in the development, design, and use of urban parks, and in particular, green spaces in post-industrial urban landscapes (J. J. Foster, 2023), is connected also to global public policy discourses that emphasize "reimagining the city itself along greener, more sustainable lines" (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2015, p. 16).

While retaining its historical associations with publicness, access, and social cohesion (L. H. Lofland, 1998b), parks today are increasingly also framed in relation to urban development and economic growth trajectories (McFarlane, 2012). Parks are, paradoxically, promoted as critical for sociospatial integration and also as a "vehicle of marketing localities and consuming places" (Madanipour, 1999, p. 879). This tension between oppositional representations of the meaning and function of urban parks and green spaces – as either sites of "attraction" or "interaction" (Madanipour, 2019) – carries important implications for how parks are perceived and produced by citizens, states, and private sector actors (Birge-Liberman, 2010; Loughran, 2016; Mullenbach, 2022). This tension between social and entrepreneurial value is evident in the prominent positioning of parks and green spaces in both urban sustainability agendas and urban growth agendas (Wachsmuth & Angelo, 2018). As nature "returns" to postindustrial urban landscapes, a complex relationship between urban environmentalism and urban growth emerges,

in which investments in green spaces are mobilized to remake the image of a city and also to open up "actual urban spaces for new waves of investment" (While et al., 2004, p. 50).

Cities, simultaneously tasked with attracting mobile capital, rolling back public spending and regulation, and protecting the local environment, deploy parks and urban greening projects as vehicles for growth. Indeed, cities are seen as leaders in confronting the global crises of environmental degradation and climate change (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2020; Jon, 2021). Parks and green spaces are emblems of sustainability and walkability; they are also important tools for attracting investment, visitors, and new, high-earning and spending young professionals to urban areas, normalising pro-nature and pro-ecology into trendy urban culture (Jon, 2021). And so, park development and maintenance is increasingly justified, by municipal leaders and civic advocates alike, through discourses that highlight the value that parks contribute to neighboring real estate and to the city as a whole (Krinsky & Simonet, 2011).

While the ecological objectives and material practices of urban greening projects may appear to conflict with those of urban economic development, environmental goals are increasingly incorporated into urban policy and governance strategies in pursuit of growth (Keil & Desfor, 2003). Extending Harvey's concept of the "spatial fix," the pattern by which the inherent crises and contradictions of capitalism are solved geographically through territorial expansion or constriction (Harvey, 2001), scholars frame urban greening as a fix for the particular historical-geographical and ecological conditions in cities today. While et al. (2004) offer the concept of "sustainability fix" as a frame for understanding how greening and "sustainable development" have been deployed as sociospatial fixes for the tensions of capitalism in cities, where ecological crises meet state restructuring. Referring directly to parks, Birge-Liberman (2010) frames urban park restoration projects and "re-greening" efforts as historically

and geographically contextual spatial fixes for crises of capitalism. More recent park design trends linking the built and natural environments through urban infrastructure adaptation and reuse, Loughran (2020) argues, constitute a "cultural fix": cities use these spaces to mitigate perceived social crises, deploying parks and greening projects to offer both ecological and social benefits while also restructuring land values to boost local economic development.

Greening the growth machine

As parks gain prominence in urban growth agendas, those who stand to benefit from economic growth compete to "monetize greenness" and "position their city as the 'greenest'" (Rosol et al., 2017, p. 1711). This attracts interest, involvement, and investment of powerful actors in urban development—including civic and cultural elites, business leaders and real estate holders, philanthropists, and elected officials (Krinsky & Simonet, 2017; Lang & Rothenberg, 2017; Loughran, 2014; Mullenbach et al., 2021). These actors seek to "mobilize the environment as a means of capital accumulation" through a process described as the "greening of the growth machine" (Wachsmuth & Angelo, 2018, p. 1041).

The influential urban growth machine theory describes the social processes through which organized networks of local actors and organizations coordinate efforts to support favorable, place-based investment and development. Despite disparate individual goals, diverse networks of place elites—including land owners, business leaders, prominent civic and cultural figures—share an interest in growth. In collaboration with local governments, they powerfully align strategies and resources to advocate for a pro-growth climate, supporting changes to public policy, investments, regulations, and procurement practices, rallying around high-profile entrepreneurial growth projects, and mediating conflicts with dissenting voices (Logan & Molotch, 2010). Growth coalitions aim to promote the city as a positive climate for investment

and tourism, and to do so, they produce, promote, and circulate supportive representations of the city, connecting place-marketing with neoliberal political and economic restructuring (M. Greenberg, 2008). Through the media, cultural forces, and civic voices, they advance a pro-business vision of the city while concealing drawbacks and deflecting criticism (Lang & Rothenberg, 2017). Despite detrimental social and environmental impacts, growth machines effectively quash opposition, and continue to play a central role in shaping urban landscapes (Brenner, 2019).

Extending this, the "green growth machine" concept highlights the environmental discourses that underpin urban entrepreneurialism in the post-industrial city. Promoted by private capital and supported by government-backed planning, policy, and funding efforts, green spaces and sustainable infrastructures are deployed to "encourage economic growth under the guise of environmental protection" (Mullenbach et al., 2021, p. 1). Business elites who stand to gain from growth mobilize representations of the sustainable, healthy, and green city to incentivize investment. While the *actions* of growth coalitions are clearly illustrated in the context of local urban development and redevelopment, the *politics* of growth coalitions influence (and are influenced by) political-economic and environmental dynamics that extend far beyond local jurisdictional boundaries; sustainability and growth discourses reflect ecological and political processes unfolding in distant spaces and systems across the globe (Brenner, 2019).

Supported and amplified by local media (Loughran, 2014), "market oriented sustainability discourses" (Lang & Rothenberg, 2017, p. 1744) gain power over the visions of communities who seldom gain from investment in these new environmental goods and who often face deeper environmental injustices as a result (Mullenbach et al., 2021). Meanwhile, a lack of critical discourse in the media and amongst civic leaders neglects to take seriously threats of

gentrification and displacement inherent in these greening projects. New York City's High Line is an emblematic case of a sustainable entrepreneurial development scheme in which elite political, business, and cultural actors aligned to support, through both financial and cultural capital, the development of this landmark urban park in an effort to drive further neighborhood growth, ultimately leading to displacement (Lang & Rothenberg, 2017; Loughran, 2014; Mullenbach et al., 2021). The green growth machine theory highlights the fundamental contradictions of market-driven sustainability projects in the context of neoliberal urbanism: green investments in such urban assets as parks and green spaces may drive economic growth, but their success in addressing ecological conditions is often fuzzy, and their detrimental effect on social equity is often more clear (Lang & Rothenberg, 2017).

Green as good

Green growth machine politics mobilizes urban imaginaries of the green city to attract investment and to spur (uneven) development. A broad field of debate across diverse disciplines, geographies, and media, urban imaginaries offer diverse conceptual framings of the city as "*simultaneously* material, conceptual, experienced, and practiced" (Lindner & Meissner, 2019, p. 2) (emphasis in original). These urban imaginaries inform our everyday lives and how we understand, experience, and act in the city, advancing new visions of the city as an ecological space, a technological space, an economic space, and a cultural space, among many others (Lindner & Meissner, 2019).

When it comes to urban nature, urban imaginaries present shifting ideas about urban environments that circulate through urban discourse (Gabriel, 2014). At the heart of these imaginaries lies the unquestioned assumption of the essential value of urban greening. Greening has been ideologically constructed as a universal good, and along with it, there has been a

transition in global urban policy and related discourse from viewing "the city as a sustainability problem to the city as a sustainability solution" (Wachsmuth & Angelo, 2018, p. 2201). The rise of sustainability science in the 1980s was accompanied by discourses that conceptualized cities not as a climate threat but rather a climate solution (Keil, 2020a). So as the threat of global climate change grows more urgent, the central role of the urban built environment and urban green amenities in achieving sustainability outcomes has become "a new policy commonsense" (Wachsmuth & Angelo, 2018, p. 2201). This has prompted notable changes in urban policy and governance. Urban policies that deploy green amenities, including parks, for social and economic benefit have become ubiquitous in political, academic, and cultural discourses. And as urban policy advice and advocacy is now more highly mobile across cities and sites (Peck, 2011, p. 773), these changes are widespread and transnational, shaping "increasingly mobile and interconnected urban environmental futures" that link local, urban environmental adaptations to global political economies (Goh, 2020, p. 2222).

These changes demonstrate that "nature" is not a given; culturally and historically specific conceptualizations of the relationship between nature and the city can be traced through to the urban policies and practices that manage the relationships between societies and nature (Keil, 2020a). So while the urgent global threat of climate change cannot be understated, scholars are increasingly critical of this dominant urban sustainability discourse, its underlying economics and politics, its governance manifestations, and its unequal impacts. The inequitable sociospatial outcomes of urban greening, framed in terms of uneven access and green gentrification, have been explored extensively. But despite incisive critique of the unequal benefits of urban greening, analyses seldom consider why urban greening itself is so uncritically considered a social and economic "good" in the first place (Angelo, 2021; Wachsmuth &

Angelo, 2018). Angelo (2019, 2021) views greening, sustainability, and resilience as "master tropes" in 21st century urban planning and policy, broadly assumed to add social and economic value to urban environments, however inequitably distributed. Acknowledging important scholarship on the uneven spatial effects of greening, we must question, more fundamentally, why greening should be considered so intrinsically valuable and potentially transformative in cities (Angelo, 2019).

As with other urban imaginaries and symbolic representations of the city, discourses about urban greening are important, not only because they reflect and reinforce social and cultural values of nature and the city, but also because they affect policy, planning, and practice, and thereby produce material implications for public space and justice (Mullenbach, 2022). Much like narratives around urban blight, representations of actual or imagined environmental problems in the city justify particular responses and solutions as logical and natural (Hajer, 2005), and in doing so, dampen dissent (Mele, 2000, p. 200). In response, as Angelo argues, deeper social-theoretical reflections on the naturalized social and economic value of urban greening can support critical investigations into the political economy of greening by "disentangling contemporary neoliberalism from valorizations of nature that transcend it" (2019, p. 1).

Urban parks and green spaces are particularly visible spaces, embedded with invisible meanings, that reflect dominant narratives about the value of urban greening and shape our experience of the city. It is important to question why the value of urban greening has resisted interrogation, and what the lack of critical discourse enables, in terms of both the distribution of power and resources in the city, as well as the reshaping of actual urban landscapes. Dominant discourses about urban greening frame parks as having everything to do with nature, urbanity,

and the public good, and nothing to do with power (Zukin, 2009). When it comes to parks and green spaces, the assumed benevolence of the state (and in some cases, private and philanthropic partners) is connected with assumed goodness of urban greening, and together limit critical discourse. When left unquestioned, the production and circulation of the image of the green city may, at best, misrepresent the positive environmental and social impacts of green investments, or at worst, obfuscate related distributional, procedural, and recognitional injustices. This study aims to bring to light these questions.

Synthesis

The production of space

To analyze the production and governance of urban green space, Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space serves as a critical link between structural analyses of the spatial expressions of neoliberalism and socio-ecological investigations of representations of urban greening. For Lefebvre, space – and in particular, urban space – is the product of social relations, with real material effects (Schmid, 2022). As with many investigations of sociospatial inequality in urban environments, the production of space is a powerful lens through which to examine how the structural transformations of neoliberalism and changing social-ecological discourses are together manifested, and contested, in the city.

In theorizing the relationship between space and society, Lefebvre advances a processual understanding of space as not a pre-existing, passive and material container in which human activity takes place, nor as an abstract idea, mathematical concept or mental realm, but instead as *a product of social relations* (Schmid, 2022). Famously, for Lefebvre, "(social) space is a (social) product" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 26). Space is produced, reproduced, and contested by the

collective activities of urban actors. In this sense, social relations both shape and are contingent on space as a "producer and product of spatiality" (E. W. Soja, 2011, p. 127), while spatiality is "simultaneously the medium and the outcome, presupposition and embodiment, of social action and relationships" (E. W. Soja, 2011, p. 129).

Lefebvre's spatial triad accounts for three processes or "moments" through which space is produced dialectically: representations of space, spatial practices, and representational space. *Representations of space*, or *conceived space*, is the dominant mental space of scientists, planners, and policymakers, embedded with objective knowledge and linked to existing relations of production and power. *Spatial practice*, or *perceived space*, comprises the daily actions and routines that take place in physical space; the material processes of production and social reproduction. *Representational space*, or *lived space*, is the social space of its users, linked to symbolism, imaginaries, and social life, as well as art, memory, and the senses (Butler, 2012; Elden, 2007; Lefebvre, 1991; Schmid, 2022). In Lefebvre's conceptualization, space is always the product of struggle between efforts to advance *representations of space* and *representational space*, as mediated through *spatial practices*. Change in society requires the production of new space appropriate for new social relationships; it is the task of ordinary individuals to engage in everyday struggles to produce such spaces.

Understanding urban space, including green space, as a product of social relations elevates "everyday life" as a frame through which to understand shifts in the form and feeling of urban space, and also to identify openings for change. As Swyngedouw and Heynen argue, "In the practices of everyday city life, urbanised nature is a crucial material and symbolic good that is embedded in and engenders urban social conflicts and struggles along class, gender and cultural cleavages over its use and control" (2003, p. 914). Just as the structural changes of

neoliberalism and the discursive changes of society-nature relations are illustratively expressed and intimately experienced in the everyday urban, the re-regulation of everyday life creates both new conditions for capital accumulation as well as new possibilities for local resistance to these shifts, through political action by marginalized communities (Keil, 2002).

Lefebvre's theory of the production of public space is a particularly valuable analytical lens here, because it helps us to understand changes in urban space—in this study, the emergence of new forms of civil society-led urban green space production, design, and governance—as linked to complex and intersecting discursive and material practices, operating at multiple scales and across multiple spaces. Understanding urban green space as socially produced means acknowledging that this production is a process, shaped by the simultaneity of social encounters and experiences at various scales, that yields real material effects. Moving beyond narrowly defined disciplinary lenses, it helps us to see how both processes of neoliberalization and changing nature-society imaginaries, inextricably linked, are expressed in the form, uses, and experience of urban green spaces. Taking seriously the everyday urban prompts us to consider first, everyday life in urban environments, second, the public and policy discourses surrounding these environments, and third, the power and capital that are mobilized in and through them, as objects of analysis that can offer valuable insight into the production of urban green space space, the implications for justice, and the possibilities for resistance.

Urban political ecology

If we understand all urban space as socially produced, then we may also see urban nature – parks, waterways, and other green infrastructures – as produced through historically and geographically contingent socio-ecological processes. Urban political ecology adopts such a critical, neo-Marxian lens in which, like space and society, environmental and social changes are

understood as co-constitutive. It explores not only the uneven *spatial distribution of environmental resources*, but also the uneven *processes of socio-environmental change* through which urban landscapes are produced in the capitalist city (Gandy, 2022b). In doing so, it helps us to see how an urban park, and the process of making it, reflect historically specific assemblages of social, ecological, and material relationships (Heynen, Kaika, et al., 2006b).

As a theoretical platform and practice, urban political ecology (UPE) connects political economy, urban ecology, cultural studies, and environmental justice theory and practice to understand relationships between society and the natural world, motivated by an environmental and social justice ethic. As the name suggests, this approach links "the urban," understood as "a complex, multiscale and multidimensional process where the general and specific aspects of the human condition meet," "the political," or political economy framings of the inequities in society-environment relations, and "ecology," a "specifically urban ecology" that captures social and scientific complexities (Keil, 2003, p. 727).

In contrast to pragmatic and policy-oriented scholarship around sustainability, UPE is an explicitly critical effort to understand how social and ecological processes, material metabolism, and spatial form together shape urban environments, resources, struggles, and solutions (Heynen, Kaika, et al., 2006b; Keil, 2003). Since its emergence in the late 1990s, the empirical, theoretical, and practical scope of UPE has proven sufficiently adaptable to respond to the ever-changing socio-environmental emergencies of our time, and in particular, to the accelerating climate crisis (Kaika et al., 2023a). Recent contributions by scholars across disciplines demonstrate how UPE's theories and methods can be expanded and enhanced when connected to a range of postcolonial, abolitionist, feminist, and multispecies epistemologies and practices, among others (Kaika et al., 2023b).

When it comes to analyzing contemporary shifts in urban greening and urban park production, an UPE lens proves particularly generative, in that it facilitates connections between political economic theories of urban environmental change and social theories of the ideological construction of nature and its aesthetic representation (Wachsmuth & Angelo, 2023). Such an approach, Angelo (2019) argues, can strengthen critiques of urban greening under contemporary neoliberalism, while retaining an underlying ethic of environmental and social justice.

Reconciling dualisms

By theorizing urbanization as a hybrid socio-ecological *process*, urban political ecology reconciles binary understandings of society and nature, the material and discursive, and the local and global (Swyngedouw, 1996). In doing so, it advances a new view of the "socionatural city" as produced through social, ecological, and economic relations across scales, connecting the transformation of urban landscapes to broader, global processes of uneven development (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2015), and is thus particularly useful for analyzing changes in civil society participation in urban park production.

Concerning society and nature, instead of analyzing their "interactions," which requires the conceptual separation of these spheres from the start (Smith, 2006), UPE insists on the fundamental hybridity of urban-environmental systems. In this view, the city is not the antithesis of nature, but rather, as Harvey famously argued, "there is nothing unnatural about New York City" (Harvey, 1996). All environments, both urban and natural, are produced through socio-material processes that link the built environment with capital, politics, society, and ecology (Ernstson & Swyngedouw, 2019). This is evident in the construction of new urban infrastructures, the creation of new approaches to environmental management and governance, and the development of new cultural practices and perceptions of urban nature as a source of

leisure and enjoyment (Gandy, 2006). It is the task of UPE to untangle these historically- and geographically-specific social and ecological processes through which urban nature and urban society are co-produced (Gandy, 2006), and in which capitalist urbanization and socio-environmental injustices are intricately interconnected (Heynen, Kaika, et al., 2006a).

Concerning the material and discursive, UPE frames urban environmental discourses and material urban environments as co-constitutive: the interconnections between the symbolic and the spatial produce and reproduce urban landscapes and practices (Keil & Boudreau, 2006; Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003; Gandy, 2022a). Urban landscapes are subject to discourses and representations as well as very tangible practices of engineering and design, which means the materiality of urban environmental change – the way it looks and feels – is also worthy of our attention (Keil & Boudreau, 2006). Through the design, development, and use of urban space, urban societies shape the material urban environment and also reinscribe urban nature with new meaning; as Swyngedouw and Heynen argue, "the material production of environments is necessarily impregnated by the mobilisation of particular discourses and understandings (if not ideologies) about nature and the environment" (2003, p. 903). Accordingly, UPE explores how both structuralist theories of power as well as urban imaginaries are together entangled in the production of urban landscapes. By constructing collective ideas about urban landscapes, practices, and people, urban imaginaries produce real material changes in urban space (Gabriel, 2014). And so, by connecting discursive investigations into the social construction of nature with political economic analyses of the socioecological production of urban landscapes, UPE contends that "the material and symbolic, the natural and the cultural, the pristine and the urban are not dual and separate realities but rather intertwined and inseparable aspects of the world we inhabit" (Keil, 2003, p. 728). If the spatial and the symbolic converge in the urban built

environment, then to understand these environments, we must examine how social representations of cities and of nature structure the production of actual urban landscapes (Loughran, 2017).

Concerning the local and the global, UPE argues socio-ecological processes that produce urban environments unfold at a range of spatial scales, highlighting linkages between city and country, local and global (Heynen & Robbins, 2005). While produced through geographically and historically-specific social, political, and economic processes, all urban environmental changes are linked to other places and ecosystems far away, through networks of ecological and socio-political flows (Desfor & Keil, 2004). Accordingly, all urban environments can be understood as the result of global socio-environmental processes that connect hyper-specific sites to spaces, societies, and ecologies across the world, linking the transformation of urban environments to global processes of uneven development (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2015).

Power in practice

Urban environments and related unevenness are not produced through apolitical, technical intervention or infrastructures, but instead through meaningful efforts to transform urban life and urban space (Angelo, 2024). These efforts are shaped by economic, political, and cultural power relations, which are themselves infused with class, gender, and racial conflicts. These efforts thus produce uneven patterns of access, control, inclusion, and exclusion in urban landscapes that reflect the interests of the elite at the expense of the marginalized, and inevitably spark conflict (Heynen, Kaika, et al., 2006b). Accordingly, processes of socio-environmental change are fundamentally political. Interrogating the processes through which urban environmental injustices are produced is vital work, in part because supposedly "natural" transformations of urban space may be "discursively, politically, and economically mobilized

and socially appropriated to produce environments that embody and reflect positions of social power" (Heynen, Kaika, et al., 2006b, p. 6).

Since the 1990s, UPE theory has been used generatively to better understand the complex processes through which urban green spaces are produced: who gains and who loses in these processes, how benefits and burdens are distributed, and how these patterns are linked to individual and group power struggles. This research not only interrogates the uneven spatial impacts of urban greening, but also how particular socio-natures are socially produced and mobilized (Heynen, Perkins, et al., 2006). Matthew Gandy's explorations of the cultural and material reworking of nature in New York City is a notable contribution to this body of scholarship. In *Concrete and Clay* (2002), Gandy argues that evolving political, economic, and cultural interests, as well as relationships between public and private, are materially reflected in the city's changing urban green landscapes and infrastructures. Phil Birge-Liberman's exploration of park restoration and green city movements counters the framing of parks as truly democratic social spaces by instead positioning parks as socially produced landscapes that serve as spatial fixes for the cyclical crises of capitalism (2010). In a similar vein, Cindi Katz's exploration of natural conservation and corporate environmentalism argues that the preservation and privatization of nature are mobilized through property rights discourses; these efforts "construct and preserve nature apart from people" in order to advance nature as a future accumulation strategy (1998, p. 59). Nik Heynen, Harold Perkins, and Parama Roy, in their study of urban tree canopy in Milwaukee, argue that assumed "natural" environments are in fact socially produced through processes that intersect with income inequality, uneven property ownership, and increased marketization, producing an urban tree canopy that is unevenly distributed across public and private property and in relation to race and ethnicity (2006). Other studies have

similarly highlighted the cultural and spatial relationships between capitalism, race, and nature, tracing how historically contingent social meanings of race and nature have structured the production of urban parks and green spaces, producing both material and cultural inequalities. These inequities are apparent in the ongoing socio-ecological exclusion of racialized users from park systems (Byrne, 2012), and in the historical development of park systems that reflect and reinforce racial-spatial injustices (Loughran, 2017).

Toward justice

The examples highlighted above demonstrate how UPE scholarship has interrogated how politics and power relations have together produced historically- and geographically-particular urban environments and related sociospatial inequalities. Indeed, UPE has proven effective at tracing socio-material flows across scales and highlighting the unequal and unsustainable outcomes of the ongoing production of urban socio-natures. But the political aim of UPE is not only to uncover existing inequalities and injustices in urban environmental change, but also to identify democratic strategies through which the ongoing production of urban nature can be made more equitable, inclusive, and just (Heynen, Kaika, et al., 2006b). Extending theoretical analysis toward environmental and social justice praxis, UPE can also lay the groundwork for new political imaginaries and practices that advance socio-ecological justice (Ernstson & Swyngedouw, 2019; Keil, 2003; Smith, 2006).

UPE contends cities are produced through socio-ecological processes, questions for whom and to what ends the resulting socio-environmental conditions are created, and explores how these processes may become more radically democratic (Heynen, Kaika, et al., 2006b, p. 2). Precisely because it rejects false dichotomies of city/nature, material/discursive, and local/global, because it locates structural and social injustices in both urban landscapes and in the processes

through which they are created, and because it connects social justice to environmental justice (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2015), UPE offers avenues to connect critical urban theory with radical democratic politics.

In questioning how, by whom, and for what ends urban environments are produced, UPE locates an emancipatory politics in the power to produce built and social environments that respond to the needs and desires of the communities that inhabit them (Heynen, Kaika, et al., 2006b, p. 2). Investigating the power-laden economic, social, political, and ecological processes that produce particular urban environments and their related injustices can thus serve as an important basis from which to inform future justice-oriented action (Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003). Historically-and geographically situated case studies can uncover inequities and build narratives that spur action towards more socially and environmentally just communities; the uneven socio-ecological power dynamics that produce uneven urban environments is thus both a focus of analysis and "a pivotal terrain around which political action crystallizes and social mobilizations take place" (Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003, p. 898). UPE offers possible pathways to connect critical theory to political activism in the context of increasingly unequal socio-ecological realities in cities (Ernstson & Swyngedouw, 2019).

Swyngedouw argues, "there is nothing inherently critical or progressive about the current state of 'political ecology'", neither as a theoretical perspective nor as a practice (2023, p. 38). However, by inviting not only critical analysis of existing conditions but also critical speculation about transformative possibilities, UPE can help us to identify new socioecological systems, mechanisms, and relationships that could yield more equitable, just, and democratic ends. Envisioning and articulating more just future socioecological scenarios has both ideological and material implications (Gandy, 2022a); this may indeed be the responsibility and challenge of

those engaging in urban political ecology. To quote Swyngedouw again, "the point is not just to understand the world, but to change it! And this requires a critique of (urban) political ecology, one that relates the material to the imaginary and, in doing so, contributes to imagining and practising different urban futures" (2023, pp. 38–39).

Urban justice

Processes of socio-environmental change are never neutral, and urban political ecology explores how these conflict-ridden and interconnected economic, political, and social processes produce urban environments and spatially uneven results. But while UPE is theoretically driven, environmental and social justice are rooted in praxis, each emphasizing a different aspect of society-environment relations. Urban political ecology centers on the material and discursive power relations that shape socio-ecological inequalities in cities, in the context of a capitalist political economy. Conversely, environmental and social justice centers on the uneven distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, shaped by capitalist urbanization and experienced by politically and economically marginalized communities, who are themselves shaped by racism, classism, and other forms of individual and group difference (Desfor & Keil, 2004; Heynen, Kaika, et al., 2006b). To link urban political ecology theory more directly environmental and social justice praxis, we must ask not only how urban landscapes are produced through socio-ecological processes and power relations, but also who gains and who loses in these processes and in their outcomes, at what geographic and historical scales these unequal effects ripple, and through what strategies and structures these inequalities are maintained, or perhaps, contested.

To analyze justice in the processes and outcomes of urban green space production, it is important to establish what, exactly, "justice" might look like in this context. While not a

universal standard by which to judge "good and bad," a concept of justice offers a morally- and philosophically-based evaluative framework through which to consider "better" and "worse" (Fainstein, 2000, p. 472). To begin to articulate a concept of justice in urban green spaces, we might begin with the broader concept of "urban justice," which aims to move moral speculations about a just society away from the abstract realm of philosophy and to connect more deeply with geography, place, and the distinct sociospatial dimensions of urban injustices. Indeed, the principles of justice may be particularly relevant to the urban context, for several reasons articulated by David Harvey in *Social Justice and the City*. First, bringing a justice lens to bear on urban issues reveals unseen connections between spatial form and social processes unfolding at the scale of the city (1973). Second, exploring urban justice helps us to move beyond liberal conceptions of justice that emphasize abstract moral and distributive concerns, and toward formulations of justice that connect more deeply to time, place, and social processes, thereby centering questions of participation and recognition. And finally, identifying the city as a site of existing injustice (and potential future justice) helps us to move beyond a universal model of justice and engage instead with the actual social and spatial contexts of the city in which life unfolds for an increasingly heterogeneous public (Harvey, 1973).

Rather than focus solely on questions of distribution, a theory of urban justice also considers intersecting forms of power, oppression, and domination, situated in time, place, and social context; it advances a concept of justice that is both universal and particular, accounting for individual and group differences in both processes and related outcomes (Harvey, 1973). Accordingly, urban justice not only considers but *centers* the role of social difference, and in particular, of race, in its analysis. Within the broader context of racial capitalism, race and racism are linked to capitalism's relations of power and exploitation and to all urban processes; thus, any

vision of social justice in the city must consider racialized difference, and its role in producing the urban (Dantzler, 2021). When considering the green and public environments of the city more specifically, urban green space justice must account for race and racism, heterogeneity, multiplicity, time, place, and change in terms of both the production, experience, and uses of urban green space.

There is no standard framework for justice when it comes to parks, green spaces, and other urban natures and urban public environments. But existing theories and evaluative frameworks regarding the just city (Fainstein, 2000; Fraser, 1999, 2010), public space justice (Low, 2020; Low & Iveson, 2016), park justice (Anguelovski et al., 2019), environmental justice (Pearsall & Anguelovski, 2016; Teelucksingh, 2007), environmental justice and access to urban nature (Langhans et al., 2023; Teelucksingh, 2007; Wolch et al., 2014), and urban design justice (Goh et al., 2022) provide direction. When considered together, these theories point toward a framework for justice in urban green space that emphasizes questions of *distribution*, *participation*, and *recognition* as central tenets.

The just city model, advanced by Fainstein (2010), responds to the historical tendency of planning theory and practice to emphasize participation in public decision-making while overlooking existing power hierarchies and social and economic inequities that hinder democratic deliberation (Fainstein, 2015). The just city model does not assume participation in deliberations about the future of the built and social environments to be transformative unto itself, but instead also considers the power dynamics within these processes and the substantive outcomes of these processes: what is actually built, designed, and delivered as a result of these deliberations. The just city model responds to the social and spatial inequalities produced by

capitalism by examining *both* inclusionary processes *and* just outcomes, and accounts for three markers of urban justice: material equality, democracy or participation, and diversity.

Other efforts to articulate justice as a normative framework in various realms of urban theory and practice similarly highlight dimensions related to distributional equity, participation in decision-making, and diversity and inclusion. Operationalizing justice in relation to participatory planning, Blue et al. (2019) link Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation, which presents parity of participation as a normative aim, with Fraser's (2013) feminist framework for justice, which emphasizes the distribution of power between the state and society. Through these linkages, they articulate three dimensions of justice in participatory planning efforts: redistribution (economic justice), representation (political justice), and recognition (cultural justice) (Blue et al., 2019).

These three dimensions of justice—distribution, participation, and recognition—also emerge in frameworks of justice developed specifically to evaluate the provision and governance of urban green and public space and to inform more just planning and design efforts, in the context of neoliberal urbanism and privatization. Setha Low and Kurt Iveson's work on this topic (Low, 2013, 2020; Low & Iveson, 2016) puts forward a set of propositions for urban public space justice that includes distributive justice, procedural justice, and recognitional justice, along with additional dimensions related to interaction and encounter and to care and repair. Operationalizing justice in relation to urban design, a realm that includes parks as well as the public environments of the city more broadly, Giamarino, Goh, Loukaitou-Sideris, and Mukhija (2022) offer four similar domains of justice: distributive, procedural, recognitional, and interactional. Exploring green gentrification and unequal access to urban environmental goods, including parks and green space, Anguelovski and collaborators use a "triple bottom line"

framework of justice, in terms of access (2019). The framework considers the geographic *distribution* of green spaces, in terms of the number and quality of urban green spaces enjoyed by lower-income and minority communities, the *recognition* of the identity, aspirations, and needs of marginalized users in green space design and management, and the meaningful procedural *participation* of communities in park planning and design process that not only invite participation but also ensure that the values, needs, and interests expressed carry *power* in deliberations and decision-making. Langhans et al. (Langhans et al., 2023) similarly examine the interplay of distributional, recognitional, and procedural justice in determining access to urban nature in cities, particularly for marginalized communities, and in guiding design and policy interventions that seek to restore access to nature.

Environmental justice and environmental racism movements have historically emphasized matters of distribution, specifically the disproportionate environmental *risk and burdens* borne by ethno-racially and socioeconomically marginalized communities (Teelucksingh, 2007; Bullard, 1990). However, over the past several decades, an expanded environmental justice agenda has come to also consider the inequitable distribution of environmental *goods and benefits*, including parks, which are sited in a manner that systematically privileges white populations while further disadvantaging marginalized and racialized groups (Pulido, 2000). Environmental justice frames have expanded to consider greater complexities in urban sustainability, including the harmful effects of gentrification and displacement that may be precipitated by environmental goods like parks (Anguelovski, 2016), and the ways in which marginalized and racialized groups are excluded from environmental decision-making (Teelucksingh et al., 2016) and the benefits of the green economy (Teelucksingh, 2019). Environmental justice has, as a result, moved away from a primarily

distributional emphasis and toward a more expansive framework that also considers calls to recognize and consider communities' specific cultural needs, as well as calls for more meaningful participation in decision making (Anguelovski, 2016).

Synthesizing these perspectives, three dimensions of justice emerge as particularly relevant when considering the socio-ecological processes through which urban green spaces are produced, governed, and experienced: distributive justice, procedural justice, and recognitional justice. *Distributive justice* can be understood as the distribution of burdens, benefits, resources, and rewards, to both individuals and communities. It is concerned with the question of "who gets what?" in response to unjust social and spatial arrangements that "institutionalize deprivation, exploitation, and gross disparities of wealth, income, and leisure time" (Fraser, 2013, p. 164). Distributive justice is primarily associated with outcomes; advancing distributive justice would result in the more equitable spatial redistribution of public investments and opportunities in the built environment, including social amenities, infrastructure, and resources, with particular emphasis on the experiences of disadvantaged groups (Giamarino et al., 2022). Distributive justice concerns expand beyond questions of access across space to include spatial access. In terms of urban green space, specifically, distributive justice accounts for both the spatial distribution of public space and environmental amenities across urban landscapes, in both quantity and quality, as well as questions of affordability and access to these spaces (Anguelovski et al., 2019). For example, distributive justice considers whether green spaces exclude those who cannot afford to participate in them, or who face other functional or psychological barriers to access (Low & Iveson, 2016). Distributive justice may expand beyond questions of spatial and psychological access; concerning the spatial rights of Indigenous communities, distributive justice may involve the direct redistribution of land to Indigenous

people through processes of rematriation that may not alter physical accessibility but meaningfully enable vital cultural and stewardship practices on ancestral lands (Langhans et al., 2023). Indeed, Indigenous ontologies that counter liberal conceptualizations of public and private land ownership complicate straightforward understandings of distributional justice concerning parks and green space (Ramirez, 2025).

Procedural justice can be understood as the equitable participation, collaboration, and decision-making by marginalized groups in decision-making processes, with particular attention to existing social and cultural power hierarchies, based on race, class, gender, or other forms of group or individual difference (Giamarino et al., 2022). Rather than a simple measure of “fairness,” procedural justice interrogates power dynamics to consider whether a decision-making process has been a democratic and inclusive arena for debate and negotiation. It asks the question, "who decides?" in response to the unjust "exclusion from the community of those entitled to make justice claims to one another" (Fraser, 2013, p. 195). Specific to urban public and green spaces, procedural justice refers to the socio-ecological processes through which sociospatial outcomes are produced: how diverse perspectives, particularly those of low-income, minority, and otherwise marginalized groups, are incorporated and how decisions are made (Anguelovski et al., 2019). Procedural justice is not only central to the perceptions of decision-making processes, but importantly shapes perceptions of resulting public and green spaces as inclusive or exclusionary themselves (Low & Iveson, 2016).

Recognitional justice considers the recognition, celebration, and valuation of individual and community identities in a manner that minimizes stigmatization and advances equity. Somewhat more difficult to articulate than distributive or procedural justice, recognitional justice concerns prioritizing the cultural claims of marginalized groups to ensure that diverse cultural

activities, group identities, and ways of being in urban space are accommodated without exclusion (Giamarino et al., 2022). Recognitional justice asserts that, beyond material distribution and democratic participation, justice must also address systems of cultural domination by the powerful and empower the marginalized. It reflects an acknowledgement that social group difference is key to city life, and that the oppression of marginalized groups must be ameliorated in order to achieve a politics of recognition (Young, 1990). Recognitional justice highlights the connection between culture and justice, interrogates "institutionalized hierarchies of cultural value that deny [certain groups] the requisite standing" (Fraser, 2013, p. 193), and asks the question, "who is included and heard?" In public green spaces and related planning processes, recognitional justice facilitates the "formation and expression of collective identities" (Low & Iveson, 2016, p. 18), and the capacity of these spaces to recognize diverse communities' unique ethno-racial, cultural, or other identities and ways of participating in and occupying space (Langhans et al., 2023). Such a capacity can be expressed in the material form, programming, and management of a public space, as well as the cultural representations and discourses surrounding it. For example, park facilities, programs, and management practices may support (or hinder) engagement, belonging, and representation amongst a heterogeneous public, and their diverse needs and aspirations for a space. This is clearly illustrated in the historic and ongoing exclusion of people of color from parks and recreational spaces, particularly in ex-urban parks, evidenced in direct discrimination as well as in more subtle signals of a lack of welcome, safety, or belonging (Byrne, 2012). Community-led efforts confront these ethno-racial barriers by seeking to strengthen connections between racialized groups and green spaces or other (urban) natures (Gibson et al., 2018; Langhans et al., 2023), for example, through urban tree planting and other forms of collective environmental stewardship practice (Grant et al., 2024).

In closing, openings

The urban built environment is a "landscape of power": capital and state power, alongside cultural power, control and shape urban space and the everyday life that unfolds in and through these spaces (Zukin, 2009). Urban spaces, including urban green spaces, are at once material reflections of power and wealth, and symbolic reflections of social relations and urban imaginaries (Gandy, 2022a). Understanding urban green spaces as produced through land, labor, and capital, as well as through social relations, discourses, representations, and aesthetics is more than a matter of analytical precision; it also creates openings for resistance to the dominant symbolic and material production of urban environments. It helps us to see how the production of urban green space is not a straightforward expression of elite power and dominant discourses, but is responsive to social and cultural criticism, political struggle, and claims to empowerment and justice. As Keil writes, the "reorientation of everydayness...involves new forms of resistance and opposition, which include the kernel of possible alternative urbanism" (Keil, 2002, p. 30). In the public green spaces of the city, which have long been sites of social struggle, political action, and encounter with difference, and symbols of democracy and collectivity (Merrifield & Swyngedouw, 1997), these alternative urbanisms may prove even more possible. Because urban green spaces are so embedded with power relations, and so inextricably linked to both socioecological changes and to processes of urbanization (Mandler et al., 2023), they may also be "pivotal [axes] around which theories of justice and 'radically open' empowerment are constructed" (Merrifield & Swyngedouw, 1997, p. 13).

This chapter sets out a theoretical framework for analyzing the phenomenon of changing civil society engagement in the production and management of urban green spaces. Two primary perspectives for understanding change in the urban built environment – political-economic and

cultural – when taken alone, each fall short of attending to the complex "interpenetrations of culture and power" (Zukin, 1996, p. 43) that shape the urban environments. I present a theoretical framing that integrates three key lenses through which to conceptualize and analyze the shifting role of civil society in green space production: first, the production of (public) space, second, urban political ecology, and third, theories of justice. Together, these three lenses attend to the complex, multi-scalar, power-laden, and processual production of urban socio-natures. The production of space frames urban green spaces as actively produced and reproduced through historically and geographically contingent socio-ecological processes. Urban political ecology frames everyday landscapes as critical sites through which global political-economic shifts of neoliberalism – expressed spatially, as unevenness – can be understood as intertwined with social-ecological shifts in urban greening and related imaginaries – expressed discursively, as naturalization. Theories of urban justice, and in particular, justice in urban public and green spaces, offer evaluative measures of the effects of this urban green space production in urban space and also in deliberative processes and in the ongoing experiences of communities, pointing a path towards more equitable and just public spaces and processes.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

How can geographically- and historically-specific cases tell a broader story about power and philanthropy in urban green space development and governance?

I use a case study approach to investigate three embedded cases of recently developed urban parks and green spaces with significant philanthropic support in Toronto. The focus of my analysis is the strategies through which these green spaces are produced, including environmental discourses, environmental design, and environmental governance. For each case, I investigate development, design, and implementation strategies. Across cases, I inquire about connections, adaptations, and extensions. Together, these strategies uncover the drivers, modes, and implications of philanthropic engagement in park production in Toronto.

I analyze three cases of philanthropy-led park production in Toronto relationally, foregrounding interconnections between cases and between local and global geographies. This approach is inspired in part by Goh's method of relational urban research which investigates strategies (in this case, governance and design strategies) across multiple, networked sites, emphasizing relationships among actors, institutions, and strategies (Goh, 2021).

My study integrates three primary scales: the park, the city, and global policy networks. I use a mix of qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, policy document and media discourse analysis, spatial methods, and site observations, to assess the drivers of collaborative park governance in Toronto, to understand how this reshapes planning processes, and to assess design and programming outcomes. Drawing from critical discourse analysis and urban political ecology approaches, my analysis foregrounds how power operates in and through

these processes and spaces. I consider how power (in this case, donor power) colludes with other forces like land, capital, labor, and culture to shape how we imagine and act upon urban green space – making some forms of spatial production possible while hindering others.

In this chapter, I discuss my site selection process and describe my study procedures - the methods, data sources, and analysis approaches I used throughout this research.

A note on reflexivity

My research topic and design are informed by my professional practice and scholarly research related to public space. From 2013 to 2021, I practiced as an urban planner in Toronto, working primarily on issues related to planning, designing, and developing parks and the public realm. I became familiar with and engaged in policy research and advocacy regarding parks and recreation services in the city, including park projects involving nonprofit and philanthropic partners. During this time, several new urban park projects were developed with significant philanthropic donations. I was curious about the rise of these philanthropy-led park projects and puzzled by the lack of critical discourse amongst planners, policymakers, advocacy groups, and the public regarding the influence and implications of philanthropy in local green governance.

After beginning my doctoral studies at UCLA, I maintained ties to individuals and organizations involved in these projects and related parks planning, policy, and advocacy in Toronto. These relationships helped me to connect to information and informants but also raised certain tensions, given the focus of my research on critical reflections on urban parks and greening. My analysis is informed by my continued reflections on the relationship between my social position and identity as an individual and researcher, my connections to the research subject and participants, and the explanations, interpretations, and knowledge claims I make throughout this study.

Research approach

In this study, I use an embedded case study approach to examine the processes and justice-based outcomes of philanthropist engagement in urban park production in Toronto. Case study research facilitates "depth, high conceptual validity, understanding of context and processes, understanding of what causes a phenomenon, linking causes and outcomes, fostering new hypotheses and research questions" (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 314), and is well-suited to this dissertation for several reasons.

First, case study research investigates complex, contemporary phenomena and processes as they unfold in relation to real-world environments and contexts (Yin, 2018). By taking seriously the micro and macro contexts in which phenomena exist, case studies generate the "concrete, context-dependent knowledge" necessary for learning and theory building (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 302). Relatedly, case studies are uniquely suited to address explanatory "how" and "why" questions, tracing contemporary events and processes over time (Yin, 2018, p. 9). Here, a case study approach enables me to analyze both the processes and implications of philanthropy-led park production, in relation to the micro environmental and social context as well as macro structural context. Contextual conditions - environmental, cultural, political, and historical - are central to my understanding of the cases.

Second, case study research supports in-depth understanding through intense observation. It is the depth, detail, and richness of each case – the "proximity to reality" (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 310) – generates insights, rather than broad statistical analysis aimed at universal generalizability (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This allows me to build a "thick description" of the three cases: complex, layered accounts of each park's development, design, and use that integrates many specific observed details and interpretations over time to convey complex meaning (Geertz, 1973).

Third, case study research integrates a variety of data from multiple sources, including documents, observations, interviews, and artifacts (Yin, 2018), which, when analyzed together, build a rich case description and layered analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, I triangulate multiple forms of qualitative data, including policy documents, news articles, semi-structured interviews, and site observations, to contribute to an understanding of each case and the relationships between them.

Finally, while case studies do not produce universal generalizability, they can be used to develop knowledge and theory that is theoretically generalizable and transferable (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Because case studies trace processes in real time, linking causes to outcomes, they are effective at exploring causal mechanisms, generating and testing hypotheses, and developing and extending existing theoretical explanations. This is important for this dissertation, which seeks to extend existing theory regarding urban green governance and collaboration by analyzing cases in the distinct political-economic and cultural context of Toronto.

For this study, I adopt a research frame inspired by the extended case method (ECM) (Burawoy, 1991b, 1998b), which originates in ethnography but has been applied in planning and policy research (Collins & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2016; Peck & Theodore, 2012). The ECM approach is characterized by several "extensions": first, ECM extends from observer to participant, using intersubjectivity between researcher and subject through "connection, proximity, and dialogue" (Burawoy, 1998a, p. 12) to yield in-depth understanding. Second, ECM extends over space and time, observing and interpreting social processes as they unfold. Third, ECM extends outward, connecting local, micro phenomena to extralocal, macro contexts, using structuration to explain these two as mutually constitutive. Finally, ECM extends existing theory, using empirical evidence from an individual case to extend and reconstruct existing theory

(Burawoy, 1991b, 1991a, 1998a, 1998a). The extended case approach is well-suited to this study, as it facilitates connections between local park governance and design phenomena and broader structural conditions, attending to mobilities and interconnections between sites and scales (Peck & Theodore, 2012), with the goal to to strengthen existing planning theory.

Case selection

Case study designs require the researcher to select cases - defined as "social phenomena specific to time and place" (Ragin, 2009, p. 2) - by setting spatial and temporal boundaries around the phenomenon to be studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Flyvbjerg, 2006, 2011; Yin, 2018). With the understanding that cases are not empirical or given, but rather theoretical constructs that emerge through interactions between evidence and ideas (Ragin, 2009), the "cases" here refers to not only the geographic or jurisdictional boundaries of Toronto or to the material sites of the three parks in focus, but also the people, processes, policies, relationships, and discourses that are constructed and conditioned by these sites.

In this study, I examine three related cases of parks and green spaces in Toronto recently developed in partnership with major philanthropic donors: The Bentway, The Meadoway, and The Art Trail. I understand these parks as instrumental cases, given that Toronto differs considerably from park governance strategies commonly observed in existing literature: Toronto has adopted collaborative park governance approaches, including partnerships with philanthropists, much more recently than many US and UK cities with longer established traditions of philanthropic support for public spaces and services, where privately-supported parks are more common. Given Toronto's unique political-economic, cultural, and environmental context, the three Toronto-based cases test the limits of existing theory and allow me to generate

new information, concepts, and explanations to account for these differences (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Thus, these case studies support analytical generalization and theory reconstruction.

Toronto is a city that has not historically occupied the global planning imagination as other, paradigmatic cities do. However, Toronto is a place where many of the changes and challenges of early 21st century cities are particularly apparent (Boudreau et al., 2009). Toronto-based cases will add much-needed geographic variation to existing studies of collaborative park partnerships. Extant literature on the subject is heavily influenced by several paradigmatic case studies, notably The High Line and other New York City-based park conservancies (Katz, 1998; Loughran, 2014). However singular the New York City context, these cases continue to assume outsized influence in contemporary theories and debates regarding collaborative park governance and public space justice. By identifying new cases in Toronto, this study adds variation and allows existing theory to be tested and extended in unique cultural, political-economic, and geographic context.



Figure 7 Location of the case sites in Toronto. Map adapted from Google Earth by author.

The three cases explored here – The Bentway, The Meadowway, and the Art Trail – demonstrate a range of strategies to develop, fund, design, and program urban public spaces through philanthropic partnerships. Each is a notable example in its own right, but together the cases form a network that illustrates how new approaches to urban public space and urban green governance are unfolding in Toronto, and suggest what is to come in the future. All three projects are relatively new, linear parks that repurpose or redevelop urban infrastructure on publicly-owned land into green space, drawing upon urban sustainability narratives. All three parks are situated within or connected to broader public infrastructure projects that are

reimagining the role of parks in relation to transportation infrastructure rehabilitation, ecological protection, and waterfront redevelopment, respectively. And all three projects are funded by significant, \$25 million philanthropic pledges from private family foundations.

The parks are distinct in terms of geography, the role and influence of the donor, and the design and programming approaches. The Bentway is the first high-profile example of a donor-led vision and design for an urban infrastructure reuse park in Toronto's dense downtown, and indeed Toronto's first urban park conservancy, setting a precedent for a new approach to park production and governance. The Meadoway applies and extends this philanthropy-led approach to park making, but in an underserved suburban geography and at a scale much more expansive than The Bentway. The Art Trail applies and extends the earlier approaches of these two parks, adding a philanthropy-funded programming layer atop a public-led waterfront park project.

Each of these cases is, on its own, an important expression of how park making is changing in relation to shifting ideas about cities, nature, and private capital. But when analyzed together, considering how each case is informed by and connected to the others and to global networks, we can see how philanthropy in park making is gaining ground, changing discourses, and transforming urban landscapes and urban spatial inequities.

Data and methods

I integrate multiple forms of qualitative data that offer different "vantage points" from which to understand the drivers and modes of park production, to analyze implications for justice-based outcomes, and to extend existing theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2010). These vantage points include interviews, policy document and media discourse analysis, spatial and design analysis, and field visits. Additional details are included in the appendices.

Interviews

I conducted 33 formal, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 36 participants, as well as seven informal interviews, between June 2023 and June 2025 (IRB#23-001629). The purpose of these interviews was to understand experiences and perceptions of both the processes and outcomes of philanthropy-led park making. I aimed to capture different project narratives from different actors concerned with different scales, and to understand where individual voices were situated within the overall discourse regarding philanthropy-led green space production.

Interview participants included representatives from nonprofit organizations, parks agencies, elected officials, neighborhood groups, community leaders, advocates, and critics familiar with the sites, with park governance in Toronto, and with global park advocacy abroad (see Appendix A for a list of interview participants). To select interview participants, I used a theoretical sampling approach: an "active, purposeful, searching way of collecting data" for the purpose of enhancing theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2010, p. 76). I used background information and an initial review of policy documents to identify individuals and organizations based on their experience with and relationship to park governance globally, in Toronto, and in relation to the three parks, with the goal to reach saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 2010). I used snowball sampling to seek referrals and engage new interview subjects when possible. I considered diversity (in age, gender, race, geography) amongst the interview respondent, and sought to balance public sector, philanthropic, and community representatives.

Interviews were semi-structured and formal, conducted in-person at the park site or the participant's workplace, or virtually on Zoom. Interviews were approximately 60 minutes in length, with follow-up by email where clarification was necessary or where research raised further questions. Interviews were guided by a standardized interview protocol that included

general questions related to the processes and outcomes of the park partnerships and allowed for unstructured dialogue and follow-up questions. I tailored the interview protocol to different types of interview participants (for example, public agency representatives and community advocates), and refined the protocol over time as key concepts emerged in the data (see Appendix B for a sample interview protocol).

Informal interviews were less structured and took place in the earlier stages of research development. These interviews helped to refine the research questions and approach, and provided essential background information regarding the cases and the context of collaborative governance in Toronto. Informal interviews were conducted in person or online and were not recorded, though I did take hand written notes throughout.

I recorded the formal interviews whenever possible, with the permission of the interview participant, and then transcribed them. In addition to recording detailed field notes on the interview setting, process, questions, and emerging ideas, I wrote a reflexive memo following each interview. I analyzed the interviews first by listening to recordings, transcribing, taking notes, and recording analytical memos, and will by coding the transcripts. Given the subjective nature of interviews, which represent individual perspectives and recollections rather than objective conditions, I triangulated interview data with other data sources to enhance reliability.

Policy document analysis

I collected and analyzed over 220 policy documents, including municipal and organizational reports, policies, meeting minutes, presentations, and press releases related to the development of the parks and the broader policy frameworks supporting park partnerships and collaborative governance in Toronto and globally. The goal of policy document analysis was to understand the nature and prevalence of park partnerships with philanthropic donors in Toronto,

the policy frameworks in place to support these partnerships, and the role of policy mobilities, or the transnational flow of policy models and advice between jurisdictions (Goh, 2020; Peck, 2011), in shaping these approaches. I also investigated the political and urban policy contexts surrounding each park, considered relationships to broader public infrastructure investments taking place around each case, and traced connections to and conversations with global park policy networks.

I used a theoretical sampling approach (Glaser & Strauss, 2010) to identify documents relevant to the cases and the theoretical framework. I retrieved policy documents by searching online municipal records and meeting minutes, municipal archives, organization websites, and in some instances, by requesting documents directly from public agency and nonprofit organization representatives, including through interviews. The final sample included documents spanning the years 2000 to 2026 and representing several jurisdictions and scales: the park, the city, the region, and global networks (see Appendix C for a summary of policy and planning documents analyzed). Documents included both text and visual materials, including maps, plans, renderings, and photographs of the sites as well as diagrams and charts. I analyzed documents alongside data from interviews, media articles, and field observations.

Media discourse analysis

I collected and analyzed over 100 news articles from print and online sources pertaining to the development, design, and programming of the three parks. Based on the scope of my analysis, and the noted importance of local news as a major actor in discourses around urban development, I collected newspaper articles, including the storylines and contained quotes, in local and national news sources. The goal was to understand the ongoing media narratives and public discourses surrounding each project, to identify dominant and counter-narratives, and

understand how they are created and mobilized by supportive coalitions. This approach is inspired by the strategies employed by Mullenbach et al. (2021) and Loughran (2014) to analyze news coverage of park projects in order to understand the role of the media in portraying and promoting landmark urban park projects. Rather than view media as a separate realm that merely reports on or reflects urban conditions, here I view journalistic representations of these park projects as productive practices that frame policy problems and legitimize particular policy solutions (Rodgers, 2013; Sharp & Richardson, 2001).

I gathered these newspaper articles by searching the online database NexusUni, which contains Toronto- and Canada-based newspapers (including both online and print content). I used key words for each of the three park projects, restricting my search to the years 2015 to 2024, corresponding to the earliest date of development of The Bentway to the present. I included articles that emphasized the park's development, planning process, and outcomes. In total, I analyzed 99 articles from the year 2015 through 2024, 91% of which were from local news sources (see Appendix D for details). Once I retrieved the articles, I identified attributes in the text (sentences, paragraphs, quotes, and phrases) that indicated the overall portrayal of the park (positive, negative, mixed, or neutral) and the type of stakeholder voices included, based on those quoted directly in the article (advocates, experts, government officials, park organization representatives, founders/donors, and residents). I then used hierarchy charts in Nvivo to track the frequency of quotes across all articles and frequency of appearance by stakeholder type and produce basic descriptive statistics.

Field visits and design analysis

During three field visits to Toronto between February 2024 and June 2025, I conducted site observations of each of the three parks. The goal of the field visits was to understand the

design and programming of the three cases in relation to contemporary themes and trends in urban park design, with a specific focus on urban infrastructure reuse and sustainability. Drawing from spatial ethnography (Low et al., 2019) and site analysis (Lynch, 1960) approaches, I visited each of the sites at three different seasonal intervals and recorded observations regarding design, use patterns, maintenance, and control across temporal and seasonal conditions. I reviewed and analyzed the planning and design documents for each park and compared plans with the realized public spaces. In cases where a park was under construction and site access was limited (notably, The Art Trail, but also for incomplete sections of The Meadoway), I visited the perimeter of the site and compared my observations with proposed plans.

Sampling

Across all methods, I used a theoretical sampling strategy to identify people, processes, policies, and actions that address elements of my research questions. The size or composition of the sample cannot be known in advance; instead, theoretical relevance is the criterion I used to select additional documents and interview participants, with the goal to maximize difference in the data. I stopped sampling when theoretical saturation had been reached: when additional data was not adding additional insights and when it became clear that additional data would not further develop an analytical category (Glaser & Strauss, 2010).

Accordingly, my sampling, data collection, and analysis processes proceeded concurrently and iteratively. I continued to collect, code, and analyze data to refine understanding and to inform which data to collect next. I sampled interview respondents and documents that maximized difference in my sample and supported relational analysis,

concluding my data collection when emerging categories were well-developed and when additional data became redundant.

Analysis

My analysis centered on the environmental discourses, environmental design, and environmental governance of philanthropy-led urban green space projects in Toronto. I investigated the emerging strategies and struggles over the meaning of urban green space, with the goal to understand how new forms of spatial production implicate spatial justice.

My analysis approach was informed by critical discourse analysis (CDA), an interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological approach that sees discourse as integral to material social – and in this case, spatial – processes (Fairclough, 2001). CDA allows the researcher to move productively between the structure, content, and action of discourse: to trace how discourse shapes systems, meanings, and action in the world. With CDA, material phenomena are examined in historical, cultural, and political context to understand the relationships between "discourse, power, dominance, and social inequality" (van Dijk, 1993, p. 249). CDA has been productively applied to urban geographical research (Lees, 2004) due in part to its explicitly sociopolitical stance: making visible power relationships and resulting injustices (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Sharp & Richardson, 2001) and working toward emancipatory objectives for disempowered groups (Meyer, 2001). For critical analyses of urban greening, in particular, CDA is a productive approach because of its critical stance taken towards granted knowledge, its recognition of historically and culturally-specific ways of knowing, and its emphasis on power relations in the planning and policy process (Sharp & Richardson, 2001)

Across all three cases, I analyzed the dominant discourses regarding philanthropy-led park making and the planning, design, and programming practices they produce, as well as the limited presence of counter-discourses. My analysis focused on how the production of knowledge at the local scale shapes and sustains particular processes of urban green space development, design, and programming that have come to be uncritically accepted. Using CDA approaches allowed me to uncover the complex interrelationships between power, practices, and ideas that underpin these processes and shape social life as well as space in the city.

As is common in extended case studies that use theoretical sampling approaches, I analyzed and collected data iteratively throughout the study, moving back and forth between theory, data, and analysis as I reviewed the material, generated an analysis from a site, wrote through it, considered emerging ideas and concepts, abstracted meaning, and then returned to the material until I was able to produce a framework that explained connections among the cases and between the cases and the larger world.

Practically, I began by reviewing the policy documents to construct the background and context for each case, and conducted my interviews, site visits, and media discourse analysis as this research continued. I read and summarized field notes, interview transcripts, and documents, and produced memos as a first step towards developing codes. Aided by computer-based coding software (Nvivo), I conducted an initial, open coding process to develop codes based on meaningful concepts gleaned from the data in relation to my research questions. Drawing from Lofland & Lofland's framework for suggested code types, which includes acts, activities, meanings, participation, relationships, settings, attitudes, and outcomes (1971), I then conducted a second round of more in-depth inductive coding, based on emergent codes generated through the analysis process. I applied these codes to units of data and refined and grouped the codes as I

interpreted the data, based on observed patterns. Informed by my research questions and theoretical framing of park justice, I continued to apply codes, condensing into categories and eventually into themes that informed my case interpretations (Saldaña, 2013). Throughout the coding process, I rigorously organized my data and documented my methods, maintained an audit trail of key decisions throughout the analysis, took reflexive memos to record reflections and reviewed them at key decision points, and debriefed interim findings with peers and advisors to support the rigor and trustworthiness of this single-coder analysis (Meyer, 2001).

One important limitation of this study is that assessing justice-based outcomes is challenging, as there is no simple, quantitative proxy by which to measure justice (for example by the number of park visitors, attendance at public consultation meetings, or by park maintenance budgets). To respond to this challenge, I triangulated between several qualitative data sources to assess justice-based outcomes, informed by literature on the characteristics of park-related justice.

Validity and reliability

I used several strategies throughout this research to support reliability and validity. To support reliability, I kept an audit trail: a clear record of the processes undertaken and decisions made at all stages of research, including the approaches used to collect, review, and analyze data (Yin, 2018). This included memos and reflexive memos for each step of the process, that I was able to retrieve and review in later stages. To support internal validity and the trustworthiness of my observations and interpretations, I triangulated between multiple methods, corroborating between different data sources to confirm emerging concepts and themes. I also engaged in member checking by asking key informants to confirm the accuracy and credibility of my initial

interpretations of the cases, and also by reviewing and debriefing preliminary findings and assertions with peers and colleagues (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

As is customary in case study research, this project aimed for analytic generalizability to expand and improve existing theory and to contribute to understanding of other situations and cases, but not to develop probabilities or statistically generalizable findings (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2018). My aim was to use these cases to uncover new concepts, variables, and causal mechanisms that may account for the relationship between philanthropic engagement in park production and park justice – understandings that will support urban political ecology and urban environmental governance theory and carry relevance to other geographies (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Methodological constraints

Despite efforts to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, this study has several notable methodological constraints. First, as is the aim of case designs, this study supports analytical generalizability. This in itself is not a limitation, but should guide how theoretical and practical insights are applied and translated to other sites and contexts. Second, this study relies on interview data which must be analyzed as beliefs and perceptions rather than as straightforward reflections of objective reality. Third, while this study investigates how philanthropy-led park production implicates park equity, the qualitative methods do not enable evaluation of realized outcomes in terms of green gentrification and displacement; this is an important topic for future research. Finally, as this study explores philanthropic engagement in park production, it focuses on one extreme end of the collaborative governance spectrum. As such, the findings cannot be straightforwardly applied to other forms of collaborative park governance, including grassroots community initiatives and volunteer stewardship. Evaluating

differences across the spectrum of collaborative governance approaches is another subject for future inquiry.

CHAPTER 4: CONTEXT: PARKS AND COLLABORATIVE GREEN GOVERNANCE IN TORONTO

How have local and global political and socioecological changes created the conditions for collaborative park governance to emerge?

While private philanthropists have long played a role in public parks, donating land and infrastructure and serving on citizen park commissions, the role of philanthropy in urban park development, design, and governance has been shifting in recent decades. Much lauded U.S. examples, including New York's Central Park Conservancy and The High Line, Dallas' Klyde Warren Park, and Tulsa's Gathering Place, illustrate donors' central role in not just funding parks, but in envisioning, designing, and programming them. Focusing explicitly on Toronto, in this chapter I examine how such significant philanthropic engagement in park making has gained profile more recently. But what accounts for the increasing interest in and public profile of philanthropic donations to urban park spaces and programs in Toronto? In order to understand the drivers, modes, and implications of the three case – The Bentway, The Meadoway, and The Lassonde Art Trail – it is necessary to investigate the local environmental governance context from which these park projects emerged.

This chapter explores the historically and geographically contingent political and socioecological processes that have driven the emergence of philanthropic participation in park governance in Toronto. I critically analyze the structural conditions, cultural shifts, and policy discourses and mobilities that have shaped why and to what ends philanthropic participation in urban park production has gained ground in Toronto. This establishes a critical context for the

following chapter, which explores how parks are constructed as a policy problem and philanthropy as a policy solution through local discourses and global policy mobilities (the creation, circulation, and adoption of policy ideas between cities) (Peck, 2011).

Toronto's park system

Toronto, Canada's largest city and home to over three million residents, is often hailed as one of the "most livable and desirable cities on the planet" (City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2013), due in large part to its reputation for exceptional, accessible parks and public spaces. Indeed, the motto of the City of Toronto's Parks, Forestry, and Recreation Division (PF&R) is "A City Within A Park," referencing the abundance of green space that covers over 8,000 hectares of land, or 13 percent of the city's land base, and includes over 1,500 named parks (City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2019a). Toronto's geography and topography offers an abundance of exceptional green spaces. A network of ravines that traverse the city, extending from the north to the shoreline of Lake Ontario, have allowed for an expansive network of parks, trails, and green spaces, that is today largely managed by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA). In addition to the 4,400 hectares of TRCA lands operated by the City of Toronto, the City also owns and manages its own 3,600 hectares of parkland (see Figure 4.1, below) (City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2019a), which includes both "planned" parks for public use – from small pocket parks and public squares in the dense downtown to large pleasure ground parks in the former streetcar suburbs to sweeping recreational fields in the inner suburbs, and many greenways and trails, beaches, playgrounds and pools, and recreation facilities (City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2019b), as

well as many "natural" parks including ravines, wetlands, and portions of the waterfront (City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2019a).

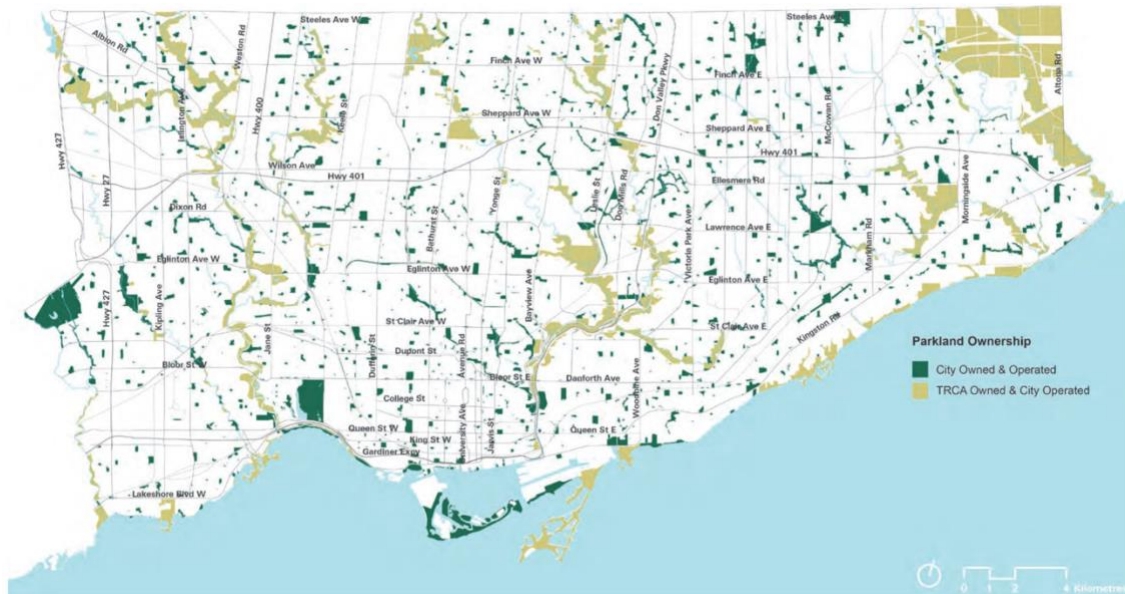


Figure 8 Toronto's park system, by ownership. Source: Parkland Strategy (City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2019a)

Among Ontario cities, Toronto has historically enjoyed some of the highest per-capita spending on parks (as a percentage of city spending), reflecting increasing attention to the public realm as the city has grown and densified (Park People, 2017b). In Toronto, capital costs for new parkland and park improvements are primarily financed through parkland dedication and alternative cash-in-lieu funds, development charges, and community benefits, through density bonuses collected from developers; operating costs are primarily funded by property taxes (City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2019a). As increased property taxes have become unpalatable to the electorate, parks have been deprioritized among tax-funded city services: in Toronto, less than 5% of property taxes are now directed toward parks (Park People, 2017b).

Today, Toronto faces extreme pressures on its park operating budgets, making park programming and maintenance a critical challenge amidst ongoing population growth and growing demand for park services. While more diverse revenue options are available for capital costs, operating costs are more difficult to fund, prompting policymakers to explore other potential revenue streams from permits, licenses, and fees, as well as voluntary contributions. While welcome, advocates note that donations are typically only used to fund capital (rather than operating) costs, and remain much less common in Canadian parks than in the United States. A 2017 report by the advocacy organization Park People warned against municipal reliance on voluntary revenue for parks, as these contributions are insufficient to sustain park systems, may crowd out government funding, and may prioritize the interests of a select few park funders, disconnected from the broader users and issues facing parks. The report concluded that "cities should take major responsibility for creating and funding parks from the municipal revenue base" (Park People, 2017b, p. 9).

Similarly, park conservancies – private, nonprofit entities that partner with a public park agency to develop or operate a park, with funding from voluntary contributions and fees – are a growing area of interest in Toronto, primarily in response to the insufficient public capital and operating budget for parks. The Park People report warns conservancies introduce many of the same risks as voluntary contributions, as they are insufficient to support park capital and operating expenses in the long term and may privilege the interests of select donors, and while they may be appropriate for significant downtown parks, "they are not a cross-city solution to park needs, nor should they be" (Park People, 2017b, p. 12).

Urban environmental governance in the region

To understand Toronto's park network and its place in the popular imagination requires understanding the recent history of urban environmental governance in the region. Here, the 1998 amalgamation, in which six formerly independent municipal governments were joined into one "mega-city" with a single regional administration, is critical context. Spearheaded by the Province of Ontario, this consolidation sought to enhance efficiency and integrate a fragmented civil society to meet the demands of an increasingly global economy (Keil, 2000). Toronto's amalgamation ushered in a new approach to urban governance: unlike earlier eras characterized by comprehensive planning, political regulation, and technocratic modernization, post-amalgamation Toronto emphasized flexibility, partnership, and negotiation with civil society and private sector actors (Keil, 2000). Practically, amalgamation resulted in significant changes to service provision in the city, intense financial and organizational pressures, and increased reliance on community-based organizations to provide public goods and services, including in public parks (City of Toronto, 2016d).

Amalgamation is cited by many as a turning point for parks in Toronto, resulting in reduced budgets and staffing and deleterious impacts on park spaces and services, paralleling the budget crises experienced in many other Canadian and U.S. cities throughout the latter decades of the 20th century. In the years following amalgamation, Toronto faced a growing maintenance backlog in parks that left little budgetary capacity to support system growth, service enhancements, or even ongoing operations (City of Toronto, 2012b). Cuts to services and staff not only reduced resources for parks, but reorganized park services across the six municipalities, dampening citywide vision, stunting political leadership, and diminishing local expertise. As one

report stated, "many people believe that no part of Toronto's infrastructure has suffered more from amalgamation and its after-effects than parks" (Harvey, 2010).

The challenges of amalgamation and ongoing financial pressures set the stage for several important organizational and policy efforts toward park partnerships. By the late 2000s, the City of Toronto began exploring options to generate funds for City-owned assets, including through corporate and nonprofit partnerships, financial and in-kind donations, sponsorships and naming rights, and community fundraising (City of Toronto, 2012c, 2012a). The Toronto Office of Partnerships (now the Office of Strategic Partnerships) was formed to manage the "corporate infrastructure" of policies, procedures, and resources to guide donations and sponsorships (City of Toronto, 2012a), and to facilitate and advise on service delivery partnerships (City of Toronto, 2020a). In the years since, the City has increasingly collaborated with private and nonprofit partners with "shared city-building goals" to supplement city services, adapt to changing needs, and respond to ongoing fiscal and organizational constraints (City of Toronto, 2018a, 2018d).

Meanwhile, in the post-amalgamation period, grassroots park advocacy and stewardship was also gaining momentum. The 2010 publication of a report titled *Fertile Ground for New Thinking: Improving Toronto's Parks*, authored by former policymaker Dave Harvey and supported by the Metcalf Foundation, launched a new public discourse amongst environmental advocates and neighborhood organizers around the need for park stewardship and collaborative governance. The *Fertile Ground* report highlighted the challenges faced by Toronto's parks in the post-amalgamation period, during which infrastructure, maintenance, and locally-responsive programming had all suffered. At the same time, the number of local "park friends" groups was growing significantly, as residents sought to supplement park services and programming through advocacy, engagement, and fundraising around neighborhood parks (City of Toronto Parks,

Forestry and Recreation, 2013). As park friends groups grew in number and reach, the City's prevailing "culture of no" and "rule driven" approach to managing public space thwarted the efforts of well-meaning neighbors to care for their local parks. In response, the *Fertile Ground* report proposed five recommendations to improve Toronto's parks, including enhancing City communication and collaboration with local park organizers; experimenting with new pilot projects, initiatives, and activities in parks; exploring creative funding opportunities, including naming rights, park conservancies, and individual donations; creating opportunities for food growing, selling, and consumption in parks; and, finally, forming a citywide parks advocacy group, inspired by efforts in San Francisco, New York, and elsewhere, to serve as a voice for community needs, and to position parks centrally in the political agenda (Harvey, 2010).

Fertile Ground connected the challenges facing Toronto's parks to those of many other cities in North America, stitching these spaces into a cross-border policy dialogue. It highlighted successful efforts from other jurisdictions that, while not directly replicable, could be adapted and applied to Toronto's parks, including fundraising arms like park trusts and foundations, park conservancies, business and park improvement districts, and citywide and national park advocacy NGOs. The report gave critical momentum to these conversations, and shortly after, in 2011, author David Harvey launched Toronto's first city-wide parks nonprofit, Park People. At the time, there were 40 volunteer-led park friends groups operating in Toronto, and Park People was initially focused on matters of distributional equity, countering the clustering of park friends groups in affluent downtown neighborhoods by supporting new groups in all of Toronto's electoral wards through training, grants, and building partnerships (Park People, 2017c). Today, the organization has expanded significantly to provide resources, research, and networks to support park groups across Canada.

With the motto, "When communities get involved, parks get better," Park People's influence on local park stewardships and collaborative park governance in Toronto has been significant. Many policymakers and park advocates see Park People as a vital voice in the parks conversation, credited with not only supporting and growing a network of park friends groups across Toronto, but also shifting attitudes amongst City staff about the benefits of collaborative governance and about parks as essential urban infrastructure. Ultimately, this work has influenced a greater openness to collaboration with voluntary and nonprofit groups in the development, design, management, and programming of public parks.

Enabling policy

In response to both growing recognition of the importance of Toronto's parks and growing desire amongst residents to engage in parks through volunteer stewardship (City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2019a), the City introduced policies, programs, and staff hiring to expand opportunities for collaborative governance. Increasing requests from external groups and growing frustration with the siloed and often inefficient pace of bureaucracy (City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2019a) prompted the City's (City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2019a) Department (PF&R) to create a dedicated Partnership Development Unit to solicit and manage partnerships with individual, corporate, government, and philanthropic entities. The Unit pursues partnerships, naming rights, and advertising as strategies to supplement parks and recreation programs, facilities, and services and address the extreme financial pressures on capital and operating budgets (City of Toronto, 2023c).

The City's growing interest in pursuing collaborative park governance strategies is also demonstrated by its 2021 report titled *Collaborative Governance Report: A Framework 1.0 for Toronto Parks*, produced by PF&R in partnership with the MaRS Solution Lab and with research

support from Park People. The report emphasizes the importance of urban parks for the social, economic, and environmental health of the city, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the inability of municipal budgets alone to sustain these spaces. In Toronto, as in other cities, these factors have led to the increased engagement of civil society groups in park fundraising, programming, operations, and maintenance. The report sets out a policy framework to "maximize the value of partnering with civil society, including community groups, nonprofits and charities - especially those in under-represented communities - and the private sector, to deliver positive social, financial, and ecological outcomes that are mutually positively reinforcing" (MaRS Solution Lab & City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2021).

The increased interest in partnerships for parks extends beyond PF&R. Throughout Toronto's Official Plan, Strategy Plan, Resilience Strategy, Ravine Strategy, Parkland Strategy, Statement of Commitment to the Aboriginal Communities of Toronto, and Framework for Working with Community-Based Non-profit Organizations, there are clear indications that the City is invested in expanding the scale and scope of collaborative governance in and around urban parks and green spaces. Other governmental agencies in the region, including the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority and Waterfront Toronto, also express interest in developing collaborative governance arrangements, actively pursuing philanthropic donations and naming rights on public assets, and creating new policies and strategies to maximize partnership opportunities (City of Toronto, 2023c).

Policy goals and imagined outcomes

As financial pressures grow, partnerships with philanthropic donors, nonprofit groups, and corporate sponsors are framed as an important source of new funding and resources for parks (City of Toronto, 2023c) to "fill the gap" left by budget cuts and growth pressures. Beyond

budgets, park partnerships are also framed as an opportunity to leverage "creative placemaking" approaches and enhance the overall aesthetic, environmental, social, and economic benefits of parks (City of Toronto, 2019a). Overall, partnerships are understood to "maximize budgets, resources, and opportunities" (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2019d) and combine the unique offerings of public and private sector partners to mitigate against risks and increase public benefit (Harnik & Martin, 2015).

This perception relies, in part, on the assumption that nonprofit and philanthropic partners bring not only financial resources, but also the capacity to be more nimble and innovative and to ultimately deliver greater benefits than the public sector alone. By combining the resources and experience of the public sector with the creativity, autonomy, and neighborhood knowledge of a nonprofit or community group, partnerships are seen to add value to parks and enhance the "public good" (MaRS Solution Lab & City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2021). As one City staff member argued in an interview, "We're greater than the sum of our parts. It's that one plus one equals three, that's my shorthand for it. Where you're able to do more working together than you might be able to just on your own" (D. Bennet, personal communication, January 3, 2024).

Collaborative governance is also believed to expand pathways to participation for residents, increase engagement through park stewardship and voluntarism, and build capacity in underserved communities. Supporting civic engagement in parks through collaborative governance is understood to precipitate many effects, including inclusion and community cohesion, increased ecological literacy, environmental awareness, and sustainability leadership. Here, investment in park partnerships is viewed as an investment in civic leadership and democracy: by fostering community engagement in parks and green spaces, the public sector can

"build civic capacity by providing the tools and opportunities needed for community members to transition from participants to advocates to leaders" and "facilitate a two-way dialogue with community members to ensure that knowledge, ideas, and concerns are integrated into decision-making by governments and agencies" (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2018a).

This engagement is, in turn, believed to foster trust in government, as expressed in an interview by Doug Bennet, a Senior Project Manager for Partnerships in the City of Toronto's Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division:

When you're working with community groups and they're hard at work, they want to upgrade their park, they do some fundraising and they're able to work closely with the city, sometimes shoulder to shoulder, there's a community-building aspect to it. It helps build those relationships and it builds trust in government. That's a really important thing, especially these days. It's one way that we can work with communities and grassroots organizations to work together to achieve common goals. The end goal might be a new playground, but to me one of the outcomes is greater trust in government, hopefully. (D. Bennet, personal communication, January 3, 2024)

The overall benefits of collaborative park governance in Toronto are often framed as "city building," a phrase frequently repeated in policy documents, press releases, and interviews. While the term has no stable definition, it generally refers to the broad environmental, economic, and social benefits of urban spatial and social change that goes above and beyond what is conventional. Collaborative governance and philanthropic donations are seen to expand the design excellence and programming impacts of parks to ultimately deliver greater value to the city as a whole. Going above and beyond public sector capacity, collaborative governance and philanthropy are expected to reinforce and strengthen existing public policy to expand the benefits of parks, further supporting city building and social integration and contributing to other urban policy goals related to climate change and resiliency.

Scale and scope of park partnerships

There is a growing acknowledgement that a shift is underway in Toronto, with collaborative governance and philanthropic participation in park development, design, and operations becoming more prevalent, or, according to some, more high-profile. But while policy documents and interviews suggest that overall interest in philanthropy in park making is growing along with public understanding of its impact, the true financial scale and geographic scope of this growth is less apparent.

The umbrella term "collaborative governance" comprises a continuum of partnerships, in which a government agency and a community or private sector partner group develop an ongoing relationship around a park or series of parks, "working together to achieve more than any one sector could achieve on its own" (MaRS Solution Lab & City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2021). These collaborative park funding and governance arrangements in Toronto range from individual, volunteer-led, grassroots stewardship efforts, to small donations for neighborhood parks, to large donations for major capital projects and nonprofit park conservancies.

On one end of the continuum, there has been a noted increase in nonprofit and grassroots groups of all sizes participating in parks in Toronto, with more groups of residents and other organizations bringing their ideas, programming, and funds to parks, including arts organizations, social service agencies, and neighborhood groups, who engage in community programming, ecological restoration, advocacy, and other activities. Park People has been central to the growth of such community-led park advocacy and activation in the past decade. Despite this increase, many argue these smaller-scale efforts still do not receive the public sector support necessary to foster their impactful work (Park People, 2020).

On the other end of the continuum, there have been several high-profile, large-scale donations to park projects in the past decade. In comparison to the City's overall donation activity, these contributions are of a considerably different magnitude; for example, in 2014, the year before The Bentway was announced, the City of Toronto received a total of \$1.1 million in combined cash and in-kind donations, with PF&R receiving just over \$220,000 in donations, primarily for commemorative tree and bench donations (City of Toronto, 2014b). At the time, the City was receiving mostly smaller donations, commonly valued at just \$25, and relatively few large cash or in kind donations (City of Toronto, 2014a). In the years 2008 through 2014, the City never received more than \$2.5 million in donations in one year (City of Toronto, 2014b). Thus, the announcement of \$25 million donations for The Bentway, The Meadoway, and The Lassonde Art Trail was unprecedented.

Compared to the City of Toronto's total annual parks budgets, advocates and policymakers caution these donations are still merely "a drop in the well" (Z. Ebrahim, personal communication, October 4, 2024), and of much less magnitude and impact than in comparable U.S. cities. Philanthropy, donations, and sponsorships remain insignificant when compared to the region's overall park needs and budgets, and staff warn against reliance on donors. But while the overall financial impact of philanthropy across Toronto's park system remains small, high-profile philanthropic donations to urban parks and public realm projects and the creation of new nonprofit park conservancies have had a significant impact on media and public discourses around parks.

Many frame this as an "important moment" in park philanthropy in Toronto. Historically, private philanthropy for parks in Canada was uncommon: donations were typically directed towards legacy causes including hospitals, higher education, and cultural institutions, and to

building and naming physical assets. But these new park partnerships and projects are "ground-breaking in terms of the magnitude of philanthropic investment in city parks in Canada" (Park People, 2017a). In contrast to the United States, where there has historically been more philanthropic involvement in parks and green space projects, change is happening more recently in Canada, in terms of both capital and operating investments.

Some advocates warn that the relatively small scale of park philanthropy in Toronto and the growing need for park investment has constrained opportunities for critical discourse. As Zahra Ebrahim, co-founder of the consulting firm Monumental Projects, stated in an interview, "we don't have space to be critical because those dollars are so desperately needed." Ebrahim continued:

We just say yes. We're just grateful that philanthropy pays attention to parks amidst all of the other competing interests, and I worry that we're not critical enough, or we don't say 'yes, and' to the philanthropy community when they come to us wanting to invest in parks, because we're just so happy they're there. (Z. Ebrahim, personal communication, October 4, 2024)

Growth of collaborative park governance

A park renaissance

To what can we attribute this "important moment" in collaborative park governance in Toronto? Some argue that the increasing wealth in the city overall, in combination with the increasing inequality and the affordability crisis, is driving park philanthropy, and that "generational wealth is being transferred [...] investment in public places is literally releasing those resources into the public domain" (L. Lindsay & S. Wilcox, personal communication, May 27, 2024). Others attribute this shift to a growing interest in parks and placemaking amongst policymakers as well as the public, particularly as Toronto faces combined pressures of a

growing and diversifying population, increasing need for and use of parks, and diminishing budget capacity. The COVID-19 pandemic is considered by many a key conjuncture prompting an increasing understanding of the social, economic, and environmental value of parks, the need for investment, and the opportunity for philanthropy. Throughout the pandemic, Torontonians flocked to public green spaces, and parks were reframed as not just recreational sites, but as critical urban infrastructure with an essential role to play in recovery. As the city continues to grow rapidly, the importance of parks is further heightened, along with the realization that funding has not kept up with the pace of growth, as argued by Amanda O'Rourke, a public space advocate and Executive Director of the nonprofit public space advocacy organization 8-80

Cities:

There has been such a tremendous pressure in Toronto, specifically, that I think it has demonstrated this widening gap [between] the importance of public space and the increasing needs, given such an intensity of population and intensity of development, [and] a lack of the same kind of investment to respond to those needs in our parks department. (A. O'Rourke, personal communication, October 16, 2024)

This heightened understanding of the value of parks and the need for more park spaces and services, in combination with the growing budget crisis, has prompted increasing receptivity to civil society engagement in Toronto's parks, as in other cities (MaRS Solution Lab & City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2021).

A changing public discourse

Elected officials and parks agencies across the region appear more open to collaborative park governance models, introducing new processes, policies, and resources that have reshaped the landscape of park philanthropy. This shift in discourse signals a greater willingness to collaborate with nonprofit and private sector partners, and to explore creative governance models for parks development and operations. Over the past two decades, public agencies in the region

have shifted from a more reactionary approach to donations and sponsorships for parks toward a more proactive approach, actively seeking donations and supporting partnerships in parks.

City-led policies and strategies to support and expand collaborative governance in parks challenge "some long-held assumptions about what is 'normal' or 'acceptable' for collaborative governance [...] they reflect long-term shifts in mindset and narratives that might be needed" (MaRS Solution Lab & City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2021). This is shaped in part by changes in other geographies, as cities, particularly in the U.S., increasingly support nonprofit partners and leverage additional funding from private sources to deliver greater value in parks that municipal funds alone could accomplish.

Despite this changing public discourse, philanthropy-led park projects remain relatively uncommon in Toronto when compared to other cities, particularly in the US, that have faced more significant park funding crises and that have longer traditions of philanthropic participation in the public realm. Some advocates consider this a relief and an indicator that the public sector in Canada has retained its traditional role and financial responsibility for public park services. Some funders argue that, despite a recent series of major donations for parks, public agencies have not done enough to affect broader change, and philanthropy remains "an uphill battle." Some argue there remains a particularly Canadian skepticism about the role of private actors in delivering public services, including parks, as expressed by a Director of the Weston Family Foundation in an interview: "We've always, in Canada, had the government fund parks. And so just this concept of private money going to a public space is still, it's a hard sell for most people."

Growing cultural acceptance

Despite a history of land donations to create parks and public open spaces, the culture of philanthropy for urban park improvements and operations has, until recently, been relatively

limited in Canada, particularly when compared to the U.S. where public-private partnerships for a range of public services are relatively more common and accepted, and where the park conservancy movement has flourished in the past several decades (Park People, 2017a). Several factors have limited philanthropy in parks in Canada, including relatively less extreme municipal budget crises and related cuts to park services, a relatively less developed philanthropic sector overall, and a fundamentally distinct culture regarding the role of private actors in public spaces. Many interview respondents noted that generally, in Canada, there remains an expectation that parks ought to be funded by the public sector, through tax dollars. Canadians remain wary of private donations for public parks, expressing concerns over diminishing democracy and publicness, as expressed by Asima Jansveld, Chief Program and Engagement Officer at the High Line and Managing Director of the High Line Network, a global coalition of infrastructure reuse projects: "I think there's this more general perception that government should be responsible for the stewardship of public land. And I do think, from what I've heard, it's this perception of private people, it doesn't feel "of the public" if you have a private entity taking care of it" (A. Jansveld, personal communication, May 5, 2024).

Many interview respondents agreed that, culturally, Canadians hold stronger views of the public imperative to support parks, and more readily express concerns over the privatization, corporatization, and commercialization of urban public park spaces. They attribute this to cultural values that differ between the countries, related to histories of public sector provision of shared public good. As Erika Nikolai, Executive Director of the park advocacy nonprofit Park People argued:

It is cultural, but it's reinforced by those municipal institutions. And I think there's such a difference in the States...it's such a stark example of where the cultures digress, in terms of collective versus individual, the role of government, taxes and private wealth. I think

there's an expectation in Canada that public space is part of public spending, and that our government is accountable for providing those in a way that has some accountability to the citizens. It can be complicated when those decisions seem as though they are influenced by private philanthropy. (E. Nikolai, personal communication, July 3, 2024 and July 29, 2026)

This suspicion of the role of private money in the public park system shapes a culture that is, overall, less open to private partnerships and voluntary contributions in public spaces (Park People, 2017a), which causes some hesitation amongst donors. As a director of the Weston Family Foundation argued in an interview:

I still think that Canadians feel generally that government should be responsible for public spaces, and they're very concerned about private philanthropy coming in and doing things. There's a perspective that private philanthropists will bring a specific agenda that may not be aligned to the neighborhood or public values. I can't speak for other foundations, but I think for us, there's absolutely no desire in giving money to something that the public is not going to accept and welcome. Because you want what you do to be well loved and looked after [...] you want it to be loved and enjoyed. But I don't think that message always gets out very clearly.

Made-in-Canada models

It appears these particularly Canadian ideals of the public provision of parks are "maturing," leading to a greater openness to partnerships. While conversations regarding the use of private money to support public parks have historically been met with resistance in Canada, policymakers now appear more receptive to and supportive of collaborative modes of park governance. Emerging narratives celebrating the innovative visions and generous contributions of philanthropic donors are shifting public perceptions of the role of the private sector in delivering park spaces and services.

Many attribute this change to the perceived success of several high-profile, global examples of philanthropy-led infrastructure reuse projects, notably The High Line, that have captured Torontonians' imagination and are frequently invoked as inspiration. Some suggest

Canadians are "star struck" by these largely U.S.-based examples, and suffer from an "inferiority complex" when it comes to Toronto's status as a global city. Others argue that these park-making models cannot simply be imported in Toronto, but must be tailored to the Canadian context.

Noting the important cultural distinctions between the countries, and the widely held Canadian skepticism regarding sponsorship, naming rights, and private management of public spaces, there is a strong narrative around the need for and benefits of "Canadianizing" philanthropy-led park making.

Early successes, including The Bentway, are positioned as catalytic, proof-of-concept projects that demonstrate that such strategies are possible in Toronto, and inspire subsequent efforts, as suggested by this interview quote from Ben MacIntosh, Manager of Cultural

Partnerships with the City of Toronto's Economic Development and Culture Division:

I do think there's a catalyst element to it. Toronto has never had a culture of this kind of philanthropy. I think that a lot of philanthropic funds in Canada go towards things like education and programs at universities. But there's very few examples of large-scale philanthropic gifts where the recipient has been the City. So [The Bentway] was really important, I think, as the first thing to happen. (B. MacIntosh, personal communication, February 12, 2024)

Made-in Canada models for collaborative park governance are gaining ground in Toronto. As awareness of the ecological, social, and economic importance of parks grows, donors and advocates have fostered collaboration among funders, communities, and government. Park People's Weston Family Parks Challenge, launched in 2013, is a notable effort in this regard. Funded by a \$5 million donation from the W. Garfield Weston Foundation, the three-year program aimed to enhance and support the long-term sustainability of Toronto's green spaces by encouraging community participation and public-private partnerships in natural areas and parks. The Challenge explicitly sought to shift opinion amongst the public and policymakers of the

value of park partnerships by developing "made-in Canada models" (Park People, 2017a), and is credited with fostering greater public sector openness to collaboration in parks.

"We can handle more of a mix"

Philanthropists, too, appear to be shifting their views on partnering with "the tax collector." As parks are repositioned as vital social infrastructure, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, some donors interested in supporting social connection, public health, and ecological benefit have turned their attention from legacy institutions such as hospitals and higher education and toward capital and programming investments in parks: hard and soft infrastructure. A shifting culture of philanthropy has bred a sort of friendly competition among donors over the last decade as they seek to differentiate their work, building a community of "real civic minded people" and inspiring others to contribute to the city through more unconventional outlets, like parks.

Despite some notable Toronto examples, there has not yet been a widespread increase in philanthropic donations across the city park system overall, and foundations are not rushing to support public realm projects. One long-time park advocate Zahra Ebrahim expressed in an interview, "We've had some significant moments (like the Bentway) but they're more signals in the noise, versus an actual giving trend"(Z. Ebrahim, personal communication, October 4, 2024). While the *scale* of philanthropic capital and operating investments in Toronto's parks remains relatively small, the *culture* of Canadian philanthropy and the discourses around park partnerships do appear to be changing significantly. Increasingly, policymakers and the public believe Toronto's parks "can handle more of a mix" (M. Rowe, personal communication, May 15, 2024), and that partnering with philanthropy must not necessarily result in the privatization of parks.

Conclusion

While philanthropy in parks is nothing new, donor-led approaches to the design, development, and governance of parks constitute a qualitative shift. While Canadian cities have historically relied more heavily on property taxes to fund municipal park spaces and services, changes in urban environmental governance, municipal finance, and urban growth policy have coincided with a growing receptivity to philanthropic leadership amongst policymakers, planners, and the public. Despite several high-profile examples, the scale of philanthropic investment in Toronto's parks remains small in comparison to the city-wide park budgets – and budget gaps. But it is clear that philanthropic actors are emerging as key players in park production in Toronto. As donors gain power and profile, new discourses about the problem of parks and philanthropy as a solution are developed and mobilized.

CHAPTER 5: GAINING GROUND: DRIVERS OF GREEN SPACE PHILANTHROPY

How are ideas about philanthropy in urban green space produced, how are they mobilized, and how do they gain power to shape how we develop, design, and govern urban parks?

Growing receptivity to collaborative arrangements to fund, develop, program, and manage green space has prompted several high-profile urban park projects involving major philanthropic donations of a scale unprecedented in Toronto's history. Each of these parks is connected to broader public infrastructure projects that are reimagining the role of parks in relation to transportation infrastructure rehabilitation, ecological protection, and waterfront redevelopment, and reflect a distinct shift in how Torontonians think about parks and about philanthropy. The Bentway, made possible by an unprecedented \$25 million donation from a private family foundation in 2017, transformed publicly-owned land under an elevated expressway into a new linear park, managed by Toronto's first urban park conservancy. Just a few years later, philanthropic donations of equal magnitude were announced for two other high-profile park projects in the city. The Meadoway, announced in 2018, is transforming a 16-km hydroelectric transmission corridor into a connected greenway for active transportation and meadow restoration, supported by a series of philanthropic donations and public investments. The Lassonde Art Trail, announced in 2022, is the largest public art donation in Toronto's history, and will introduce a free, open-air museum of public artworks to a new waterfront park under development as part of a major flood protection effort. In each of these cases, a major philanthropic donation introduces a new design vision and new governance approach to activate green space in an urban infrastructure reuse project. And in each of these cases, a complex

confluence of cultural and political conditions are made material in the design and everyday experience of the urban landscape.

How have these specific sites, in this specific city, come to reflect political-economic and cultural changes unfolding across the globe? In this chapter, I trace the emergence of urban parks as a policy problem and philanthropic participation in park making as a policy solution, at multiple scales. To do so, I examine how structural, social, and environmental conditions have transformed how we think about parks and about philanthropy, and in turn, have transformed the discursive and material production of urban green space in Toronto. I introduce and analyze the three cases comparatively to identify patterns in the framing of parks as a policy problem and of philanthropy as a policy solution. I then discuss how local policy discourses and global policy mobilities shape collaborative green governance and nonprofit-led approaches to park making in Toronto. This provides a necessary foundation for the subsequent chapter, which explores how philanthropic engagement reshapes park planning and design processes.

Policy discourses and policy mobilities

Power and discourse together make "commonsense" narratives (Wachsmuth & Angelo, 2018, p. 2201) out of highly complex and historically specific socio-ecological issues, and in doing so, naturalize particular planning and policy interventions (Hajer, 2005; Lees, 2004; Sharp & Richardson, 2001). The media importantly shapes and mobilizes these narratives; the news is not simply a reflection of urban life and policymaking, but is itself an urban *practice*, infused with power, that actively produces society and space (Mullenbach, 2022; Rodgers, 2013; Roth & Vander Haar, 2006). As urban environmental discourses circulate, in news, policy debates, and public dialogues, they shape both urban imaginaries and actual struggles over urban space; it is

thus important to consider not only what these discourses *say* about the city, but also what policy and planning *action* they motivate. In the context of global flows of people and ideas (Sheller & Urry, 2006), it is important, also, to consider how these discourses are transmitted, translated, adopted, and adapted through local and global networks. Indeed, urban environmental policy issues are never purely local; networks of ecological and socio-political flows (Desfor & Keil, 2004) connect urban ecosystems and urban actors across time and space into a complex, global web of uneven development (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2015). Just as air and water flow beyond regional boundaries, so do urban policy ideas, advice, and advocacy (Peck, 2011, p. 773), linking cities and sites transnationally together in "increasingly mobile and interconnected urban environmental futures" (Goh, 2020, p. 2222).

Responding to calls to explore the symbolic and discursive processes underlying urban environmental policy outcomes (Desfor & Keil, 2004), this chapter investigates everyday discourses regarding philanthropy-led park production. Everyday discourses are "socially constructed constellations of words and images that both reflect and contribute to shaping particular realities" (Allan & Tolbert, 2019, p. 138). These sets of ideas and concepts are (re)produced to give meaning to the physical and social world (Hajer, 2005), and in doing so, sustain processes of urban development that powerfully shape everyday life and urban landscapes.

Extending existing investigations of urban green growth discourses and their uneven outcomes (Kotsila et al., 2021; Lang & Rothenberg, 2017; Loughran, 2014; Mullenbach, 2022; Mullenbach et al., 2021; Roth & Vander Haar, 2006), I analyze power and narratives in philanthropy-led urban park production in Toronto. I explore the regional and historical context in which the three case parks were produced, highlighting factors including local political and

governance context, environmental conditions, neighborhood demographics and population change, and built form and infrastructure plans. I consider the role of public agencies in shaping the opportunities, constraints, and conditions of public-nonprofit collaborations in parks.

Additionally, I consider the regional and international policy networks and flows of urban policy ideas, urban environmental governance approaches, and urban design paradigms through which these projects are interconnected.

I consider how parks are constructed as a policy problem and philanthropy-led, collaborative design and governance as a policy solution through discourse, how these discourses circulate and gain legitimacy, and how these discourses shape the design and governance of actual urban landscapes. I consider the justice implications of these framings: how supposedly natural transformations in urban space and its governance are socially produced to ultimately create landscapes laden with power. Throughout, I explore how elite actors, including donors and international policy advocates, mobilize official narratives about park design and governance. I uncover relationships between material urban landscapes and urban imaginaries by considering the actions and motivations of the coalitions of actors that (re)produce these discourses, along with the implications of these discourses for park justice: the content of the discourse and its influence on park making practices.

The Bentway

"Other cities have found creative ways and clever ways to do this with various elevated structures at one time or another," [Mayor Tory] said. "They've done some very magical things that are alive with people and clearly the area under the Gardiner here and at other parts of the Gardiner are ideal for that kind of revitalization." ("Public Space under Gardiner Expressway to Link Waterfront to Rest of Toronto," 2015)

We can chart the story of these three park projects through three press conferences. In November 2015, a group of elected officials, civil servants, urban advocates, and philanthropists gathered in an unlikely venue – a vacant lot under the elevated Gardiner Expressway, just west of Toronto's downtown core – to announce not only a new public space for the city, but also a new *way of thinking about* public space. Initially called "Project: Under Gardiner,"¹ the plan was to construct a new linear park on "leftover" City-owned land under the expressway. The proposal was created and propelled by a \$25 million philanthropic donation from the Judy and Wilmot Matthews Foundation, a Toronto-based family foundation known for its support of local education, arts, and public realm initiatives. It was, at the time, the largest donation of its kind in the City's history, and enthusiastically received by elected officials, parks agency staff, business and civic leaders, and local media.

Project: Under Gardiner would transform vacant, city-owned land "into a unique, vital, and energized public space" that would include "a pedestrian and cycling promenade, a destination space for markets, entertainment, art displays and civic opportunities" (City of Toronto, 2015, p. 13). Located under the Gardiner Expressway, from Strachan Avenue in the west to Spadina Avenue in the east, the Under Gardiner would introduce in phases a series of unique open spaces for public art, public realm improvements, and public programming (City of Toronto, 2015).

¹ The project, originally referred to as "Project: Under Gardiner" at its launch in 2015, would eventually be renamed "The Bentway" in 2016, following a public naming competition, the details of which are discussed further in the following chapter. In this chapter, I refer to the project as both "Project: Under Gardiner" and "The Bentway."

Problem framing - "Nurture common ground": The site was unusual, a puzzle of complex ownership and competing jurisdictional claims. The City-owned land under the expressway was managed by the City's Transportation Services Division, used for construction staging for ongoing Gardiner Expressway Rehabilitation efforts (Waterfront Toronto, 2015b). Yet this "forgotten space" (Waterfront Toronto, n.d.-a) sat at the nexus of significant spatial change. It directly abutted Fort York, the former military fort and historic site of Indigenous presence along Toronto's waterfront and colonial history which had recently opened a new visitor's center and interpretive museum. All around the space, Toronto's exponential population growth had sparked a condominium boom; in the decade between 2006 and 2016, Toronto added over 140,000 new dwelling units, 80% of which were in buildings greater than 5 storeys (City of Toronto, 2020b). The former industrial lands around the Gardiner had deindustrialized, densified, and diversified, and tall condominium towers were developing rapidly. City officials and journalists warned that the dramatic population growth, rising density, and increasing housing costs were pushing families into new high-rise units and sparking demand for "a new kind of backyard, a new kind of place to hang out and do stuff with family" (Abel, 2018). Amidst fears over reduced quality of life, limited access to public services and public spaces, and social isolation (City of Toronto, 2019a), many argued more public green space was needed to support social cohesion and to knit "this ever-growing part of the city together" (Micaleff, 2021).

Policy and planning efforts had begun to address these issues. *Growing Up: Planning for Children in Vertical Communities* introduced urban design guidelines to better accommodate families in multi-family residential towers (City of Toronto, 2020b), and the City had begun developing new libraries, recreation centers, and schools in the area. But civic leaders and park advocates continued to voice concern over the inability of the park network to meet the needs of

this growing and diversifying neighborhood. This added to broader concerns across the city regarding aging park infrastructure, capital and operating budget strain, and growing demand for public space that far outweighed service levels. In newspaper coverage, it appeared Torontonians held low expectations for the public realm and a growing sense of frustration that much-needed park investments "might never get built" (Rider, 2022a).

Project: Under Gardiner responded to this context by proposing a series of public realm amenities that would serve the area's 70,000 residents and "knit together" the growing neighborhoods of Exhibition Place, Fort York, Bathurst Quay, Liberty Village, South Niagara, Wellington Place, and City Place, as illustrated in Figure 5.1, below (City of Toronto, 2015). According to donor Judy Matthews, imaginative urban design would address growing social problems in the neighborhood: "an explosion of people coming into vertical spaces downtown" means that "loneliness is a real problem. We want to create a space, but also nurture common ground" (Moore, 2015).



Figure 9 Map showing neighborhoods and population adjacent to the Project: Under Gardiner site as initially proposed in 2015. *Source: Project: Under Gardiner Stakeholder Advisory Committee Meeting (City of Toronto & Waterfront Toronto, 2016)*

Infrastructural opportunity: The Under Gardiner presented a solution to both ongoing neighborhood growth and change, and to the presence of intractable urban infrastructure. Completed in 1966, the F.G. Gardiner Expressway is a six-lane, 18 kilometer, controlled access highway that runs along Toronto's downtown waterfront and includes 6 kilometers of elevated roadway. The Expressway had long been a point of contention: metaphors like "dividing line" and "border" were often invoked throughout decades-long advocacy efforts to tear it down and reconnect the city with its waterfront. The Under Gardiner proposal was put forward just months after yet another highly politicized and publicized battle at City Hall over the future of the Gardiner, in which a proposed "Boulevard" option to ground the eastern portion was rejected in favor of a "Hybrid" option that would maintain most elevated portions of the highway. While this battle did not pertain to the specific section between Strachan and Spadina, it generated renewed public interest in the Expressway and ultimately confirmed that, however derided, the Gardiner would remain in place in Toronto's future.



Figure 10 (left) The "cathedral-like" space under the bents of the Gardiner near Fort York Boulevard crossing in February 2024. Photograph by author.

Figure 11 (right) The space under the Gardiner near Fort York Boulevard in July 2024. Photograph by author.

The Under Gardiner offered ameliorative measure, while accepting that the Expressway would remain. Rather than position the Gardiner as a relic of an industrial past that limited access to the waterfront and cut off relationships between neighborhoods, the proposal identified the expressway's latent potential as vibrant public space, drawing inspiration from other linear infrastructure reuse park projects, primarily in the U.S. Rather than advocate its tear down, the Under Gardiner would coordinate park construction with ongoing Gardiner rehabilitation efforts to "*leverage* City investments in the Gardiner Expressway, Fort York and nearby parks" (City of Toronto, 2015) (emphasis added). A 2016 presentation by the project's designers framed it as "the tip of the iceberg": a \$25 million investment in the public realm under the expressway on top of the estimated \$150 million public investment already made in completed, planned, and underway rehabilitation efforts between 2005 and 2018 (Greenberg Consultants & Public Work, 2016a). This fundamentally reframed the City's investment in the Gardiner's from a massive maintenance bill into a "once-in-a-generation investment" and an "unprecedented opportunity to rethink how this structure functions and for whom" (The Bentway Conservancy, 2023).

Policy alignment: The City had no preexisting plans to redevelop this space under the Gardiner; indeed, the space was not even designated as parkland in the City's Official Plan. However, the Under Gardiner proposal emphasized alignment with ongoing transportation, planning, economic development, and environmental policies, plans, and capital improvements initiatives in the area, as well as broader policy goals of both the City and Waterfront Toronto related to active transportation, neighborhood connectivity, and the public realm (City of Toronto, 2015, p. 1). Viewed as an opportunity to bring arts and culture programming downtown, the proposal also aligned with the Waterfront Culture and Heritage Infrastructure Plan's aim to create an east-west corridor connecting major cultural and entertainment

destinations along Toronto's waterfront (see Figure 5.4) (City of Toronto, 2015). Most importantly, the project was framed by the donors and City staff alike as an "innovative solution" to the urgent need for expanded parkland in the downtown in the midst of rapid population growth (City of Toronto, 2015, p. 7).

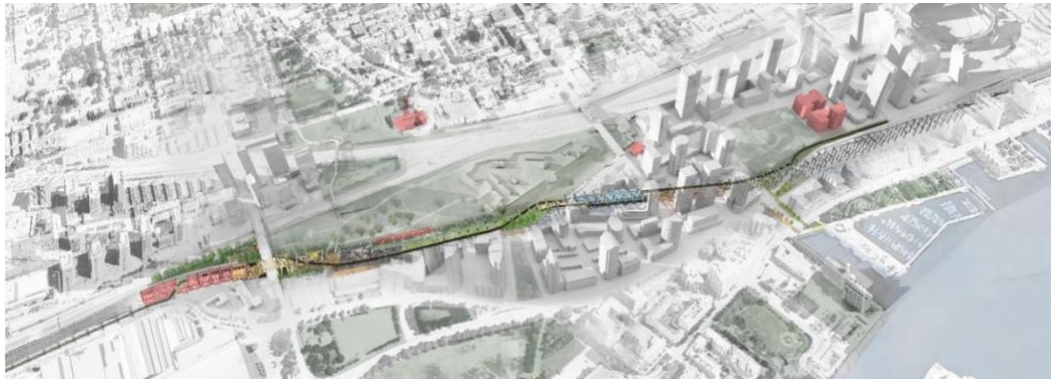


Figure 12 Plan view of Project: Under Gardiner site as initially proposed in 2015, extending further east and west. Source: *Project: Under Gardiner Backgrounder* (City of Toronto & Waterfront Toronto, 2015)

Design discourse: The initial proposal, as outlined in a December 2015 staff report to City Council authority, already contained professional renderings (see Figures 5.5 and 5.6) produced by Ken Greenberg (a long-time local urban planning and design consultant and former head of the City's Urban Design Division) and PUBLIC WORK (a small and much celebrated local landscape architecture and urban design firm) (City of Toronto & Waterfront Toronto, 2015). Under the 1.75 km stretch of the Gardiner between Strachan and Spadina Avenues, the expressway platform runs about 12 metres above ground level, with bents (concrete columns that support the roadway platform) creating a "cathedral-like vacant space" beneath (City of Toronto, 2015, p. 5). The donors proposed a "continuous, open, flexible space" for active transportation and community programming by converting the "rooms" beneath the bents into a series of spaces

for programs and activities. Renderings depicted a series of flexible programming spaces, a multi-use trail, a winter skating trail, and a "grand staircase" and amphitheater for year-round performances and events (City of Toronto & Waterfront Toronto, 2015).



Figure 13 Early rendering for Project: Under Gardiner, included in initial staff report to City Council. Source: *Private Donation to Animate the F.G. Gardiner Expressway from Approximately Strachan Avenue to Spadina Avenue* (City of Toronto, 2015)



Figure 14 Early rendering of the proposed Under Gardiner skating trail, distributed alongside initial project announcement. Source: *Project: Under Gardiner Introducing Toronto's Missing Link and Hidden Public Terrain* (Greenberg Consultants & Public Work, 2016)

The design emphasized the post-industrial beauty of the Expressway, positioning this massive structure as an opportunity, not a challenge (Waterfront Toronto, 2016e). The design team was quickly commended for its innovative approach, as illustrated in a 2015 newspaper article: "Rather than fighting the grim industrial shadow of the expressway, the Under Gardiner planners have accepted its presence. They want to turn a more than fifty-year-old barrier into a soaring roof, five storeys high and wider than a normal city street" (Moore, 2015).

The Under Gardiner foregrounded the capacity of creative urban design to transform post-industrial spaces and to shift understanding of the possibilities of infrastructure reuse in the growing city. Using urban design, the plan would offer a "focal point, meeting place, and architectural highlight" for the new neighborhood (Moore, 2015), ultimately "transforming the Gardiner from highway obstacle to hybrid opportunity, helping build a healthier, more connected, and more inspiring city" (The Bentway Conservancy, n.d.-b). Long before its completion, the Under Gardiner was already celebrated for spurring an "urban renaissance" in the "once-peripheral zone" surrounding the Gardiner that had in recent years become enveloped into Toronto's ever-growing downtown.

Rethinking parks: The Under Gardiner proposed a new way of thinking about parks who ought to make them. The City's inability to see the Gardiner as a civic jewel "hiding in plain sight" ("Massive Project Aims to Transform Space under Gardiner Expressway between Spadina and Strachan," 2016) and to turn this aging infrastructure into much-needed public space was framed as one of ineptitude, inefficiency, and a "culture of no" at City Hall (Hume, 2018). Advocates criticized the City for its extended timelines, overall incompetence, and corporate culture, unmotivated and unreceptive to big ideas and complex projects (Hume, 2015). This created a narrative in which ambitious, beautiful, and functional parks and public spaces were

impossible to achieve through existing public sector leadership. The Matthews and their design team responded to this perceived crisis of public space with a proposal to creatively "reclaim" and "revitalize" aging urban infrastructure and support community, culture, and recreation in the densifying city (Waterfront Toronto, n.d.-c). The project was a powerful symbol of urban ambition and optimism – described in newspaper coverage and interviews as "wildly ambitious", "innovative", "revolutionary", "game changer", and "visionary" – all made possible by innovative, civic-minded donors "willing to color outside the lines."

The Under Gardiner also interrupted conventional modes of park-making in its governance approach. The project established a collaborative model of philanthropic partnership in which the donors offered a pre-conceptualized project and the funding to match, directing not only the specific geography and design of the park, but also the approach to ongoing maintenance and programming (City of Toronto & Waterfront Toronto, 2015). The approach was inspired by other philanthropy-led collaborative governance and conservancy models for adaptive reuse projects, including notable U.S. examples, such as The High Line in New York and The 606 in Chicago. As a condition of the initial donation, the Matthews required a jurisdictional scan and plan for a governance and funding model to sustain the space's long-term programming, operations, and maintenance (City of Toronto, 2015, p. 9). The study, conducted by HR&A Advisors and Park People, included a review of local and international best practices, taking inspiration from the governance, programming, and maintenance approaches of other similar parks and green spaces. It pushed the City to consider the benefits of creating an independent nonprofit conservancy, charitable foundation, or BIA model to program and operate the future park (Waterfront Toronto, 2016b).

Rethinking philanthropy: Interview respondents and policy documents report that, traditionally, philanthropists in Toronto had been resistant to the idea of donating to parks and public realm projects, due to a belief that such amenities should be funded by the public sector, a comfort with traditional modes of giving to legacy institutions like universities, hospitals, and cultural institutions, and a hesitancy to work alongside public sector partners unversed in managing philanthropic donations. The Matthews' much publicized donation to Project: Under Gardiner made an important statement. At the time, it was one of the most significant donations in the City's history: the single donation eclipsed the total received by the City the previous year (City of Toronto, 2015, pp. 4–5). The gift was considered "extraordinary," with the "potential to deliver important city-building initiatives and create a profound legacy for all Torontonians" (City of Toronto, 2015, p. 4). From the project's outset, newspapers and City reports already referred to the donation as precedent-setting, not only in its ability to deliver a legacy public space for all Torontonians, but also to "inspire other Torontonians to make similar philanthropic contributions to city-building initiatives" (City of Toronto, 2015).

City building: The Under Gardiner proposed a philanthropy-led vision, design, governance, and funding structure uniquely capable of spurring a transformative adaptive reuse effort under the intractable Gardiner Expressway. News coverage lauded the project as an example "of what can be accomplished through public and private partnerships" (Connor, 2018), made possible through collaboration between the public sector and philanthropy. The project was understood to be successful precisely because the City *did not* lead it; as the former CEO of The Bentway proclaimed, "It's a project for the city, not by the city" (Ngabo, 2017). Leadership in the public realm was deemed to have "moved out of City Hall," and generous, innovative, and efficient civic-minded philanthropists were necessary to "[get] it done" and "[make] it happen."

As for the City, "the best thing it can do is stay out of the way" (Hume, 2018). Despite overt criticism of City culture and process, in several interviews public sector staff and elected officials emphasized their role in bridging political divides and departmental silos and "shepherding" donor-led projects through complex approvals processes. This suggests a somewhat contradictory role for the City: to at once stay out of the way of well-meaning donors, and also to usher projects through to completion.

The Matthews' \$25 million donation to both the design and capital development of The Bentway, and to the creation of a long-term governance and management structure to support its ongoing programming and operations, was framed as necessary to "unlock the potential" of underused urban infrastructure. By linking the donor's creativity and capital with the public sector's infrastructural expertise, the project would deliver an impact greater than the sum of its parts and "showcase a new model for city building for Toronto" (City of Toronto & Waterfront Toronto, 2015). With this project, the Matthews laid the groundwork for and a dramatic reorientation in the city's understanding of what parks are for, and who should make them.

The Meadoway

"The Meadoway will create a transformative public space in the heart of Scarborough that will connect our communities and draw visitors from across the city and beyond," [Mayor John] Tory said in a statement. "It is another example of what can be accomplished when we work with public, private and philanthropic partners to introduce innovative new public spaces for our residents to enjoy and which contribute to the ongoing vibrancy of our city." (Rider, 2018)

Several years later, at another press conference in April 2018, a group of elected officials, parks agency staff, and philanthropic donors again gathered to announce a major donation to transform underutilized urban infrastructure into a public green space: The Meadoway. Unlike

the Under Gardiner, the group did not make their announcement in the dense, park-deficient downtown, but in a very different type of aging infrastructural space: a grassy expanse below a hydroelectricity transmission corridor in the far reaches of Toronto's inner suburb, Scarborough.

Part of the "urban fringe" that represents something between the archetype of the central city and the new suburb (Keil & Young, 2009), Scarborough, like Toronto's downtown, has also experienced dramatic sociospatial change in recent decades, though in a markedly different direction. The traditional homeland of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, the area had remained largely rural until after the second World War, when it rapidly developed as a low-density, suburban enclave for middle-class, primarily white Torontonians seeking reprieve from the central city. In more recent decades, as Toronto's economy boomed and the downtown core, Scarborough had become a hub for new immigrants and working class people trying to get a foothold in the city. Scarborough's mid-century bungalows and apartment towers are now home to an astonishingly diverse population, and in its strip malls can be found some of the most exceptional cuisine from around the globe. While Scarborough hasn't experienced the same increase in population and density as Toronto's downtown, its park deficiency is expressed in other ways: many of its larger parks and recreational fields are built around an auto-centric urban form, and its ravines are disconnected from a cohesive network, making these green spaces relatively inaccessible, both spatially and socially, to Scarborough's increasingly diverse population (Biglieri & Keil, 2024). Meanwhile, Scarborough's wide arterial roads and winding cul-de-sacs do little to support local active transportation, leaving many disconnected from their neighborhoods and from the city as a whole.

The Meadoway Proposal, put forward by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) in partnership with the Weston Family Foundation and the City of Toronto, would

transform a 16 kilometer stretch of publicly-owned land under the Gatineau Hydro Corridor into a greenway for recreation and ecological protection through Scarborough (see Figure 5.7 for map). If fully realized, The Meadowway would become one of the largest urban linear greenspaces in Canada, at over 200 hectares (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2019a). The project's budget of \$85 million was to be funded in part by an initial \$25 million donation from the Weston Family Foundation, a large, nation-wide philanthropic foundation with a long history of supporting human and environmental health through projects related to parks, sustainability, and ecosystem conservation (Weston Family Foundation, n.d.). The remainder would be funded by the City of Toronto, which manages the existing trails and parks along the corridor, and the TRCA, which manages most of the land and the ravine connections.



Figure 15 Map of The Meadowway project, by Toronto and Region Conservation Authority. Source: *The Meadowway online* (The Meadowway, n.d.-a)

Problem framing - Complex jurisdiction: Much like Project: Under Gardiner, the site was a patchwork of complex ownership and public jurisdiction. The Gatineau Hydro corridor spans 16 kilometers from the Don River on the east side of Downtown Toronto to Rouge National Park at the far eastern edge of Scarborough, atop provincially-owned lands, owned by Infrastructure Ontario (the Provincial Crown agency that builds and manages public infrastructure projects) and managed by Hydro One (the electricity transmission and distribution provider and former Crown corporation) (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2024b).

The corridor crosses many TRCA-owned floodplains and protected ravines, managed by the City of Toronto, and abuts or intersects with many right-of-ways and public and private parcels, including parks, commercial, industrial, and residential uses (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2019c). Because of its continued use for electricity transmission, the space was not officially designated as parkland, but some areas within the corridor already featured public-oriented uses, including community gardens and stretches of walking and cycling trails.

Since the early 1920s, the Hydro Corridor had transmitted electricity from the Ottawa River to the city, forming a linear expanse that stretched from Toronto's downtown and across Scarborough. As the city grew and densified, the land beneath the transmission towers remained some of the last open space in the Greater Toronto Area (see Figure 5.8) (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2019c). There are over 500 kilometers of similar hydroelectric transmission corridors in the region, under which most of the land consists of thick, non-native grasses that are mown several times a year, severely limiting the biodiversity, ecological and hydrological function, and aesthetic appeal of these vast spaces (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2019b).



Figure 16 A mown grass expanse of the Gattineau Hydro Corridor in July 2024. Prior to The Meadoway project, the full corridor featured mown grass. Photograph by author.

Infrastructural opportunity: While dramatically different, aesthetically, than the Gardiner Expressway, the Gattineau Hydro Corridor had similarly become a "barren" infrastructural barrier constricting community, connectivity, and access to greenspace in Scarborough (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2024b). The complex ownership and management structure had thwarted creative activation, and its continued use for electricity transmission imposed strict limitations on allowable uses, structures, and plantings so as to not interfere with the overhead wires. The corridor was a natural backyard for many nearby residents, some of whom already used the space for walking dogs or as an informal extension of their private vegetable gardens, but overall, many understood the space to be "underutilized" and

"degraded," and an opportunity hiding in plain sight (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2024b; Weston Family Foundation, 2024).



Figure 17 (left) Mown grass below the hydroelectric towers in The Meadowway, June 2024. Photograph by author.

Figure 18 (right) A connection to a trail along The Meadowway, February 2024. Photograph by author.

The Meadowway proposed to revitalize what had been primarily mown grass beneath the hydro corridor into a thriving native meadow habitat to support ecological benefit and biodiversity, while also providing a continuous multi-use trail network to connect Scarborough's significant low-income and new immigrant population to a network of 15 new and existing public parks, four ravines, 34 neighborhoods, and many schools and businesses (The Meadowway, n.d.-c; Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2024b).

Policy alignment: The Meadowway made important connections, both literally and metaphorically, to municipal, regional, and province-wide public infrastructure plans related to active transportation, climate change, and green space, including Toronto's Cycling Network 10

Year Plan, the TransformTO Climate Action Strategy, and the Toronto Ravine Strategy. TRCA's Trail Strategy, launched in 2019, set out goals to collaborate with intergovernmental and nonprofit partners to expand the region's trail network and greenspace system, including by developing active transportation greenways along infrastructure corridors (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2019d, p. iv). Meanwhile, the City's 2017 Toronto Ravine Strategy put forward plans to collaborate with the TRCA and Indigenous stakeholders, private landowners, and nonprofits on capital and operating partnerships throughout the ravine system (City of Toronto, 2020c). Together, this created a policy context in which a project like The Meadowway could be understood as both a new and innovative idea and also a natural extension of previous efforts and investments in active transportation, parks, and environmental infrastructure.

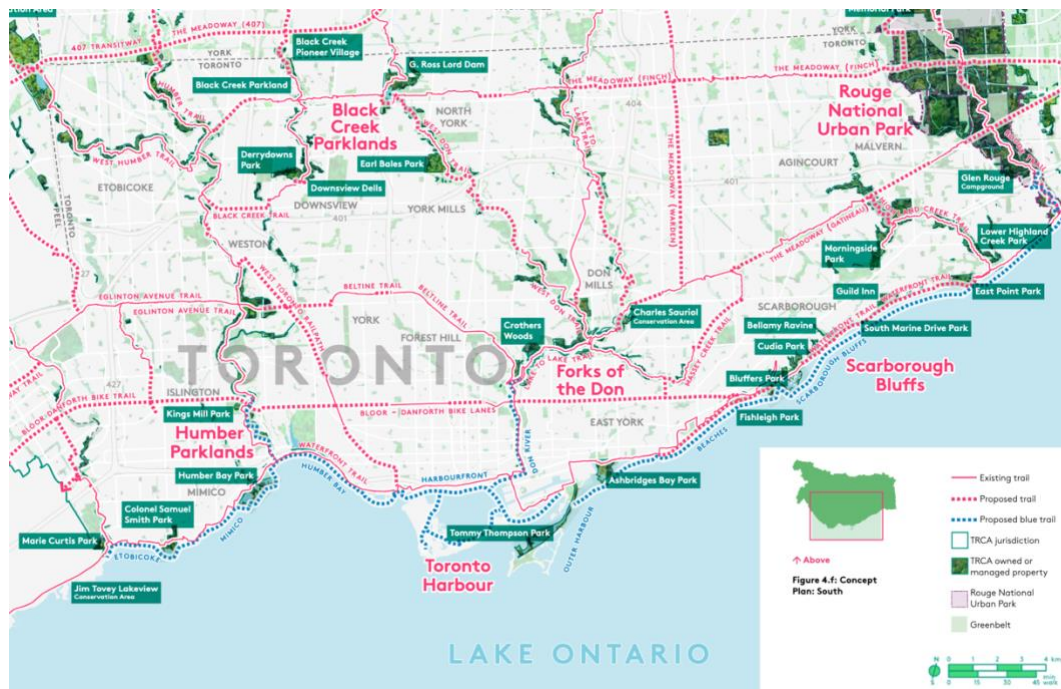


Figure 19 TRCA's proposed trails, including an extension of The Meadowway throughout the Gatineau and Finch Hydro Corridors and along the 407 Transitway. Source: *Trail Strategy for the Greater Toronto Region* (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2019d)

The Meadowway proposal was also supported by timely research and advocacy. Park People's *Making Connections* report explored creative solutions to expand a well-connected park system amidst growth pressures, advocating for linking diverse open spaces into networks, creating new parks in overlooked infrastructural spaces, and focusing on linear infrastructure reuse parks as a means to enhance access (Park People, 2015). The report argued for expanding collaboration and empowering communities by pooling funding between government agencies and nonprofits and by facilitating partnership and participation in park planning and programming.

Facing increased population growth, the TRCA was tasked with expanding its portfolio of green space to meet community and ecological needs, and this required thinking creatively about where and how to support social, ecological, and health benefits (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2018a). With relatively simple changes, The Meadowway proposed to transform an existing infrastructural corridor into "one of the most innovative meadow restoration and outreach projects in Canada" (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2022b).

Design discourse: As new thinking about the social and environmental value of urban greenspace, ravines, and trails had been taking hold in the region, The Meadowway's design approach was framed primarily in terms of the ecological benefit offered by increased biodiversity and native meadow habitat, and the social benefit and connectivity offered by improved active transportation links. The multi-use trail would provide a safe, continuous connection between Scarborough and the downtown, as well as 200 hectares of rich native meadow habitat for over one thousand species of flora and fauna. As TRCA materials stated,

"this initiative connects communities and revitalizes our city's landscape and how we navigate it" (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2024a).

Ecological benefit, biodiversity, and climate resilience were core to the project's purpose and visioning. As an explicit response to the ongoing impacts of climate change, urban growth, and expanding agriculture, The Meadowway would re-naturalize and re-connect a network of ravines, waterways. By restoring a meadow habitat, the project would deliver a vibrant landscape that would support ecosystem resilience; provide habitat for pollinator species, migratory birds, and native plants and animals; improve water infiltration and reduce soil erosion and compaction; reduce maintenance costs and emissions; and improve air filtration to reduce pollution, in addition to the many social and health benefits for users (see Figure 5.12) (The Meadowway, n.d.-a). The Meadowway was more than its aesthetic or recreational value as a park space: it was a nature-based solution to support the region's biodiversity and climate adaptation.

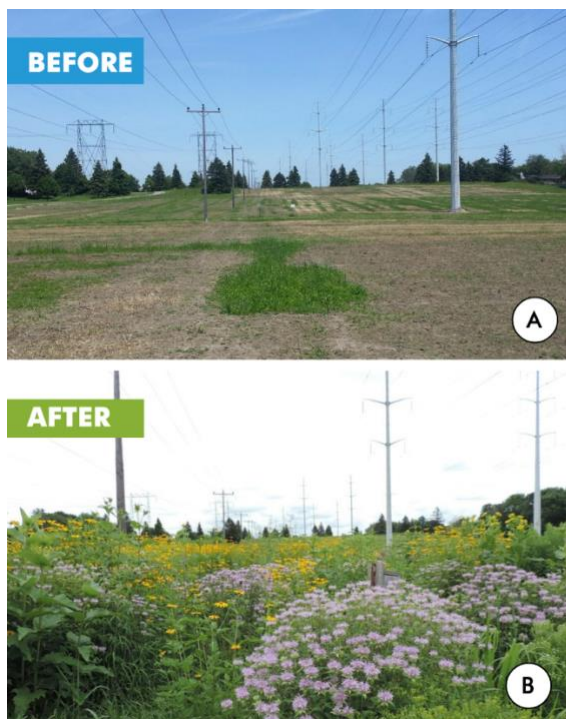


Figure 20 Scarborough Centre Butterfly Trail before and after meadow restoration. Source: *Meadowway Manual: A Blueprint for Naturalizing Infrastructure Corridors* (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2022b)

Rethinking parks: The Meadoway was framed as an "ecological based community-building project" (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2024b) that "restores biodiversity, connects people to nature, and creates a more livable and vibrant community" (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2024b). Early materials emphasized the project's ability to link not only neighborhoods, employment areas, transit hubs, and parks (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2022a), but also to build "meaningful community engagement and educational opportunities that will facilitate an increased sense of community pride and ownership of this important natural connection" (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2022a). This would be achieved by reframing infrastructure corridors as part of the region's ravine and greenspace system: able to support connections between green spaces, expand the overall amount of green space, and enhance ecological function alongside community benefit in the growing city, as exemplified by this quote from the donor featured in a newspaper article about the project:

“As Canada’s cities continue to grow, we need to develop smarter ways to bring nature back into our neighbourhoods and our lives,” said Tamara Rebanks, Chair of the Conservation Committee, Weston Family Foundation. “The Meadoway will be a catalyst for building a new kind of city park for Canada” (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2018b).

Rethinking philanthropy: Advancing the ecological and social benefits of urban infrastructural spaces required new partnerships between multiple orders of government, communities, and philanthropists (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2018a). The Under Gardiner project had been credited for inspiring renewed interest in "city building" initiatives amongst Toronto's philanthropic community (Rider, 2022a) and for showing what could be accomplished in urban parks through philanthropic partnerships. In the case of The Meadoway, the donor – The Weston Family Foundation – had for years been interested in habitat

conservation and ecological restoration, which naturally led to an interest in the role of urban greenspaces in advancing both environmental and social benefit, simultaneously, as described in an interview by a director of the Weston Family Foundation:

We realized that if we wanted Canadians to appreciate protecting wild spaces, we needed to also fund some urban spaces where most people had their first contact with nature. We also realized quickly how expensive it was to protect land in urban centers because of the price tag...so we quickly realized that if we did want to protect and restore land, it had to be through public spaces.

The Meadoway was both "a ground-breaking initiative," and, at the same time, a rather simple and light-touch effort to restore habitat and reconnect green space and trails along an existing infrastructural corridor (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2024b). The plans for the project were rather simple (though not easy): revitalize the meadow habitat, connect a continuous trail network, and deliver public and educational programming to link communities with nature and with one another. But given the lack of public resources for public space and environmental infrastructure, the Westons' initial donation was critical to advancing plans for The Meadoway in the context of a scarce public budget and limited resources to support its capital development (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2018b). While the concept for the Meadoway evolved over nearly a decade of local efforts led by the TRCA and the community, the narrative surrounding its eventual expansion emphasizes that a project of this scale, connecting diverse partners around complex sites with complex ownership and management structures, would not have been possible without an initial injection of private capital to "grease the wheel."

City building: Like the Under Gardiner, The Meadoway was framed from the project's outset as an important inspiration for future projects, in Toronto and in other cities; a TRCA press release stated, "This transformative initiative sets the stage for other cities to embrace a

nature-inspired infrastructure, and we envision The Meadoway becoming the blueprint for a greener future" (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2024b). This was particularly the case along the thousands of kilometers of infrastructure corridors maintained by government agencies in Toronto and across Ontario, which are typically planted with mown grass and other non-native species that offer little by way of biodiversity and ecosystem services. The Meadoway's meadow restoration and re-naturalization was touted as a "A Blueprint for Naturalizing Infrastructure Corridors" to promote habitat and increase biodiversity, connect people to nature, and provide active transportation options (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2022b), while its collaborative governance model was touted as critical to its success. Together, the design approach and funding approach were seen as a model for other such city building initiatives:

This transformative initiative sets the stage for other cities to embrace a nature-inspired infrastructure, and we envision The Meadoway becoming the blueprint for a greener future. We look forward to continued collaboration with our partners, and encourage others to join in and support the revitalization of one of Ontario's most cherished urban natural features. (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2023b)

As the second significant donor-led urban park project of this scale in Toronto, building on the success of The Under Gardiner, The Meadoway signaled a shift in public opinion and in the philanthropic sector: Torontonians appeared to be more receptive to the participation of private actors in public space development, while local donors appeared more open to new possibilities and broader impacts for their philanthropy in the public realm.

The Lassonde Art Trail

“I want to thank the Lassonde family for this generous donation to our city’s waterfront and for providing funding that will help us continue our vision for an accessible, beautiful and unique waterfront,” says Mayor John Tory. “A new waterfront public art trail will not only attract residents and visitors to Toronto’s waterfront but provide an opportunity for people to experience art and much more for free.” (Waterfront Toronto, 2022b)

At a third press conference, in June 2022, Toronto Mayor John Tory, several City Council Members, Waterfront Toronto Chair Stephen Diamond, and members of the Lassonde Family gathered on the waterfront to announce another major philanthropic donation to a new public realm project: The Art Trail². In contrast to The Under Gardiner and The Meadoway, The Art Trail would not establish a new urban greenspace. Indeed, plans for a significant series of waterfront parks had been in development for decades, as part of Waterfront Toronto's massive, multi-decade project to transform the Port Lands. Located on the eastern portion of Toronto's downtown waterfront, where the Don River meets Lake Ontario, the Port Lands comprise a 400-hectare former industrial site, primarily owned by Waterfront Toronto, the tripartite government agency responsible for redeveloping Toronto's waterfront. Following years of advocacy and planning, the multi-billion dollar project began in 2016, with funding from the Government of Canada, Province of Ontario, and City of Toronto. Waterfront Toronto was the agency responsible for planning and constructing the project and public infrastructure, which is to be handed over to the City of Toronto after completion. By early 2026, four new bridges, new

² When initially announced, The Lassonde Art Trail was commonly referred to as The Art Trail. Throughout this dissertation, I use both names as contextually appropriate.

water, sanitary, and stormwater infrastructure, several new right-of-ways, a flood protection landform, the new Don River, and the eastern portion of Biidaasige Park valley were completed, opened, and handed over to the City. In summer 2026, Waterfront Toronto completed and transferred ownership of the remaining portion of Biidaasige Park (which opened to the public in summer 2026), several new bridges and right-of-ways, and new storm and sanitary infrastructure (City of Toronto, 2026a).

The Pierre Lassonde Family Foundation proposed a new series of public artworks and related programming to be layered onto the future park space. Planned to complement the 16-hectare expanse of new waterfront parks on the island of Ookwemin Minising, a central zone in the Port Lands redevelopment, The Art Trail would introduce a free, open-air public art trail. Along a path weaving through the parks, the Trail would site a rotating selection of temporary outdoor artworks, curated and managed by a new nonprofit organization.

The Lassonde's \$25 million donation was the "single largest arts-related gift the City has ever received" (Murphy, 2022), and "the largest gift offered to the City since the development of The Bentway [Under Gardiner]" (City of Toronto, 2022a). The Foundation had previously donated to projects at the intersection of art, community, and education, but The Art Trail marked the Lassondes' first foray into public space (City of Toronto, 2022a). Distinct from the other donor-funded parks, funds were dedicated entirely to operations and programming, not capital: the Lassondes earmarked \$10 million to commission and purchase two new permanent artworks to anchor the trail. The remaining \$15 million would establish a new nonprofit organization, The Art Trail Foundation, to manage the space in perpetuity, curating temporary installations, performances, and programming by international and local artists, and fundraising to sustain the initiative into the future (Waterfront Toronto, 2022c).

Problem framing - Making a new neighborhood: While similarly addressing the challenges of population growth and intractable urban infrastructure, The Art Trail primarily responded to the challenge of imbuing a "new" neighborhood with a sense of place, history, and connection to culture and landscape. Toronto's waterfront had been significantly reshaped over the past century, channelizing the mouth of the Don River, hardening the water's edge, and introducing industrial uses. The Port Lands redevelopment was a major step in this evolution; the plans would "bring back the Don" with a naturalized river mouth, a series of connected wetlands and flood protection features, and naturalized banks along the river and waterfront that would allow residents to reconnect with the waterfront. Waterfront Toronto was responsible for the soil remediation, earth works, and hydrological engineering that would lay the foundation for future development. But while public servicing and infrastructure would make mixed-use development in the Port Lands possible, alone it would be insufficient to ensure the social, cultural, and economic vitality of this new neighborhood.

The Art Trail would introduce arts and culture programming to a brand new public space in a brand new neighborhood. It would set the stage for the community yet to come, attracting residents, employers, and visitors to the Port Lands. Waterfront Toronto was developing a new series of public spaces along the mouth of the Don River and forging connections to Toronto's existing park network. The Art Trail would use these spaces as a platform for public art, and in doing so, bring the parks to life (Waterfront Toronto, 2022c). As Herb Sweeney, Principal with Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates and a project landscape architect for the Port Lands stated in an interview:

It's a "build it and they will come" type of approach, so the parks will be in place before any adjacent neighborhoods and developments are constructed. So there's a great opportunity for this to help provide experiences that the city just hasn't had in the

downtown area and, going back to the original goal of The Art Trail, making it accessible to all. There's some fantastic opportunities with the location and where it sits, being on the terminating end of the waterfront, being at the intersection of where the Don Valley system brings nature back down to the water. The park itself has an amazing opportunity to make a lot of connections that were lost, and to do it for as many people as possible. (H. Sweeney, personal communication, July 10, 2024)

On a site that had been so distanced from its social and environmental history through successive waves of urban development, public art was viewed as an ideal solution to reconnect the Port Lands with local ecologies and communities. Permanent and temporary artworks would celebrate the Port Land's layered social and ecological history, reflect Toronto's diversity, celebrate Indigenous presence on the waterfront, and elevate environmental and climate issues (City of Toronto, 2022a). The Art Trail would become a landmark in the new neighborhood, supporting a regional destination and an everyday park space and imbuing the Port Lands with a sense of place and identity (City of Toronto, 2022c).

Infrastructural opportunity: The Port Lands Flood Protection project is an ambitious, multi-billion dollar, multi-decade urban regeneration effort to flood protect over 240 hectares of lands along Toronto's eastern waterfront at the mouth of the Don River. A central component of Waterfront Toronto's ongoing revitalization efforts, the project integrates flood protection and soil remediation, ecological restoration, and industrial heritage preservation, with the goal to protect Toronto's downtown from flooding, recreate waterfront habitat, and facilitate future development (City of Toronto, 2023b, p. 2). In keeping with Waterfront Toronto's "lead with landscape" approach, the project introduces new public infrastructure and parks to lay the foundation for the privately-directed, mixed-use development that will follow.

The Port Lands Flood Protection Plan is an astonishing feat of public sector perseverance and planning. The scale of the project was unprecedented, both geographically and temporally,

and because of this complexity, it is considered "a bit of a sleeping giant" (H. Sweeney, personal communication, July 10, 2024): its future impact as a public amenity and its importance at a global scale are difficult to comprehend. The Art Trail offered a more tangible vision, as illustrated in the artistic renderings released alongside the project announcement (see Figures 5.13 and 5.14). It would leverage the public sector's existing investment in a new network of parks and public realm infrastructure by adding an innovative layer of public art and related programming. Layering on a high-profile public art initiative would make good use of the existing public investment, and also make the project itself more public.



Figure 21 Rendering of The Art Trail in the Port Lands, released with the initial project announcement. Source: *Visionary \$25-million gift to create new public art trail on Toronto's waterfront* (Waterfront Toronto, 2022c)



Figure 22 Rendering of The Art Trail in a future park, released with the initial project announcement. Source: *Visionary \$25-million gift to create new public art trail on Toronto's waterfront* (Waterfront Toronto, 2022c)

Policy alignment: From its inception, The Art Trail was framed as both an exciting new gift to the city and a natural extension of ongoing policy and planning efforts. The 2017 Port Lands Planning Framework, jointly produced by the City and Waterfront Toronto, outlined a strategy for Villiers Island that positioned public art as central to the area's future transformation into a creative district with a high quality public realm (see Figure 5.15). The Framework identified opportunities for installations and events by local arts and cultural organizations, including permanent artworks that would highlight unique natural and heritage features and contribute to the area's identity and temporary works that could be more responsive to global trends. The Framework proposed alternative funding courses and partnerships, including philanthropy, to deliver this vision (City of Toronto & Waterfront Toronto, 2017). Later, in 2021, as part of Waterfront Toronto's effort to develop distinct precincts along the waterfront, the agency created the Villiers Island and Keating West Public Art Master Plan, outlining more specific plans for "an art trail that will wrap around the southern edge of future Villiers Island, functioning as a free, accessible outdoor exhibition space with works by local, national and international artists" (Waterfront Toronto, 2022a, p. 31, 2024a).



Figure 23 Existing and future conditions for parks and public realm on Villiers Island, as featured in the Villiers Island Precinct Plan. Source: *Port Lands Planning Framework* (City of Toronto & Waterfront Toronto, 2017)

The Art Trail also aligned with city-wide efforts to expand the impact of public art. The Toronto Public Art Strategy emphasized the importance of commissioning new destination public art works as well as temporary works to more nimbly respond to contemporary issues (City of Toronto, 2019b). The Plan also supported creative collaboration with partners, including by seeking philanthropic donations to support underserved areas and by establishing independent nonprofit organizations to commission artworks and deliver innovative programming, inspired by New York City's Public Art Fund (City of Toronto, 2019c, p. 3).

Design discourse: As is the case in all its projects, Waterfront Toronto was tasked with planning and delivering the new parks throughout the Port Lands, to prepare the site for future development. After completion, ownership of the infrastructure, including parks, would be turned over to the City of Toronto, and the Parks, Forestry, and Recreation division would be responsible for ongoing maintenance (City of Toronto, 2022a). This meant that Waterfront Toronto, which had established a strong reputation for urban design excellence in its projects, would lead the procurement, design, and construction of the new Port Lands parks, including the site of what would become The Art Trail. The Art Trail was just one small part of the massive, \$1.25 billion Port Lands project. Under the leadership of Waterfront Toronto, the parks and public realm assets throughout the Port Lands were designed by New York-based landscape architects Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, whose design centers waterfront culture and heritage in revitalization.



Figure 24 The Port Lands during construction, looking west toward the downtown core, July 2024. Photograph by author.

While the design for Villiers Island's Promontory Park and River Park was highly complex, creating a naturalized "green and blue loop" that would showcase the site's natural, cultural, and industrial heritage, build strong connections to the water, and emphasize sustainability (Waterfront Toronto & City of Toronto, 2017), the design for The Art Trail was relatively simple, referred to as a "layer" on top of the already rich design and landscaping of the parks. The Art Trail required that necessary utilities and flexible electrical and digital infrastructure be integrated into the design of the park, to accommodate a range of permanent and temporary artworks and to open opportunities for artists and programmers to make use of the space. The Art Trail Foundation worked closely with the project landscape architects to identify locations where electrical plugins, water plugins, tie downs, and other features would best serve the art and the visitors. While the new Art Trail Foundation would be responsible for selecting

permanent artworks and programming the space, the City of Toronto would be responsible for the ongoing maintenance of the park lands, requiring simple, durable, and easy to maintain features to support the artworks.

Rethinking parks: The Art Trail expands the idea of what parks can be and do by delivering an unprecedented investment in arts and cultural programming, rather than capital development and design. This emphasis on cultural programming in an infrastructure reuse park is, in part, a response to growing awareness of public art initiatives in other public spaces; the policymakers who envisioned a public art trail in the Port Lands drew inspiration from international precedents including The High Line, Jupiter Artland, and Yorkshire Sculpture park.

In the case of The Art Trail, the public sector was not framed as incapable or ill-equipped to envision such a forward-thinking park project. Indeed, Waterfront Toronto developed the concept and planning framework for a waterfront public art trail, and is widely regarded as a leader in innovative public realm development and urban design excellence. Similarly, the City of Toronto was thought to be well-equipped to maintain the new parks. However, interviews suggest that many (including public sector staff and elected officials themselves) believed the public sector lacked the sustained resources and curatorial expertise necessary to manage such a complex "layer of programming" in the long term. Philanthropic and nonprofit partners were framed as more nimble, flexible, and uniquely positioned to deliver temporary and permanent arts and cultural programming at key locations throughout the park (see Figure 5.17), and therefore strong collaborators. Interview respondents and Waterfront Toronto policy documents suggest that Art Trail's impact is to rethink what it means to go "above and beyond" the base design and programming of a public park, and to enhance public realm projects by emphasizing new programming possibilities (Waterfront Toronto, 2023).

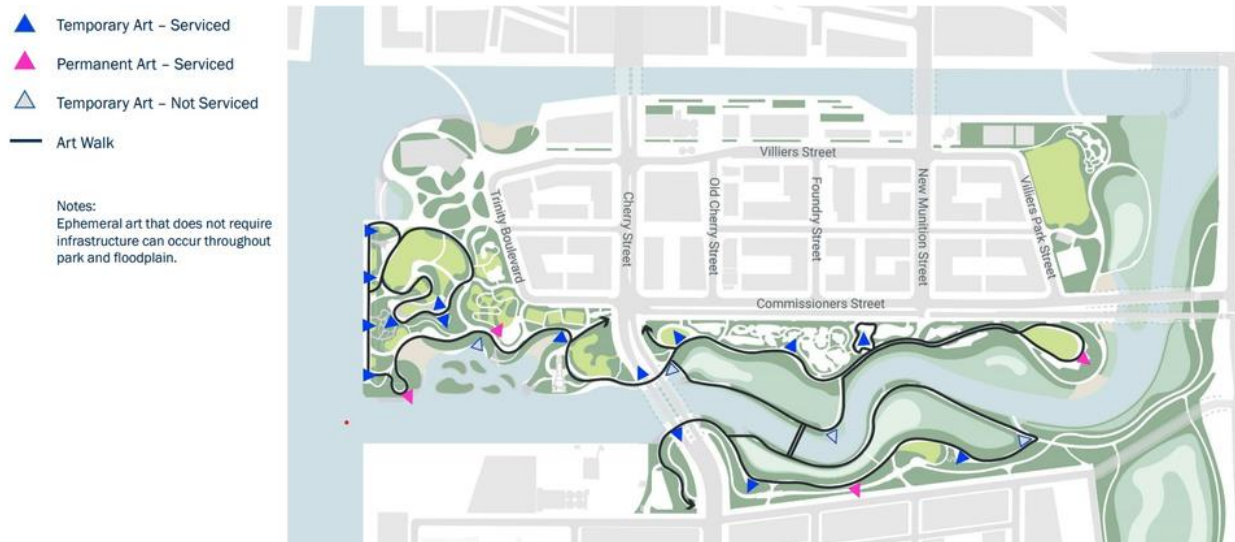


Figure 25 Concept map for The Art Trail showing pathways and locations of permanent and temporary artworks. Source: Visionary \$25-million gift to create new public art trail on Toronto's waterfront (Waterfront Toronto, 2022c)

Rethinking philanthropy: The Art Trail marks a shift in discourses about philanthropy in Toronto: away from the public sector as responsive to donations, and toward public-led efforts to actively seek philanthropic partners to deliver public parks. This repositions philanthropy as the ideal solution for funding and delivering *programming*, specifically, in high-profile park spaces.

Waterfront Toronto celebrates its own success in integrating philanthropy into its existing public realm and park planning efforts, touting the agency's "growing record of innovating to add even more value - engaging philanthropists to fund public realm projects and generating revenue through the commercial use of waterfront lands in transition" (Waterfront Toronto, 2022a, p. 63). A philanthropic partner is not required to *develop* the park, but to *animate* it, and in doing so, make critical connections to community, infrastructure, and environment to solidify the park's place in the local imagination. The Art Trail introduced a unique model for philanthropy-led *programming* that uses existing public parks as a "platform" for activation, distinguishing the

project from other sculpture parks in its governance model and its ability to host rotating, temporary artworks: an ever-changing space with "natural appeal" to philanthropists.

City building: While an outdoor art trail had been envisioned in the Port Lands for years, and integrated into many related policies and plans, the \$25 million donation from the Lassondes was credited with bringing the idea "to life with with programming and activations to engage residents and visitors" (City of Toronto, 2022a). The project promised to deliver broad community benefits to both locals and visitors, ultimately expanding the positive impact of the existing public investment in the Port Lands public realm network.

The Art Trail repositions the role of donors in public realm projects. Representatives from the City of Toronto and Waterfront Toronto hope the project will inspire civic-minded donors to partner with under-funded public projects in Canadian cities, shifting from critique of local government to collaboration. In an interview, Waterfront Toronto President and CEO George Zegarac and Chief Planning and Design Officer Chris Glaisek expressed optimism that successful philanthropy-led park projects like The Art Trail would inspire a culture of philanthropy around major public-led infrastructure investments in the future.

The donors echo this repositioning of the urban public realm as an opportunity to expand the impact of philanthropy. As donor Pierre Lassonde was quoted in the initial press release for the project, "If one wishes to have a profound and lasting impact on the wellbeing and happiness of Torontonians, the waterfront offers a multitude of philanthropic opportunities" (Waterfront Toronto, 2022b).

Analysis

Discursive space: Leading voices and coalitions of interest

The discursive space afforded to different urban actors in policy dialogues and media is both a reflection of and contributor to social power (van Dijk, 1993). Analyzing the "hierarchy of leading voices" (Mullenbach, 2022) can reveal who holds power in discourse to influence and shape public opinion about philanthropy-led parks. In the case of the three parks, coalitions of supportive actors, including nonprofit park organization staff, elected officials and public sector staff, and advocates from outside organizations, accounted for nearly all direct quotations featured in media coverage of the three park projects, thereby significantly shaping the discourse around philanthropy-led park making. Park organization representatives, including designers and conservancy staff working directly to propose, develop, or manage the projects, were often considered official sources in news coverage. Together with donors, park organization representatives have considerable power and media standing to mobilize "official" narratives of philanthropy-led park production, the problems to which it responds, and the solutions it offers. Disseminating messaging in press releases and press conferences, elected officials use these projects to demonstrate their strong record of public impact by advancing ambitious "city building" park projects as a response to the challenges posed by conventional planning pathways. Similarly, senior public agency staff promote these projects as evidence of their ability to introduce new, transformative public realm projects with broad public benefits.

Local media have considerable ability to shape public perceptions of urban spatial conflicts (Roth & Vander Haar, 2006), and may act as boosters by promoting uncritical portrayals of park projects (Loughran, 2014; Mullenbach et al., 2021), while ignoring potential or realized inequities. Overall, media coverage of the three parks was overwhelmingly positive,

nearly always presenting a positive or neutral portrayal of the projects, and reflecting the official narratives of coalitions of donors, park organization representatives, and elected officials directly. The near absence of critical narratives in media coverage, in combination with the limited representation of actors unaffiliated with the projects, suggests there is little discursive space for dissent regarding philanthropy-led park production in Toronto.

Narratives: Framing the problem of parks

With privileged access to newspaper coverage and the ability to share messages widely, these supportive coalitions have considerable power to shape public understanding of park policy issues and to gain support for desired solutions (Roth & Vander Haar, 2006). Through policy and public discourse, the dominant voices of donors and their coalitions develop and mobilize popular ideas about the need for, function of, and expected impacts of philanthropic engagement in park production. Toronto's park crisis is largely framed as a product of budget strain, rapid growth, and public sector ineffectiveness.

Post-amalgamation urban environmental governance changes resulted in diminished park budgets and local control, creating a "crisis in maintaining public space" in the city (Harvey, 2010). Today, the City continues to struggle with financial pressures as capital and operating budgets remain insufficient to meet park needs across the city, leading to insufficient staffing levels and delayed park planning and projects (Park People, 2024). Amidst limited revenue generating capacity, Toronto must also contend with aging park infrastructure and growing demand for parks that far outweighs public service levels. A growing and diversifying population, particularly downtown, further fuels fears over social disconnection spurred by limited park access. The neglected state of Toronto's parks, combined with the pressures of rapid population growth and widespread acknowledgement of the need for great parks to support urban

livability, frames a city in need of rapid, creative responses to create more - and different - green space.

At the same time, parks are widely understood to offer a diverse range of benefits for health, climate resiliency, ecological diversity, and social inclusion. Policy documents and public relations materials produced for all three parks emphasize the ability of these projects to support a range of City priorities established in wide-ranging policy documents, including active transportation and connectivity, public art and cultural vitality, ecological benefit and climate resilience, public health and wellbeing, and social inclusion and engagement. Throughout policy documents and interviews, respondents emphasized the increasing importance of parks as social infrastructure, as economic drivers, and as a key piece of the city building puzzle. In the context of rapid population growth and change, urban green space is understood as central to maintaining Toronto's status as a global city.

However, dominant narratives position the public sector as slow, ineffective, and ill-equipped to address the urgent need for public green space in the growing city and to foster parks' diverse benefits. The assertion that, as parks become increasingly vital and also increasingly complex, their provision is above and beyond public sector capacity is circulated through global policy networks, including park professional associations like the City Parks Alliance and the Trust for Public Land, as well as peer-to-peer networks like The High Line Network. A report on urban park conservancies produced by the Trust for Public Land argues that, as developing and operating urban parks becomes increasingly complex, meaningful solutions have eluded municipal governments, so nonprofit partners are emerging to meet the challenges (Harnik & Martin, 2015).

Here, opportunities to create more connected, integrated, and creative green spaces to serve a growing and diversifying population are to be found in unlikely places. Publicly-owned spaces underneath and above infrastructure, largely understood to be obsolete, underutilized, or intractable, have typically been seen as barriers, both physically and psychologically, that prevent much-needed green space expansion and social connection. But as powerful international examples of successful infrastructure reuse, parks are mobilized through policy networks. As local advocates research and test new approaches to creating and connecting green spaces through infrastructure corridors, these spaces are reframed: from intractable to opportunity spaces.

The complexity of these promising infrastructure reuse projects, and the diminishing public budget and public sector capacity, means the problem of parks is viewed as being fundamentally above and beyond public sector capacity. In interviews, some policy actors in Toronto suggested that the dire condition of Toronto's parks and the City's inability to address needs presents a powerful narrative to spark civil society action.

Narratives: Positioning philanthropy as the solution

Dominant narratives frame Toronto's park crisis as the product of an inefficient, ineffective, and under-resourced bureaucracy, unable to meet the needs of a growing city. In response, powerful actors interested in parks - including philanthropists, park advocates, and elected officials - introduce their desired solutions as logical, desirable, and even natural (Sharp & Richardson, 2001). These leading voices put forward nature- and culture-focused urban infrastructure reuse projects as the ideal built environment response to green space inequities in Toronto, and civic-minded philanthropy working in partnership with a more nimble and receptive public realm as the ideal governance model. Positioning collaborative governance as

the solution to Toronto's park crisis constitutes a rethinking of both park design and park governance; of infrastructure and philanthropy.

Responding to the perceived crisis of public space, donors, designers, and supportive public officials propose new urban design approaches to "reclaim" and "revitalize" aging and underutilized urban infrastructure. Policy and design documents, promotional materials, and media coverage portray these adaptive reuse projects as symbols of urban ambition and optimism, using descriptors including "wildly ambitious", "innovative", "revolutionary", "game changer", and "visionary." High-profile infrastructure reuse projects in other cities, including the High Line in New York City and the Cheonggyecheon River in Seoul, are often invoked by Torontonians as inspiration (Waterfront Toronto, 2015b). These parks have sparked international trends in the development, design, and use of urban parks (J. J. Foster, 2023), in which post-industrial cities seek to aesthetize landscapes of decline and advance new city-nature hybridities (Loughran, 2016); their omnipresence in Toronto-based news on parks highlights the global mobility of these urban environmental policy ideas (Goh, 2021; Peck & Theodore, 2012). As international parks like The High Line set a new standard for park design, maintenance, and governance, this has reshaped local ideas about what a park should be. Rather than spaces of recreation, parks are framed as platforms for social integration, cultural engagement, ecological protection. Rather than barriers to be mitigated, underutilized infrastructure is framed as an opportunity hiding in plain sight. Creative design, together with creative programming, can help to realize the full social, economic, and environmental benefits of green space.

Expanding the idea of what constitutes a park and how more connected, creative public spaces can serve the "triple bottom line" of sustainability goals, requiring more nimble experimentation to test new ideas, processes, and governance approaches to manage public

spaces. Here, global examples of donor-led infrastructure reuse projects also inspire new park governance approaches. With the public sector framed as resistant to change at best, and inept and incapable at worst, philanthropists are positioned as uniquely capable of delivering such creative adaptive use park projects, as they have in other cities. Amanda O'Rourke, Executive Director of parks advocacy and research organization 8-80 Cities, described this dynamic in an interview:

I think there's a tension there, and a pull, because [we have] such close proximity to the US. We get to see lots of Canadians go to New York and go to California and see these beautiful parks and go, why can't we have things like this? So I think the influence of that American model has certainly trickled upwards, or has had an influence. (A. O'Rourke, personal communication, October 16, 2024)

With their capital and cultural power, donors are framed as efficient and innovative, using their funds and political savvy to "grease the wheel" of park production. This is starkly opposed to the public sector's "culture of no" (Harvey, 2010): its tendency to inhibit community action and enforce rigid labor rules and permitting procedures that hinder agency and engagement. Despite acknowledgement of the need to retain some City leadership in designing and governing parks, philanthropists echo a sense of urgency for change in Toronto's parks, and embrace a vision of community-engaged and collaborative park governance that is creative, flexible, proactive, and responsive.

This has required a shift in the culture of philanthropy and the culture of bureaucracy. Historically, donors in Toronto have expressed "hesitation to give money to the tax collector" (D. Bennet, personal communication, January 3, 2024), a resistance to working with bureaucracy, and limited trust in government accountability. The public sector often introduces extended timelines, jurisdictional complexities, and a requirement to manage public processes and expectations that do not align with typical philanthropic processes, requiring patience from

donors. In an interview, one participant described park philanthropy as "not for the faint of heart... it's not a discrete little thing where they can just write a check and say bye" (M. Rowe, personal communication, May 15, 2024). But as more donor-led projects are introduced in Toronto, and as such projects grow in number and profile in other global cities, there appears to be a growing interest amongst donors in providing both capital and operating funds for parks. Donors are attracted to the idea of demonstrating big visions through individual, catalytic projects that fit into a narrative of "city building," and are inspired by precedents that "prove it's possible" to reimagine infrastructural space and use a donation to spur change.

As donor-led park projects globally and in Toronto gain profile, these projects demonstrate that the public sector can indeed move more quickly and deliver more creative parks in partnership with a forward-thinking philanthropist. As a result, there is growing receptivity amongst public agency staff and elected officials to support collaborative governance approaches to develop and manage parks. Policy documents and official statements celebrate philanthropic partnership in park production as an innovative and necessary approach, and a promising path forward for Toronto's parks. The three projects signal "a new Toronto that is ready to embrace change and say yes to sweeping ideas" ("Public Space under Gardiner Expressway to Link Waterfront to Rest of Toronto," 2015), and a philanthropic sector open to new possibilities in the public realm. As the earliest example of a donor-led project of its scale, The Bentway is framed as a "proof of concept" that demonstrates the potential of both urban infrastructure reuse and of philanthropy-led park production. A former Waterfront Toronto CEO was quoted in an article saying the project's success "affirms not just what we've done, but how we've done it" (Hume, 2015). Indeed, The Meadoway, whose name is a direct echo of The Bentway and whose donation structure and linear infrastructure reuse approach reflect similarity (Micaleff, 2024), is an

example of The Bentway's influence; as is the Art Trail, which represents the "single largest arts-related gift the City has ever received" (Murphy, 2022).

Donors, advocates, policymakers, and elected officials produce and mobilize narratives regarding the problem of parks, the solution of philanthropy, and the imagined outcomes of donor-led park projects, which, in turn, shape public perceptions of the realized and potential effects. In addition to introducing additional park space, the three park projects are credited with changing both City processes and collective ambitions regarding what the urban public realm can and should be. The Bentway, The Meadoway, and The Art Trail are widely celebrated for transforming both actual underutilized urban space *and* its symbolism.

Shifting discourses about parks and philanthropy

Discourses regarding urban environmental change not only shape how we think about the city and its relationship to nature, but actually produce material changes in the urban landscape (Hajer, 2005). In the case of the three parks examined, dominant discourses around the need for and function of philanthropic engagement in the production of the urban public realm not only shape narratives and public opinion about the role of philanthropy in parks, but also produce real change in the parks and public spaces of the city. Responding to the justice-oriented objectives of critical discourse analysis, it is important to consider not only the content of these discourses, as outlined above, but also how these discourses influence change in city policies and practices regarding urban public space.

Using the frame of park justice, including dimensions of procedural, distributional, and recognitional justice (Anguelovski et al., 2019; Goh et al., 2022; Low & Iveson, 2016), I evaluate the equity implications of these discourses. I argue that official discourses, created by donors and their coalitions and mobilized in public policy, press, and popular discourse,

naturalize both the value of urban infrastructure reuse park projects as a solution to Toronto's park crisis and the role of philanthropic donors in envisioning and enacting these projects.

Together, this minimizes the possibility of procedural justice, discounting or excluding entirely counter-narratives that question these design and governance approaches.

Solidify green as good

In keeping with the commonsense policy narrative of "green as good" (Angelo, 2021), policy and media discourses surrounding the three parks advance an uncritical acceptance of the social and ecological benefit of urban infrastructure reuse and urban greening, underpinned by an assumption that these social and ecological goods are universal and widespread (Mullenbach et al., 2021). Connecting environmental sustainability narratives to ideas about the social value of public space (Madanipour, 2019) naturalizes the idea that inventive urban infrastructure reuse projects connect people to neighborhoods, to one another, and to nature. These are appealing outcomes as Toronto faces rapid population growth and neighborhood change. Here, sustainability discourses recast the urban infrastructural relic – the freeway underpass, the electric transmission corridor, the waterfront industrial site – as an "unexpected gift" that, through philanthropic funding, political will, and "creative thinking" can be transformed into an active agent that delivers broad social and ecological benefits (J. J. Foster, 2023; Lang & Rothenberg, 2017). In addition to masking the threats that urban greening poses in terms of gentrification and displacement (Pearsall & Anguelovski, 2016), framing philanthropic investment in public parks as a universal social and environmental good (Mullenbach et al., 2021) limits the possibility for counter-narratives to gain discursive space. Indeed, as will be discussed next in Chapter 6, the voices of advocates questioning the equity and democratic implications of philanthropic investment in parks were seldom represented in policy discourses

and media coverage of the three parks. While the vast majority of news coverage celebrated the social and ecological benefits of these projects, several individual articles included perspectives that questioned the equity impacts and democratic decision-making processes of these high-profile parks. In one news article, a Toronto City Council member criticized the democratic implications of the City's growing reliance on private individuals to fund city parks:

"I don't understand why, in a democratic society, wealthy people get an extra vote about what we build in the city of Toronto," he said, noting donors get a deduction on their income taxes. "We elect governments to decide what our priorities are and it undermines the role of government when wealthy people decide instead." (Rider, 2016)

In an interview, public interest designer, strategist, and public space advocate Zahra Ebrahim argued the high need for park support has made it difficult to decline donations when offered, adding, "Philanthropy in Canada is a drop in the well compared to the sheer volume of philanthropy that is available in the US" (Z. Ebrahim, personal communication, October 4, 2024).

Despite some concerns over the impacts of philanthropic-led park-making on democracy and privatization, overall, policy and media discourse reflects a growing openness to new modes of designing, delivering, and governing urban parks, and a shifting perception of who should be responsible for park making, as demonstrated in this statement from an interview with Dave Harvey, former Executive Director of parks organization Park People:

It's not the ideal way to do things [...] some smart person should be developing a plan of what's needed for parks and a thoughtful government funding them in the proper order. But it's hard to find money. It's hard to do all this. So we've been more fortunate to find some interesting philanthropy supporting some projects. (D. Harvey, personal communication, February 14, 2024)

All three projects are relatively recent, making it difficult to assess longer-term sociospatial impacts in terms of green gentrification and park inequity. Nonetheless, as Toronto

faces a crisis of park space and services, these dominant discourses may limit park justice by offering scant space to perspectives that question the benefit of philanthropic investment, or present alternative visions for the distribution of such benefits.

Position philanthropy as a "game-changer"

Discourses regarding the three parks emphasize the "innovative", "creative", and "unprecedented" nature of the projects, positioning donors as the key to making them possible. By first framing the public sector as ineffective, inefficient, and unable to mobilize the capital and creativity necessary to transform the public realm, partnerships with donors are presented as the ideal, and indeed only. market-based means through which to make necessary changes in the public realm. Philanthropy is framed in opposition to the public sector: able to move more quickly and decisively, to take more risks and work more inventively, to introduce new ideas to improve the urban public realm, and to "make them possible" (Rider, 2016). While broadly acknowledging the need for system-wide improvements, the public sector is seen as unable to invest sufficiently in park spaces and services. Donors' offers to invest in individual, high-profile park projects garner uncritical support from advocates, policymakers, public officials, and the public, despite continued challenges across the park system. Projects are celebrated as unprecedented in the Canadian context, and vital. These investments signal a public space "renaissance for the whole city," despite the rather limited scale and scope of the parks' actual social and ecological benefits, delivering unclear benefits beyond the immediate neighborhoods in which these projects are sited. This raises the risk of deepening distributional inequities, as philanthropic donors channel investments towards particular high-profile park projects and the public sector mobilizes resources to match. Meanwhile, community concerns about ongoing

capital, maintenance, and programming needs and system-wide inequities attract little media attention and barely figure in policy dialogues.

As more high-profile, donor-led projects are completed, these projects "set a blueprint" for nature-inspired, creative infrastructure reuse and collaborative governance that is replicated. The Bentway is largely credited with generating necessary public interest and confidence in philanthropic funding for the public realm. By once again demonstrating that public agencies can successfully partner with philanthropic donors to deliver visionary public realm projects, policymakers hope these projects will inspire future donors to make similar donations to public realm projects (Waterfront Toronto, 2022a). In an interview, George Zegarac, CEO of Waterfront Toronto, expressed optimism that additional philanthropy-led public realm projects will demonstrate to the public and to parks agencies not only that these projects are possible, but that philanthropy is essential to moving them forward.

Conclusion

Philanthropic donors, in alliance with civic leaders, elected officials, and senior bureaucrats, and with support from unaffiliated urban advocates, coalesce around the dominant discourse that frames Toronto's parks as failing, philanthropic engagement as the solution, and widespread social and environmental benefits as the inevitable outcomes. In this dominant discourse, Toronto is a city facing a polycrisis of rapid population growth, inadequate park facilities, and an inept and under-resourced public sector. In response, the creative reuse of underutilized urban infrastructure is framed as a desirable design solution, and philanthropy-led park production and management as a desirable governance approach. Widespread social, ecological, and "city building" benefits are framed as the inevitable, shared outcome of such

schemes. As these dominant discourses circulate, they *naturalize* particular narratives regarding the problems facing parks in Toronto, the desired policy and governance solutions, and the anticipated outcomes for the city.

By giving significant discursive space to powerful actors with a vested interest in advancing these park projects – donors themselves as well as supportive elected officials and public sector staff – policy dialogues and media coverage further circulate an uncritical view of philanthropy's role in park production that minimizes or misses entirely concerns related to democratic decision-making, park equity, and responsiveness to community needs.

Parks are important sites in which changes in both urban environmental governance and meaning of public space coalesce and are made visible, and thus critical contexts in which to investigate impacts. Dominant discourses about urban greening frame parks as having everything to do with nature, urbanity, and the public good, and nothing to do with power (Zukin, 2009). When it comes to parks and green spaces, the assumed benevolence of the state (and in some cases, private and philanthropic partners) is linked to the assumed goodness of urban greening and infrastructure reuse. I argue these discourses are not merely symbolic but are actually *productive*: they do not just reflect changes in how we think about urban public spaces and public responsibility, but actively advance particular modes of planning, designing, and governing the urban public realm that carry real implications for park justice. Discourse about urban green space, urban design approaches, and urban environmental governance are intimately intertwined: the material production of urban green space and its management is subject to representations of greening, growth, and giving (Keil & Boudreau, 2006; Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003). When left unquestioned, the production and circulation of the image of the green

city may, at best, misrepresent the positive environmental and social impacts of green investments, or at worst, obfuscate related distributional, procedural, and recognitional injustices.

CHAPTER 6: MADE-IN-CANADA MODELS: MODES OF COLLABORATIVE PARK MAKING

How does philanthropic participation reshape the power relations and processes through which urban green spaces are planned, designed, and governed?

New discourses about greening, growth, and philanthropic giving are not only a response to changing political-economic and cultural conditions in Toronto, but also a reflection of increasingly mobile global policy ideas that link urban infrastructure reuse and creative placemaking with nonprofit governance. In response, Toronto has begun testing new, more collaborative approaches and partnerships to fund, develop, and program green spaces. Several high-profile infrastructure reuse park projects have put these new modes of park production into practice, each representing a unique approach to philanthropy-led park making. The Bentway set a precedent for how philanthropists could rapidly mobilize private capital to envision and make material a novel form of park space that reuses infrastructure and manifest a novel form of public space governance in Toronto: the urban park conservancy. Buoyed by growing enthusiasm for public-nonprofit collaboration. The Meadoway later demonstrated how donors could support the longer-term, incremental development of a community-rooted vision for infrastructural transformation and ecological benefit. Most recently, The Lassonde Art Trail broke new ground by introducing a layer of donor-funded public art programming into a public park, shifting away from donations for capital infrastructure.

Park making has been conventionally understood as the purview of the public sector, but these examples of donor-led projects raise questions about implications for democracy and

participation. How is the political, financial, and cultural power of philanthropy mobilized in the park making process? How does this power reshape park planning, design, and governance, and what does this mean for the possibilities of procedural justice? Who participates, whose voices are heard, and how are the needs of marginalized and underrepresented communities reflected?

In this chapter, I explore how philanthropic power, when wielded through park planning, design, and governance, reshapes the strategies and processes through which green spaces are produced. To do so, I examine how donor power is embedded in park-making processes, and how this power interacts with other forces at multiple scales, including local green growth machine politics and global urban policy mobilities, as well as counter-forces, including dissenting voices and coalitions. I compare the planning processes, governmental strategies, and design approaches, as well as related interventions and contestations, that shaped each park's development. I then critically analyze how both local socio-environmental context and global policy mobilities shape how philanthropic participation in urban green space is adopted and adapted in Toronto, and how this in turn shapes the possibility of procedural justice. This sets the stage for the subsequent chapter, which explores distributive and recognitional justice outcomes in the material landscapes, management, and programs of realized parks.

Power and participation in parks

As with many other public services, responsibility for local park planning has shifted away from public managers and toward nonprofit partners, as local governments encourage "collaboration" to manage austerity and deliver services more efficiently (Davies & Blanco, 2022). There is considerable variation in the nature and structure of collaborative park governance arrangements, each with distinctive power relationships, decision-making abilities,

organizational capacities, and access to resources. At one end of the spectrum, volunteer networks assist with ongoing maintenance and programming in existing, publicly owned and managed green spaces (Campbell et al., 2021; Fisher, 2012; McMillen et al., 2016). These smaller, self-organized stewardship and "friends of the park" groups can make significant contributions to social trust, citizen science, managing ecosystem services, and supporting park advocacy efforts (Campbell et al., 2021; Connolly et al., 2014). At the other end of the spectrum, highly coordinated and well-resourced political, business, and cultural elites combine their political and financial power to create park conservancies to develop and manage landmark urban parks, as illustrated in the high-profile cases like the Central Park Conservancy and Friends of the High Line (Krinsky & Simonet, 2017; Lang & Rothenberg, 2017; Loughran, 2014). Across the spectrum, park-supporting nonprofits today are more likely to contribute external funding, resources, and expertise to public parks agencies (Brecher & Wise, 2008; Gazley & Brudney, 2007; Walls, 2014). This shift challenges conventional theories of government-nonprofit relationships which assume a "unidirectional funding flow from governments to nonprofits" (Cheng, 2019, p. 238), and highlights the growing power and influence of park-supporting nonprofits.

Given their significant power, influence, and financial and political capital, situated on the very extreme end of the "spectrum" discussed above, donor participation in park making highlights the growing interdependence between government and nonprofits, public and private funds, blurring the line between state and civil society (Pincetl, 2003). This raises important questions regarding the impact of philanthropy (as a tool) and donors (as actors) on participation, inclusion, and justice in planning and design processes for public parks. These questions are

important, as the nonprofitization of park governance, in all its variations, carries clear implications for public space justice, as explained here.

In response, this chapter explores the planning, design, and governmental strategies through which philanthropy-led parks have been produced in Toronto, foregrounding questions of participation, equity, and representation. I investigate the planning and political processes through which the three donor-led parks were envisioned, designed, and developed. Drawing from urban political ecology frameworks, I consider the local political-economic, ecological, and cultural context in which these processes unfolded, as well as the local and international policy networks in which these projects are entangled.

I use procedural justice as an evaluative framework to analyze the participation, collaboration, and decision-making power of marginalized groups in the park planning process. I am interested here in how modes of park making – the visioning, planning, design, and development – are reshaped by the power and participation of philanthropic donors, and what this means for the possibility of procedural justice. I explore the processes, dialogues, meetings, and media that frame the opportunities and constraints of participation in each case, illustrating the nature of participation and implications for procedural justice. In doing so, I uncover the conditions of public-nonprofit park partnerships – the policy frameworks, governance strategies, processual features, organizational capacities of the partners, and power relations between them – that may deliver distinct outcomes for participation, inclusion, and justice.

Toronto context

Recent growth in park-supporting nonprofits in Toronto – from volunteer stewardship efforts to high-profile philanthropic donations – suggests growing receptivity to collaborative

governance in green spaces. Widespread support among civic leaders, the media, and the public for nonprofit partnerships in Toronto's parks contrasts starkly with some recent fierce criticism of private partnerships, illustrated by the ongoing outcry over the mega-spa plans for publicly-owned waterfront lands at Ontario Place (Stone & Cook, 2023) and the airport expansion planned for City-owned parkland on Toronto Island (Casey, 2026). Overall, popular opinion appears to be shifting when it comes to how urban parks ought to be developed, delivered, and maintained: interviews, policy documents, and media point to a growing enthusiasm amongst policymakers and elected officials for collaborative park governance, a growing interest amongst donors in urban green spaces as objects of philanthropy, and a growing tolerance amongst a historically wary public for nonprofit participation in the production of the public realm.

As park partnerships have gained attention at a global scale, collaborative park governance arrangements have become more frequent, complex, and ambitious in Toronto (MaRS Solution Lab & City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2021). Active park partnerships in the city today reflect a spectrum of engagement (City of Toronto, 2013; City of Toronto Partnership Development Unit, 2013), as illustrated in Figure 6.1, from permits for community-led events ("transactional"), to more sustained community activation and programming ("transitional"), to longer-term capital development and programming partnerships ("collaborative governance") (MaRS Solution Lab & City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2021). Some of these partnerships are initiated by external actors that enter into direct partnership with the City, while others are undertaken by local community-based groups that deliver programming and stewardship activities.

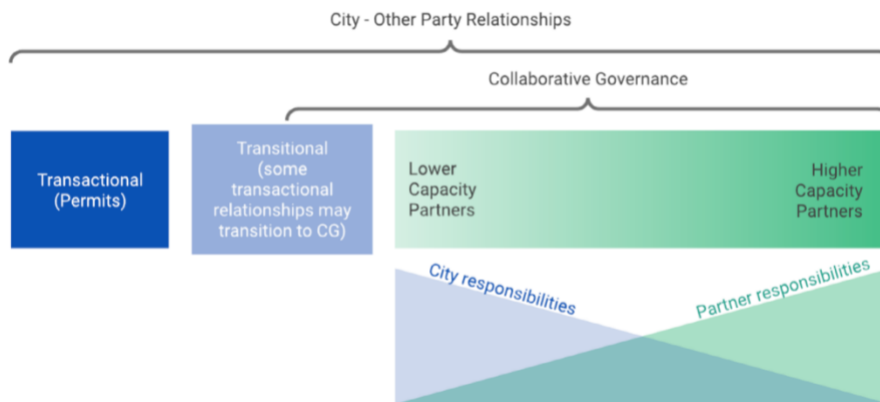


Figure 26 Graphic illustrating the spectrum of relationships between the City and external parties. Source: Collaborative Governance Report: A Framework 1.0 for Toronto Parks (MaRS Solution Lab & City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2021, p. 24)

Because there is no standardized, "cookie-cutter" approach to organizing or managing collaborative park governance arrangements in Toronto, local public agencies have developed flexible planning processes, guidelines, and procedures to facilitate collaboration while supporting structure and accountability. An example is the City of Toronto's 2021 "Collaborative Governance Framework," which aims to streamline what had been previously ad hoc partnerships with third parties by offering more transparent principles, processes, and goals for soliciting and managing park partnerships (MaRS Solution Lab & City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2021). The Framework both demonstrates and further encourages an increasing openness within the City for collaboration with a range of nonprofit partners.

Local governments' increasing openness to partnerships in parks is a response, in part, to ongoing advocacy efforts, including by Park People. According to interviews, since its founding in 2011, Park People has moved away from critiquing City processes and toward a more collaborative approach emphasizing education, research, and piloting "made in Canada models" for urban park governance. In response, public agencies in Toronto developed policies and

staffing complements to facilitate collaboration with nonprofit partners. Some public sector staff see themselves as "navigators" or "shepherds," supporting donors and nonprofit partners through complex bureaucratic processes to ensure project success. In an interview, a senior leader in the City of Toronto's Parks, Forestry, and Recreation division shared that, because the City is not well-positioned to accept donations, the division works to navigate philanthropic proposals and "bridge the gap" from donation to implementation.

This largely responsive stance toward donations and partnership requests raises questions about whether the City is able to critically evaluate and, if necessary, refuse, much-needed philanthropic dollars for projects that may not align with organizational goals and public need – particularly as the City faces such intense budgetary strain and increasing park demand. As one City staff member shared in an interview, "I would say the large majority of donation proposals that come to the city are accepted, because they're good ideas, and they fall within the policy" (D. Bennet, personal communication, January 3, 2024). Some fear that the capital and political power of donors, in combination with the City's desire to shepherd partnerships and donations through to success, threatens democratic accountability in decision making. This sentiment is captured in an interview quote from Amanda O'Rourke, Executive Director of 8-80 Cities:

I do think that the City needs to take the reins a bit on this [...] they're so under-resourced and they're just trying to keep up with the daily needs and the daily operations. I think it does mean we need a really strong vision of how we're actually going to fund parks in our city in an equitable way [...] That conversation is not really being led by the people it should be led by, which is really the public sector, in my opinion [...] Unfortunately, the philanthropic sector is driving a lot of the conversation, and the City is responding, they're in response mode. (A. O'Rourke, personal communication, October 16, 2024)

Conversely, supporters frame collaborative park governance as an opportunity to expand access to decision-making processes and increase community engagement in local parks, thereby *strengthening* democracy and participation. Collaborating with on-the-ground nonprofit partners

can center community visions and needs and strengthen relationships with groups often marginalized in City-managed public spaces and related decision-making processes (Park People, 2022), including youth, low-income, and racialized residents (Park People, 2017c). Philanthropy may provide financial resources for not only capital and programming improvements in parks, but also for creative and high-quality public engagement processes that connect with communities from the outset, with benefits far beyond those possible through standard City consultation processes.

With growing recognition of the financial resources, technical expertise, and community connections offered by donors, public agencies in Toronto are shifting from a largely responsive stance toward more active efforts to initiate nonprofit partnerships for major park projects. In recent years, the City, Waterfront Toronto, and TRCA have expended partnerships with local nonprofits, developed new partnership policies and park governance arrangements, and dedicated staff resources and funding to soliciting, cultivating, and managing philanthropic donations (Acting Director, Urban Forestry, 2022; City of Toronto, 2022b). This illustrates how changing local discourses regarding the need for and benefits of philanthropic engagement in park making have become embedded in the policies and governmental strategies that enable collaborative park governance. But these local discourses do not operate in isolation; indeed, they are informed by global policy networks through which paradigmatic examples and policy best practices are transmitted and then adopted and adapted to the Toronto context.

Global context

The collaborative park governance ideas taking hold in Toronto are not new – in fact, as Toronto is increasingly connected to other major urban centers through international policy

networks, these ideas travel through peer networks, policy research, and personal relationships before being adapted and adopted in Toronto. As in many other cities, Toronto's parks are now understood as vital to the city's social, economic, and environmental future. At the same time, policymakers and advocates recognize the need to create systems to better support Toronto's parks, as captured by this quote from a 2013 Park People report:

As Toronto grows, neighbourhoods and residents will need more and better parks. People living in dense communities are using parks more intensively and in different ways than in the past. Toronto aspires to lead other Canadian cities in implementing innovative park solutions, using community energy and ideas to support better parks. We need to test these new concepts and develop made-in-Canada models. (Park People, 2013)

The "new concepts" needed to inspire "made-in-Canada models" are frequently drawn from international examples of urban infrastructure reuse parks. Many interviews highlighted how Toronto is now more highly integrated into international networks of park advocates and policy leaders that promote partnerships and collaborative governance as strategies to support urban parks. A notable example is The High Line Network, formed in 2016 as "the leadership arm of The High Line" with the goal to connect international leaders of infrastructure reuse public space projects. Today, the Network has 47 members, including the Atlanta BeltLine, Waterfront Seattle, and The 606 in Chicago, and two Canadian members: The Bentway and The Meadoway. The Network is a hub for peer learning, research, technical assistance, and advocacy, producing and disseminating best practices and thought leadership to support urban infrastructure reuse and community-led green space projects in other cities (High Line Network, 2019). The High Line Network has been influential in advancing the High Line model -- a nonprofit-led infrastructure reuse project using creative urban design, arts-based programming, and collaborative governance -- to cities across North America, including Toronto. In more recent years, the Network has sought to address criticism of the High Line's inequitable

engagement and green gentrification by promoting equitable development and community benefits strategies (High Line Network, 2019).

The City Parks Alliance is another international policy network that has been influential in mobilizing park design and collaborative governance strategies that have taken root in Toronto. The City Parks Alliance is a membership-based organization that supports equitable urban park development and revitalization; it has several Canadian members including public agencies, nonprofit partners, and philanthropists. As Executive Director Catherine Nagel shared in an interview, the Alliance recognizes that public budgets are currently insufficient to ensure urban parks remain vibrant and viable, and in response, adopts a cross-sector approach to park investment that includes philanthropy among other partners (C. Nagel, personal communication, April 19, 2024). The Alliance promotes philanthropy, corporate sponsorship, and conservancy models as innovative strategies to "close the gap" in capital and maintenance funding across park systems, but also emphasizes the need to ensure private funding does not produce a "have and have not system" or drive displacement.

The Trust for Public Land has similarly promoted conservancies as a possible, though potentially challenging, model to revitalize urban parks that cannot be sustained through public funding alone. The Trust's influential 2015 report on urban park conservancies explored the benefits and risks of private, non-profit park-supporting organizations operating and managing public green spaces (Harnik & Martin, 2015), and its 2017 report on creative placemaking focused on the potential of the arts and culture to animate public space and support community development, framing parks as cultural assets (The Trust for Public Land & City Parks Alliance, 2017).

The Design Trust for Public Space, another New York City-based organization, developed and mobilized creative urban design and management approaches to revitalize spaces beneath elevated transportation infrastructure, including roadways, subway lines, and rail lines. The Trust's "Under the Elevated" initiative and eventual "El-Space Toolkit" offered important resources for public and private sector partners on how to plan, design, and manage these complex sites as community gathering spaces. The Design Trust emphasized the everyday beauty of residual spaces often seen as dark and oppressive: the dappled light, shade, and "steampunk" aesthetic supported their potential "as valuable untapped assets for their surrounding communities with opportunities to address systemic social, health and safety, environmental, economic challenges and racial inequities" (Design Trust for Public Space, 2019). The Under the Elevated work was an early inspiration to Toronto's Bentway project; representatives from the Design Trust visited Toronto in 2016 to meet with The Bentway's design team and partners as the project was in development.

These networks demonstrate that Toronto's growing receptivity to collaborative governance approaches to developing urban parks, and to creative design and placemaking strategies to activate underused urban infrastructure, have not emerged in isolation. These ideas have travelled through highly mobile policy geographies between the U.S. and Canada; policymakers and donors have devised "made-in-Canada models" to adapt these approaches to the Toronto context, as evident in the cases of The Bentway, The Meadoway, and The Lassonde Art Trail.

The Bentway

Initiation - "A remarkable proposition": The vision for what would become The Bentway emerged not from pre-existing City or community plans, but from a collaboration between "a range of citybuilders and experts," initially operating outside of public processes (The Bentway Conservancy, n.d.-b). At the time of the donation, in late 2017, the City-owned space beneath the Gardiner Expressway was not designated as parkland and there were no existing plans to integrate this space into the adjacent public realm. As one City Staff member shared in an interview: "Was the Bentway on the City's radar before the Matthews came along with their supporters and advocates to propose it? I don't think so. So it wasn't really on any city planning book. But it was like, wow, this is a really cool idea, let's examine it" (D. Bennet, personal communication, January 3, 2024).

According to many involved, the project evolved in response to ongoing local advocacy and organizing around parks, international policy discourses regarding infrastructure reuse and collaborative park governance, and the particular local conditions and opportunities in Toronto's downtown. In early 2015, Park People released an influential report on innovative approaches to meet Toronto's park needs amidst growing density and land values, emphasizing the potential of nonprofit-led urban infrastructure reuse projects (Park People, 2015). At the same time, local civic leaders, including urban designer Ken Greenberg, were drawing inspiration from collaborative governance and conservancy models in other cities, including the Central Park Conservancy and the High Line, that delivered exceptional park spaces and programs without relying solely on public resources. And in light of the recent battle over the future of the elevated Expressway, the exponential residential growth taking place in the surrounding neighborhood, and recent civic investments in waterfront public spaces and cultural institutions like the new

visitors center at the Fort York National Historic Site, the space beneath the Gardiner Expressway had gained a new sense of possibility.

In an interview for this study, Greenberg recalled inviting local philanthropists Wil and Judy Matthews for a walk beneath the then-vacant space beneath the Gardiner, insisting their investment could be a significant city building step (K. Greenberg, personal communication, June 18, 2025). The Matthews "were looking for a space" to revitalize as a project, and were impressed by "the majesty, the monumentality, the potential" of the site (Moore, 2015). Greenberg brought on the emerging landscape architecture firm PUBLIC WORK, and the team quickly put together a Framework Plan for the project. The Framework Plan outlined infrastructure elements "fundamental to the project's vision," including a grand staircase and amphitheater at Strachan Avenue, a skating trail, and a pedestrian bridge over Fort York Boulevard, and illustrated a vision for the design and programming of a series of "rooms" beneath the bents for arts and cultural activity, community gathering, and active transportation (Waterfront Toronto, 2015b, 2016a). The proposal was kept confidential as the team approached City staff, Councillors and the Mayor, and other civic leaders to gather input and secure buy-in. It was then announced to the public at a joint press conference between the donors, Waterfront Toronto, and the City in November 2015, before it was considered or approved by Toronto City Council that December.

Park-making strategies - "The power of the idea": The donor team emphasized "the power of the idea" to ensure support from City decision-makers and the public. Philanthropy-led investment in public green space at this scale was unprecedented in Toronto's history, as was an urban park conservancy, so the team crafted a narrative that framed the gift as the Matthews' "love letter" to the city, and the space beneath the Gardiner as holding a "hidden magic" –

strategies later highlighted as best practices for securing buy-in by The High Line Network (High Line Network, 2019). The design team's pre-existing planning proposal and design renderings, released to the public alongside the initial proposal, stirred public imagination and interest. Needing an iconic image around which to rally attention and support, the donor team painted one of the Gardiner's bents a bright shade of yellow and hosted their press conference in front of this space (see Figure 6.2). As Greenberg shared in an interview, "This was such a risk to be honest, everything about it was unconventional. The idea was unconventional. The conservancy was unconventional. The idea of having the design team sole source was unconventional. Everything, it broke every rule in the book. And it was just the power of the idea" (K. Greenberg, personal communication, June 18, 2025)

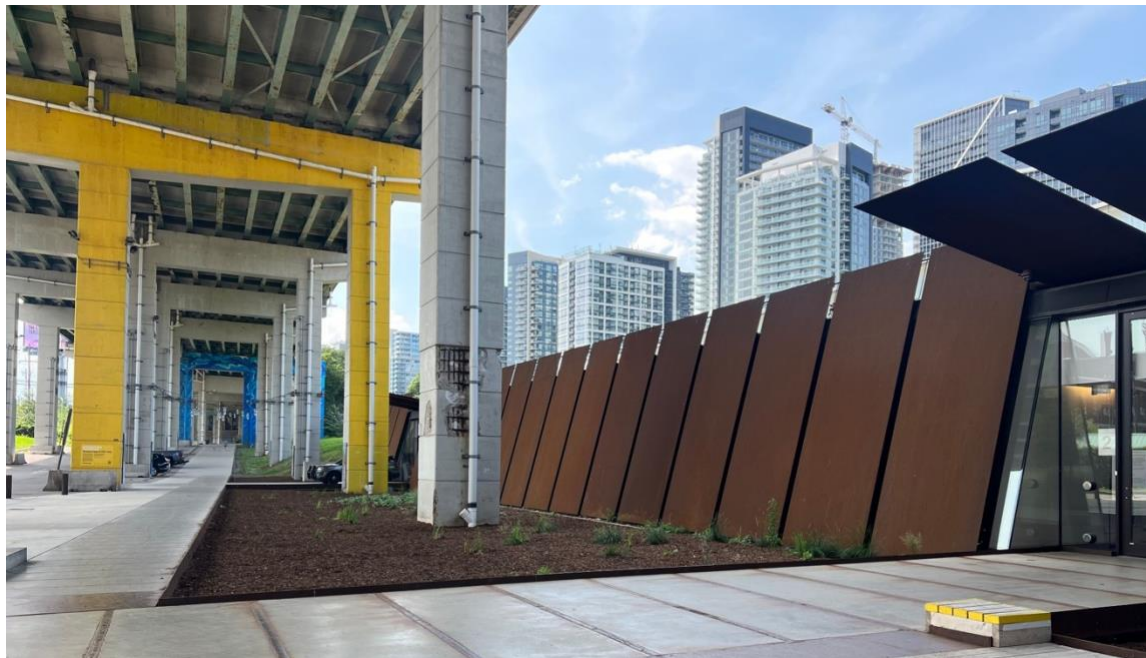


Figure 27 A painted yellow bent in The Bentway, adjacent to the Fort York Visitors Centre, July 2024. Photograph by author.

In addition to a compelling narrative, interviews and policy documents emphasized the importance designating then Deputy City Manager John Livey as a "shepherd" or "inside fixer": a point person who could navigate the bureaucracy for this unconventional project and "bring down the barriers that would eventually start coming up when doing a project like this, a parks project on non-parks land, with an arrangement with this not yet created not for profit," (M. Layton, personal communication, May 6, 2024).

Other key conditions from the donor included an expedited project timeline, a particular governance structure, and unconventional procurement practices. These donor-dictated conditions were established from the outset, and directly tied to the donation, requiring that the project be completed by July 2017; that the design, consultation, and construction be managed by Waterfront Toronto with oversight by a steering committee including the donors; and that Ken Greenberg Consultants and PUBLIC WORK be retained on a sole-source basis to lead the design (City of Toronto, 2015; Waterfront Toronto, 2015b, 2016a). These conditions stood in stark contrast to the City's conventional park planning, procurement, and design procedures, but when tied directly to the donation, were easily agreed upon.

Planning, policy, and governance approaches - Toronto's first urban park conservancy: The donor's imposition of a strict deadline prompted the City of Toronto and Waterfront Toronto to quickly mobilize public resources and procurement processes to advance the preconceived project. The donors insisted their \$25 million donation be used only for capital costs relating to project design and construction; overhead costs incurred by the City or Waterfront Toronto would be ineligible for funding, as would the park's post-construction maintenance, operations, and programming (City of Toronto, 2015, p. 15). This laid the groundwork for a key component of the Matthews' donation: a requirement that the City and

Waterfront Toronto study and propose a governance and funding model to manage The Bentway's long-term programming, operations, and maintenance (City of Toronto, 2016b).

Waterfront Toronto retained consultants to research international best practices in collaborative park governance and funding (City of Toronto, 2016b; Waterfront Toronto, 2016a). Citing influential examples of successful park conservancies in other cities, the partners eventually agreed on a non-profit charitable corporation as the most appropriate governance approach. A privately-led park conservancy "would allow for maximum flexibility and autonomy to deliver the project as envisioned" (Waterfront Toronto, 2016b), enabling The Bentway to secure earned and donated income alongside support from the City of Toronto, particularly in the early years (Waterfront Toronto, 2016b). The Bentway Conservancy, Toronto's first urban park conservancy, was incorporated in September 2016 and commenced hiring its senior leadership and staff (City of Toronto, 2018b).

While the City of Toronto retains ownership of the land and amenities, The Bentway Conservancy operates, manages, and programs the site (City of Toronto, 2018b). Given Torontonians' historic wariness of private partners in public parks, the Conservancy was a significant step for park governance across the city. As Park People Executive Director Erika Nikolai reflected in an interview:

I think it proves that you can have a conservancy. It is pretty groundbreaking in its governance. To the City's credit, they made it happen. That sort of blazes the trail and creates a precedent in terms of it being doable. Which is a pretty powerful thing with the City. To be able to refer back to a successful example is really critical to being able to navigate all those layers of decisions and bureaucracy. (E. Nikolai, personal communication, July 3, 2024)

Participation and consultation: The initial donation stipulated a "robust public consultation program" would be undertaken thorough the planning and design process (City of

Toronto, 2015, p. 1), and "members of the public will be invited to help develop this vision alongside community groups and organizations representing sport, recreation, arts and culture, and entertainment" (City of Toronto & Waterfront Toronto, 2015). Early documents suggested the project would be "Shaped by Torontonians for Torontonians" (City of Toronto & Waterfront Toronto, 2015); the project partners insisted the final design was yet to be determined and the public would have an important role in shaping the project (City of Toronto & Waterfront Toronto, 2015). But with the donor's team's pre-conceived Framework Plan already articulating the project's key infrastructural pieces, and efforts already underway to develop a nonprofit governance model, Torontonians had relatively little room to shape the design or programming directions.

Waterfront Toronto led all public outreach and engagement efforts for The Bentway, convening a Stakeholder Advisory Committee and inviting public participation through meetings and online campaigns. Beginning with a highly publicized "Reclaim the Name" campaign, residents were invited to "help give the space a name that is uniquely Torontonian." The campaign was framed as an inclusive avenue for participation, and again lauded by The High Line Network as a successful example of storytelling as a means to secure support (High Line Network, 2019). Donor Judy Matthews was quoted in a press release: "We want this new public place to belong to the people of Toronto...that's why we are asking all of you to help us name it" (Waterfront Toronto, 2016d).

Waterfront Toronto also collaborated with Park People to present a series of "Walkshops": walking consultation events that invited residents and stakeholders to tour the site and voice their ideas, needs, and concerns (see Figure 6.3) (Waterfront Toronto, 2016c). Many of these conversations centered on rather quotidian themes including stormwater and sound

management, site accessibility, and safety and security; desires to see indigenous histories incorporated into the site and unhoused people not displaced or excluded were also raised during the Walkshops (Waterfront Toronto, 2016c). The Bentway's early public engagement efforts were successful in supporting public perception of robust participation and consultation. But given that the final design and governance approaches of The Bentway mirror so closely the initial Framework Plan proposed by the donor team, is it difficult to see where and how public input meaningfully changed the project's direction.



Figure 28 Participants gathered for a "Walkshop" for Project: Under Gardiner in February 2016, before construction had begun. Photograph by author.

Public perception and impact - A symbol of urban optimism: The Bentway's process of development was lauded in interviews and policy documents as an inspiration, a blueprint, and a catalyst for other donor-led public park projects in Toronto. There is a colorful story behind the project: the donor's "visionary" proposal for the forgotten space, the initial project announcement in front of the bright yellow concrete bent, the meetings and relationships with civic leaders and park advocates in cities across the globe, and the ambitious project timeline and design all make for a compelling narrative. The Bentway has become a shining example of what is possible when philanthropy lends its financial resources and imaginative thinking to urban park development, prompting a shift in how we think about, design, and develop public spaces. As Bentway co-director David Carey was recently quoted in a newspaper article, "The naysayers asked who would want to spend time under a highway...Since those early days, we've become a symbol of urban optimism. It's really an idea that Toronto can dream big and that we can do great, great things together" (Cecco, 2024).

"The Bentway Model" has since become highly influential in Toronto, not only for its creative design strategy and governance structure, but also for its donor-led approach to urban park making. Its insistent donors, armed with a pre-conceived plan and the funds to match it, have been celebrated for establishing a new, collaborative model of philanthropic partnership, and in doing so, changing the conversation in a local government criticized for its resistance to public-private partnerships in parks (Waterfront Toronto, n.d.-c). From the outset, the project was predicted to inspire similar philanthropic donations. As former Toronto Mayor John Tory was quoted in a newspaper article, "Toronto is going to get used to saying yes to things like this" (Moore, 2015). Whether the "Toronto" referred to by Tory represents the municipality or the collective populace remains an open question.

Since its opening, The Bentway has been credited for inspiring renewed interest in so-called "city building" initiatives amongst Toronto's philanthropic community (Rider, 2022b) and for spurring park donations of a similar scale. Indeed, The Meadoway, whose name is a direct echo of The Bentway and whose donation structure and linear infrastructure reuse approach reflect similarity (Micaleff, 2024), is an example of The Bentway's influence.

Initially inspired by global precedents of nonprofit-led urban infrastructure reuse projects, The Bentway has itself become a local precedent for how to reshape planning, design, and decision-making processes to enable these unconventional projects. And indeed, the project is now becoming an inspiring example to other cities around the globe. As one of the founding members of The High Line Network, The Bentway is often cited as an example of successful, donor-led urban infrastructure reuse park development in case studies - information sharing amongst other actors aiming to reuse urban infrastructure creatively.

The Meadoway

Initiation - Building off success: The Bentway served as an important "proof of concept" for and fostered receptivity to philanthropic partnerships for urban infrastructure reuse amongst policymakers and the public. But The Meadoway was initiated in a decidedly different manner. Beginning in 2012, the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) and the Living City Foundation envisioned the Scarborough Centre Butterfly Trail (SCBT) pilot project to introduce a meadow into the underutilized space beneath the Gattineau Hydro Corridor, pairing ecological restoration with community connection (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2025a). In 2013, the project was awarded a grant from the Weston Family Parks Challenge, a joint effort of Park People and the Weston Family Foundation to support community-led

partnerships that would enhance Toronto's greenspaces and "provide a pathway to a new era of partnerships and engagement in city parks" (Park People & The W. Garfield Weston Foundation, 2013). The Parks Challenge distributed a total of \$5 million to 26 small-scale, sustainable urban park and partnership efforts, and marked the Weston Family Foundation's first extension into parks and public space work.

The SCBT transformed a 3.25 km stretch of the hydro corridor into a native meadow habitat, supporting pollinator species, birds, wildflowers, and grasses and increasing biodiversity and ecological function (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2025a). The project also incorporated a multi-use trail that supported hiking and biking tours and strong community engagement activities with local schools and community groups (Park People, 2017a). The pilot extended through to 2017, confirming the viability of introducing greenspace beneath Toronto's hydro corridors (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2019a) and demonstrating a positive community response (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2020).

The success of the SCBT helped garner a broad network of support amongst policy- and decision-makers within TRCA and the City of Toronto, as well as civic leaders and the public who advocated for its expansion into a more ambitious project (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2022b). These partners sought to grow the urban linear greenspace to a greater scale and establish a complete, accessible active transportation connection between downtown Toronto and Rouge National Park (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2022a)

In 2018, the Weston Family Foundation partnered directly with the TRCA and the City of Toronto to announce The Meadoway (Weston Family Foundation, 2024). Supported by \$25 million commitment from the Weston Foundation, plus an additional \$6.3 million from the City,

the project would extend the success of the Scarborough Centre Butterfly Trail into a much larger, 16 km connected route for greenspace restoration, active transportation, community cohesion, and education (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2019c, 2019b). The donation for The Meadoway did not introduce a new initiative, but extended from nearly a decade of advocacy, action, and pilot initiatives by public agencies, community members, sponsors, and advocates, with leadership from the TCRA. This idea was captured in an interview with Erika Nikolai, Executive Director of Park People:

I would say that The Meadoway was a much slower evolution, a philanthropist came and invested in something that was already underway to expand it. It probably makes for a more solid foundation. I think The Bentway is doing great, and it was really needed, and maybe there wasn't enough of a sense of community to identify that in the moment. So I think ideally, the spark comes from the community, and it takes a long time, because usually you don't have an investor right away, so you're going to have to have a lot of momentum and enthusiasm to get there. (E. Nikolai, personal communication, July 3, 2024)

Park-making strategies - "Lay the groundwork": The Meadoway's incremental approach was credited in many policy documents and interviews as instrumental to its success. The approach followed a strategy that local advocates, including Park People, had been promoting: park pilot projects that could be implemented quickly through community partnerships to demonstrate possibilities and then ultimately secure support for larger-scale and longer-term change (Harvey, 2010; Park People, 2015, 2017c). Indeed, Park People, in collaboration with the Weston Foundation, funded the initial pilot that laid the groundwork to eventually transform the full 16 km hydro corridor into a much larger and more ambitious meadow and trail project. Its incremental growth and demonstrated success over time, from a small-scale pilot to a much larger and more ambitious long-term project, was critical to securing philanthropic support from the Foundation.

In addition to testing ideas, demonstrating results, and fostering support from decision-makers and donors, The Meadoway's incremental approach also had practical benefits: by completing the trail in phases, TRCA could coordinate with stakeholders and adjacent infrastructure projects and secure additional funding (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2025b). The full \$85 million project was separated into phases, each with distinct goals, budgets, and timelines. The Weston Foundation's initial commitment of \$10 million for the first phase from 2018-2021 supported a multi-year comprehensive planning and public consultation effort, along with the restoration of 80 hectares of native meadow habitat, the construction of 1.8 km of multi-use trails, and accompanying public education and community learning efforts (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2024a). The Foundation pledged an additional \$15 million, contingent on TRCA securing matching funding. In 2023, the Weston Foundation committed another \$6.3 million to support the second phase of The Meadoway, while the TRCA continues to leverage funds from federal and municipal sources to advance trail connections and meadow improvements (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2023a). TRCA has outlined further plans to seek public funds and private donations to support the third phase of capital works and The Meadoway's long-term maintenance, management, and programming (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2022a, 2023a, 2024b, 2025a).

Planning, policy, and governance approaches - "A different kind of arrangement":

The Meadoway was "not a typical project" for TRCA; its jurisdictional and ownership complexity and geographic scale required new planning and governance approaches that would bring together diverse partners and funders. The space beneath the Gattineau Hydro Corridor was primarily owned by Infrastructure Ontario and managed by Hydro One, linking a patchwork of sites leased by the City of Toronto and TRCA, which managed and maintained trails and ravine

spaces. This complex jurisdiction had previously deterred public realm projects in the corridor, but TRCA saw an opportunity for collaboration between these diverse partners.

TRCA formed partnerships with the City of Toronto and Hydro One and secured funding from the Weston Family Foundation, with additional support from Parks Canada, local schools and community organizations, and Infrastructure Ontario (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2024b). This collaboration was made possible in large part by the scale of the Westons' donation, and the project's potential to expand across the region, as described by Colin Love, a staff member of TRCA:

This would not happen without that key infusion of dollars, right? And it's really unlocking so much more than just the Meadoway project in this case. How do these partners, TRCA, City of Toronto, Hydro One, Infrastructure Ontario, and the Feds, and the Province all work together? Because here's the proof of concept, if you will, of the 16 kilometer corridor. But if you map out all the different rights of way, or hydro space, that's systemic opportunities there...you need that to find the path so that these partners can learn how to work with each other. (C. Love, personal communication, October 16, 2024)

The Weston Foundation describes their approach to this partnership as "collaborative," working alongside partners "to do more than provide funding; we want to enable others to find transformational ways to improve the well-being of Canadians" (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2024b). This was echoed in interviews with TRCA staff, who noted the enthusiasm and support the Weston Foundation brought to the project, and the Foundation's strategic approach to entrusting and empowering TRCA staff and partners to plan capital and programming changes. This approach did not come without challenges, however. Bureaucratic roadblocks and a lack of receptivity to donor expertise made the project difficult, as described in an interview by a Director of the Weston Family Foundation who was closely involved in the project:

For a funder like us that's been working in this space for many, many years, I think we bring a lot of experience to the table too, and we have a lot of connections across Canada, and we know what works and what doesn't work. And often people at the City, this was the first time they were doing something, and yet they came in with an attitude that, you're just philanthropists, you have a lot of money, but you don't know how to deploy it as well as we do. And I think it is really important to both go in with open minds that this is a collaborative process.

Significant portions of The Meadoway have been completed to date, but the longer-term management and operations remain unclear; this will likely also require a unique partnership model. Following its incremental approach, TRCA continues to explore possible future governance and management arrangements, as described in an interview by TRCA staff member Katie Turnbull:

This is not a project that we would normally ever do. Typically we're two years on the project and we're out. This is ongoing. And that's something for us to figure out. Yes, we built this, but who is going to fund it long term? Whether it's The Bentway, whether it's any of these big projects – how do you build long term funding? We're still trying to figure that out, we don't have the answers yet." (K. Turnbull & L. Chadwick, personal communication, February 16, 2024)

Participation and consultation - "Community powered green space": Spanning 16 km, from Rouge National Urban Park in the far eastern reaches of Scarborough to the Don River Ravine in downtown Toronto, the geographic scale of The Meadoway is unprecedented in Toronto. Once completed, it will introduce 200 hectares of meadowlands and 16 km of multi-use trails connecting four ravines, 15 parks, and many schools, businesses, hospitals, and transit hubs (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2024a; Weston Family Foundation, 2024). The green space connects 13 neighborhoods across Scarborough, home to a growing population of exceptional racial and ethnic diversity. It also runs through five "Neighborhood Improvement Areas" (and adjacent to several more), designated by the City of Toronto's Strong Neighborhood Strategy to receive increased investment and social programs to address structural inequities

(City of Toronto, 2026b). As a project consultant noted in an interview, "People don't expect such a large investment to happen in a much more under-served area that's often been overlooked in the broader [Greater Toronto Area]" (E. Wong, personal communication, July 10, 2024)



Figure 29 Houses abutting The Meadoway, July 2024. Photograph by author.

From the project's outset, TRCA and the donors acknowledged the complexity of the surrounding community, the importance of meaningful public consultation to build support, and the need for ongoing engagement and education to nurture enduring connections to nature and to community. The Westons' initial donation supported a multi-year public consultation effort for The Meadoway and spurred the slogan, "Community powered green spaces."

Accounting for this geographic scale and demographic diversity, The Meadoway's donors and partners developed a community- and equity-driven planning and design process that centered community needs from the outset and sought to avoid the "parachute science" of a donor dropping into a community and dictating change. The project was required to complete a Class Environmental Assessment (EA), a mandated public process for input on planning and design for the multi-use trail and meadow restoration work (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2020, 2024b). TRCA and the Weston Foundation upended conventions of the highly standardized EA process; rather than a mere regulatory requirement, the EA process was an opportunity to engage the community and stakeholders in a series of online and in person information sessions, one-on-one meetings, and Q&A sessions to seek feedback on the project's possible design.

A centerpiece of the EA process was "The Meadoway Visualization Toolkit," which presented accessible visualizations of the existing conditions and future visions for green spaces, bridge features, road crossings, and public realm features throughout the corridor (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority & The W. Garfield Weston Foundation, 2019). Many residents were familiar with the space as mown grass where they would walk their dogs, expand their backyard gardens, or even play golf; conveying the possibilities of the space as a future meadow and trail was a challenge. The Toolkit illustrated concepts for distinct segments of The Meadoway, each with their own look and feel that reflected the many different user groups, activities, and passive recreation needs along the corridor (see Figures 6.5 and 6.6). The Toolkit conveyed the project's vision, enabled diverse stakeholders to better understand the possibilities of this new public space, and offered avenues for informed input during iterative consultation

events throughout the design process (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority & The W. Garfield Weston Foundation, 2019).

The Meadoway's strong focus on community engagement broadened participation beyond what is typical of City-led planning and design processes, responding to the demographic diversity of the surrounding neighborhoods and reflecting the needs of these communities.



Figure 30 (top) Rendering of a segment of The Meadoway corridor. Source: *The Meadoway Visualization Toolkit* (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority & The W. Garfield Weston Foundation, 2019)

Figure 31 (bottom) Rendering of a right of way crossing in the The Meadoway corridor. Source: *The Meadoway Visualization Toolkit* (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority & The W. Garfield Weston Foundation, 2019)

Public perception and impact: Like The Bentway, The Meadoway is one of only two Canadian members of The High Line Network, and like many of the projects in that network, seeks to both draw support from and also serve as an inspiration to other urban infrastructure reuse parks. Unlike The Bentway, however, The Meadoway did not evolve from the vision of a donor, but from an evolving collaboration between public agencies, parks advocacy organizations, the donor, and the surrounding community. As the TRCA emphasized throughout the project's planning and development, "The Meadoway will serve as a model for how to successfully revitalize and repurpose hydro corridors across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and abroad" (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2019c) and will "set the stage for other cities to embrace a nature-inspired infrastructure" and become "the blueprint for a greener future" (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2024b).

In 2022, the TRCA published a "Meadoway Manual" to share strategies and best practices for creating meadow habitat beneath hydro corridors. The Manual emphasizes the community engagement, education, and communications approaches that were critical to The Meadoway's success, actively aiming to advance the adoption of similar strategies for philanthropy-funded, community-led greenspace production in Toronto and internationally (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2022b).

The Lassonde Art Trail

Initiation - "A Waterfront Toronto-conceived project": Unlike The Bentway and The Meadoway, plans for The Art Trail were well underway years before a donor emerged. A free, outdoor public art exhibition space with temporary and permanent works was envisioned by Waterfront Toronto (WT) in early plans for the Port Lands parks and included in Villiers Island

Precinct Plan (City of Toronto & Waterfront Toronto, 2017; Waterfront Toronto & City of Toronto, 2017). Supportive infrastructure for an outdoor art trail was already being constructed along the pathways of the future parks on Ookwemin Minising (formerly Villiers Island), led by WT and fully budgeted for within the broader Port Lands Flood Protection project (City of Toronto, 2022a). As the concept for the trail developed alongside construction, WT identified a need to incorporate both permanent and temporary artworks into the site. While Waterfront Toronto could supply the infrastructure to support permanent public art, the agency recognized additional funding and operational capacity, and likely a third party partner, would be necessary to curate and program a successful, rotating selection of artworks on the site.

In planning documents and annual reports, WT refers to The Art Trail as "a Waterfront Toronto-conceived project," and celebrates its success securing a \$25 million donation from the Lassonde family (Waterfront Toronto, 2023, p. 85). WT envisioned a new public art trail that would "weave its way throughout the parks on the north and south banks of the new mouth of the Don River, creating an unprecedented flexible platform for both temporary and permanent outdoor art" (City of Toronto, 2022a). For this and several other ambitious public realm projects, Waterfront Toronto had begun to view philanthropic donations as "one important way to realize ambitious public realm projects on lands by the lake" and had been expanding internal fundraising capacity and pursuing new philanthropic partnerships (Waterfront Toronto, 2023).

Waterfront Toronto actively solicited donations for The Art Trail project by "connecting generous and visionary philanthropists with an exciting opportunity to enhance the public realm" (Waterfront Toronto, 2023). According to interviews and policy documents, executives hosted prospective donors on boat tours through Toronto's Inner Harbour, discussing the possibilities of their pledges to the future public spaces in the Port Lands. On one of these boat tours,

philanthropist Pierre Lassonde became an enthusiastic supporter of funding a public outdoor art trail spanning three new parks on Villiers Island. In June 2022, The Art Trail was announced publicly by Waterfront Toronto, the City of Toronto, and the Pierre Lassonde Family Foundation, which had pledged \$25 million toward the project (Waterfront Toronto, 2022c).

Park-making strategies - "Set up the framework": The strategies to develop The Art Trail are notable in two respects: first, WT's creation of a strong vision for a fundable public realm project for which they could seek philanthropic donations, and second, the donor's role in supporting a layer of programming atop a public-led park project. Interviews and policy documents indicate that WT's approach to creating opportunities for philanthropic donations to their park projects and directing those donations to programming (rather than capital) was inspired by U.S. examples of donor-led park projects. Other local projects, including The Bentway, provided additional assurance of interest within the philanthropic community and receptivity amongst policymakers to pursue such park partnerships.

The planning and design team for the Port Lands public realm began discussing how to incorporate public artworks into the Ookwemin Minising parks during the design development phase, according to project landscape architects (see Figure 6.7 for an illustration of the early parks and public realm plan for the site). While there was no philanthropic funding for an art trail at the time, there was "this opportunity for a group, individuals, somebody to help push this forward, but we were looking to set up the framework to allow for it to happen." (H. Sweeney, personal communication, July 10, 2024)



Figure 32 Parks and public realm plan for Ookwemin Minising (formerly Villier's Island). Source: Villier's Island Precinct Plan (Waterfront Toronto & City of Toronto, 2017)

Waterfront Toronto adopted an anticipatory strategy to "set up the framework" for a philanthropic donation by establishing the park planning, design, and capital infrastructure in advance (see Figure 6.8), as described in an interview by Chloe Catan, Executive Director of The Art Trail Foundation:

The thinking around the Art Trail was that if Waterfront Toronto was building this park system then we have the great chance to actually think of art as an integral part of this park system. We could build in infrastructure, very flexible infrastructure right into the parks, that could allow people to come in. And by people I mean artists and curators and third party programmers or the city, to actually program the art much more much more easily. (C. Catan, personal communication, January 10, 2024)



Figure 33 Construction underway for the parks on Ookwemin Minising, July 2025. Photograph by author.

Planning, policy, and governance approaches - "Bringing this ambitious project to life": Unlike The Bentway and The Meadoway, the Lassonde's donation to The Art Trail supports programming, not capital development. The \$25 million donation, the largest gift to the City since The Bentway, funds two key components: \$10 million to commission two major permanent public artworks to anchor the trail, and \$15 million to establish a new non-profit organization to develop, curate, and manage The Art Trail and raise an additional \$30 million to sustain its long-term operations (City of Toronto, 2022a). Waterfront Toronto would provide the capital infrastructure necessary to support The Art Trail's operations as part of its ongoing construction of the Port Lands public realm and parks (see Figure 6.8). Upon completion, the City of Toronto would manage the ongoing site maintenance. Acknowledging that managing a free, outdoor art museum with temporary and permanent works and related programming was beyond the City's capacity, the donor would fund a new nonprofit organization to operate and

program The Art Trail and its collection of rotating, temporary artworks into the future (City of Toronto, 2022a). The cost of the capital infrastructure design and construction had already been integrated into the Port Lands Flood Protection project; the Lassonde's donation would contribute to "bringing this ambitious project to life with programming and activations to engage residents and visitors" (City of Toronto, 2022a).

Following approval by Toronto City Council, the Lassonde Foundation appointed a new executive director to head the new non-profit organization and launch a juried international competition to commission two anchor artworks (City of Toronto, 2022c). The first executive director, Chloe Catan, had previously worked with Waterfront Toronto on the Port Lands Public Art Plan and was directly involved in developing the plans and frameworks that would guide Waterfront Toronto's concept for an outdoor art trail. An early task for Catan was to negotiate a long-term renewable operating license agreement with the City to operate in the new waterfront parks, which would outline how the organization would deliver services in the park while upholding the City's priorities of community use of the space and engagement with local arts and community organizations to deliver programming and events (City of Toronto, 2022a).

The Foundation would also coordinate infrastructure needs across the site with the ongoing design and construction of pathways through the Villiers Island parks (City of Toronto, 2022a). These include electrical, utilities, and servicing infrastructure that would allow for temporary installations, events, and performances, so that art can be considered "an integral part of the park system, rather than an afterthought" (C. Catan, personal communication, January 10, 2024). As project landscape architect Herb Sweeney described in an interview:

One of the opportunities that we were looking at is to do things a little bit differently and thinking about how to have infrastructure in place day one, versus coming in and disturbing the landscape in a bigger way when temporary art is brought in, to help limit

the impact to maintenance budgets and operations budgets that would happen later on...by thinking about it ahead and future proofing in many ways, it helps limit costs across the board, between the [Art Trail] Foundation itself and also for the City that's going to be operating and maintaining the parks. (H. Sweeney, personal communication, July 10, 2024)

As Waterfront Toronto set the stage for public art in the Port Lands and the City of Toronto prepared to take on the long-term maintenance of the parks, the Lassonde Foundation would, with a minimum 20-year lease on the site, curate and manage public art and community programs throughout the site. While all those interviewed described a close and productive collaboration between the Foundation, the City, and WT, the governance arrangement for The Art Trail is primarily a lease agreement rather than a partnership.

Participation and consultation: Public consultation and engagement around The Art Trail did not begin by connecting with adjacent residents, businesses, and institutions, like The Bentway and The Meadoway had. Much of the public consultation that led to the vision for The Art Trail had been undertaken by Waterfront Toronto as part of the years-long Port Lands master planning, design, and development frameworks, in consultation with local community members as well as experts in public art, community programming, and Indigenous storytelling (Waterfront Toronto, 2024b). The public and stakeholders, both in nearby neighborhoods and across the city, including representatives from the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, had been invited to participate in the creation of public realm design for the Port Lands Flood Protection project overall and the development of the Villiers Island and Keating West Public Art Master Plan, which together established the framework for a waterfront public art trail (Waterfront Toronto, 2023, 2024a). The Public Art Master Plan not only outlined the concept of a waterfront art trail, but also identified key themes for the temporary and permanent artworks (see Figure 6.9). By the time Waterfront Toronto sought philanthropic support for the project, the

vision had already been articulated through publicly-led planning and design processes; as described by Chloe Catan in an interview, "Out of that kind of consultation process, and writing of that plan, comes The Art Trail. So it's very much part of that consultation process" (C. Catan, personal communication, January 10, 2024).



Figure 34 Potential themes for temporary and permanent artworks on OOKWEMIN MINISING, developed by Waterfront Toronto through public and stakeholder consultation. Source: Villiers Island and Keating West Public Art Master Plan (Waterfront Toronto, 2024a)

In response to input gathered through earlier Waterfront Toronto-led consultation processes, the concept for the art trail emphasized importance of "celebrating the site's unique multi-layered histories," "reflect[ing] the diversity of Toronto's vibrant cultural life and communities," and "celebrat[ing] indigenous presence on Toronto's waterfront through public art," along with other goals related to environmentalism, sustainability and cultural vitality (City of Toronto, 2022a). These key goals were established at the time of the Lassonde's donation, and

would continue to guide the project's development as the new Foundation curated and programmed the space.

Public perception and impact - "Invisible Infrastructure": The Art Trail and the enabling donation from the Lassondes focuses on programming, rather than capital infrastructure. Traditionally, philanthropic engagement in park production, particularly in the U.S., focused on capital investments. However, some interviewees noted an increasing interest in "soft infrastructure" in Toronto's parks, including social services and community and cultural programming, largely in response to the City's lack of capacity to deliver such programming in parks. The Art Trail illustrates this approach at the largest scale to date: a \$25 million donation targeted directly toward the long-term activation of an already existing City park through creative arts, cultural, and community programs. Here, the donor's philanthropic investment has made possible a new cultural facility, itself made possible by the public sector's capital investment in the new waterfront park park. The Art Trail has broadened the scope of possible philanthropic partnerships in Toronto's parks by focusing donor resources toward supporting the "invisible infrastructure" of park programming, as shared by Executive Director Chloe Catan in an interview:

The Bentway, a major part of that gift was to build, if I understand correctly, build the actual physical space. But ours doesn't have the kind of concrete infrastructure. It's invisible, so you have the lighting infrastructures underneath the park, but there's not a structure. So most of the money is going into the programming and the people who run the programming, and the actual artwork. (C. Catan, personal communication, January 10, 2024)

Analysis

As with other well-observed shifts toward the privatization of public space, the participation of philanthropic donors in Toronto's parks does not represent a *dissolution* of

responsibility from the state to nonprofit partners, but rather a *reorganization* of responsibility for park production and management. This infuses the park-making process with new power relations. In each of the three cases explored here, an analysis of park planning, design, and decision-making processes illuminates how donor power is mobilized, and in turn, how the benefits of participation are unevenly experienced by local communities; these are questions of procedural justice.

Shaping the conversation

The media itself plays an important role in determining whose voices are heard and thus whose needs are represented and responded to in the process of park-making. As discussed in Chapter 5, media and local and global policy networks shape public understanding of the need for and benefits of philanthropy-led urban infrastructure reuse parks, more broadly. But throughout the park-making process itself, the media's privileging of the voices of donors and their supportive coalitions allowed these actors to initiate and advocate for new visions for park design and programming in particular urban sites. Donors and supportive coalitions have greater power to establish and mobilize visions for particular park sites: to initiate and promote their own visions for urban public spaces, and to thereby ensure positive reception by policy- and decision-makers and the public.

The concept of "media standing" – in which those actors considered credible sources by journalists are called upon to comment publicly on issues and are quoted in news articles (Roth & Vander Haar, 2006) – importantly shapes how ideas about urban parks are legitimized and disseminated. In all three cases studied here, the park projects were initially announced to the public through press conferences and related media coverage, coordinated by donors in collaboration with elected officials and public agency staff, weeks before receiving necessary

approvals by the appropriate public governing body. As the first public communication about the project, these press announcements had considerable power to shape narratives and perceptions of the projects. Newspapers often printed direct, original quotes by donors from City-issued press releases, uncritically amplifying donors' own narratives of their benevolent motivations to improve the public realm and expand philanthropic culture. By printing these quotes directly, newspapers granted media standing to donors and those with a vested interest in the project's success; these actors were thus able to mobilize their voices and visions from the project's outset, gain public support in advance of the project's approval, and pre-empt criticism.

Despite the framing of some of the parks as responsive to, or in some cases, led by the local community, quotes from residents not affiliated with the projects were rarely featured in early press coverage, as were quotes from outside experts with subject matter expertise related to parks, design, or ecological issues. Indeed, critical perspectives were almost entirely absent from initial news coverage of the three projects. Where they were included, counter-narratives highlighted concerns regarding philanthropy-led park investment, including its impact on democratic decision-making, the inequitable distribution of limited park funds, responsiveness to local needs, and risk of hastening gentrification. Individual critics were often quoted alone, without support from additional voices coalescing around these issues. Unlike prominent donors and other coalition members who were given media standing as sources and also had access to other official communication channels (like government or Foundation press releases and websites), critical, individual voices had few alternative avenues to share their messages broadly with the public. Given the media's role in mobilizing discourses about urban growth (Rodgers, 2013), by offering privileged access to coalitions supportive of philanthropy-led park production, journalists help shape early public opinion in the interest of these coalitions.

Shaping a vision

All three philanthropic proposals were presented to the public as *fait accompli*, despite the projects still requiring official approval by the relevant governing bodies. The philanthropic dollars, ideas, and cross-sector actors had already coalesced around the projects before the public was made aware of the plans. Through press conferences, news coverage, and direct communications, donors, elected officials, designers, and others directly involved in the projects exercised considerable control over initial narratives, shaping public perceptions of the need for and value of these projects. Initial announcements of all three parks obfuscated their process of development and presented the projects as inevitable, rather than proposals to be debated in the public sphere. Given wealthy donors' significant power, influence, and financial and political capital, this raises questions regarding the impact of philanthropy (as a tool) and philanthropists (as actors) on democracy and decision-making in parks (Harnik & Martin, 2015; Walls, 2014).

How a park project is envisioned from the outset and, critically, by whom, influences how the project responds to and reflects political, environmental, and cultural challenges, opportunities, and needs. Local resistance to the privatization of public space in Toronto and global policy discourses regarding the risk of philanthropy-led "vanity projects" highlight concerns over "elite capture": the ability of urban actors with considerable social, political, and financial power to exert undue influence over public decision-making processes and over actual public spaces (Perkins, 2010; Pincetl, 2003). As collaborative park governance and donor-led urban infrastructure reuse projects have expanded in the US and more recently in Canada, policymakers and advocates increasingly acknowledge that communities must be engaged in early project visioning and design to foster equity, trust, and shared ownership; equitable park projects must be driven by community need, rather than donor interest (City Parks Alliance,

2015; High Line Network, 2022; The Trust for Public Land & City Parks Alliance, 2017). As one park advocate shared, "It's less about egos and less about demonstration projects, and I think more about building a resilient ecosystem of funding" (A. O'Rourke, personal communication, October 16, 2024).

Each of the cases illustrate a distinct role for philanthropy in establishing the initial project vision. In the case of The Bentway, the donor drove the conversation with a pre-determined plan for an underutilized infrastructure corridor, developed in advance with a team of landscape architects and urban designers, and a \$25 million donation to advance the project. In contrast, The Meadoway evolved over six years through several iterations and pilot projects that evaluated outcomes, incorporated community feedback, and broadened support amongst the community, decision-makers, and the donor before a \$25 million donation and a full, 16 km project were announced. At the other end of the spectrum, The Art Trail was envisioned entirely by Waterfront Toronto as part of its ongoing planning and design for the new Port Lands public realm network before it was presented to prospective donors to secure their support for a programmatic layer. These three distinct approaches to project visioning carry distinct implications for the possibility of transparency, democratic division-making, and community-driven park production, discussed below.

State-led park planning and decision-making ought not to be idealized as inevitably just; as policy advocate Mary Rowe shared in an interview, "I'm not as concerned as one once was to assume that a publicly-stewarded process is going to be any better and that the consultation will be any more effective. I think you just need a willing proponent, whoever it is, public or private, to listen" (M. Rowe, personal communication, May 15, 2024). However, Waterfront Toronto's leadership in developing the plan for what would become The Art Trail offered to the public –

including a broadly defined "community" surrounding the new neighborhood that included Indigenous communities, cultural leaders, and local residents – a series of structured, ongoing opportunities to shape early plans, frameworks, and goals for a public art trail on Ookwemin Minising. The Meadoway was similarly led by a public agency, TRCA, but evolved through several pilot phases and partnerships with various parks advocates, community groups, and public agencies before the full, 16 km project was announced. This offered neighboring communities and those interested in active transportation and ecological restoration opportunities to shape early iterations of the project, experience its interim impacts, and to influence later phases.

Conversely, The Bentway was envisioned by the donors and designers, who created a framework of key infrastructural elements established in advance of public consultation. While the project has, without doubt, introduced an active and well-used public space to an interstitial site that lacked identity and utility, the project's initiation sets a troubling precedent for park making in the city. The donors' desire to envision and initiate new projects, rather than support existing community-led park projects or involve communities in establishing project goals, in combination with local government's willingness to facilitate these projects, directs undue decision-making power and public resources toward unelected donors. This sentiment was expressed by Zahra Ebrahim, founder of Monumental Projects, former Chair of the Park People Board of Directors, and current Director of Friends of the West Toronto Railpath:

We have to be thoughtful about a culture of donor-driven development of infrastructure, and bring a cautious optimism to it. We definitely need more philanthropy in public space and social infrastructure, but I'm more interested in a culture of philanthropy that shows up to ensure projects happen, supports community-led momentum and advocacy, and accelerates the development of projects that speak to the needs of locals and residents. The precedent of a high-net worth donor deciding what gets built can go both ways. We're okay with it when it's creating parks and public spaces, but should their political

inclinations, values, and belief systems lend themselves to wanting to create spaces to the explicit exclusion of communities, we get into much more complicated territory. (Z. Ebrahim, personal communication, August 4, 2026)

Shaping the parameters of participation

After an initial project vision is established, donor power is mobilized to shape the parameters of decision-making and the possibilities for participation throughout park planning and design processes. Reflected in the literature, mobilized through global policy discourses, and adopted in local discourses regarding park production is a prevailing assumption that collaborative governance broadens opportunities for diverse participants to shape park-making processes and outcomes (Rigolon et al., 2025; Rigolon & Gibson, 2021). Donors can provide funding to support robust and creative consultation processes, and their on-the-ground connections can forge stronger relationships with communities than often possible through public-led processes (Elwood, 2004; Rigolon, 2019; Roy, 2011). While this may be the case in collaborative governance efforts led by grassroots community and stewardship groups (Campbell et al., 2021; Connolly et al., 2014; McMillen et al., 2016), philanthropic partnerships involving donors with high social, political, and financial power may in fact constrain opportunities for procedural justice by narrowly defining the parameters of participation and decision-making.

Celebrated for its creative approach to public communications and consultation, The Bentway's donors dedicated significant funding to support a robust engagement process. But the degree to which participants could meaningfully influence the direction of a project for which the donors and partners had already established was limited. Prior to any public consultation, The Bentway project had proposed key infrastructural elements, design approaches, and the possibility of a nonprofit conservancy management structure. The park as it eventually materialized featured many of the same infrastructural elements, design directions, and

management approaches initially unveiled with the donor's announcement. With the donor's \$25 million tied to a narrowly defined capital investment, expedited timelines, procurement practices, and long-term management conditions, the subsequent public consultation and engagement process offered little space for community-led ideas, critical perspectives, or alternative visions for the space.

Conversely, The Meadoway's incremental development and investment in an iterative consultation process centered around the Visualization Toolkit and community and educational outreach expanded the accessibility of the conventional Environmental Assessment process. The donors provided funding to support creative strategies to engage the highly diverse community surrounding the 16 km corridor well beyond what would be possible through a conventional, public-led process. Furthermore, because of The Meadoway's phased approach, public input could meaningfully inform ongoing refinements as The Meadoway was being developed and designed. Each case illustrates how donor power in determining what is "up for grabs" in the park planning and design process can either expand or constrain possibilities for participation.

Donors wield power to shape not just *participation in* the park planning process, but the *nature of* the process itself. The promise of significant funding is a lever used to "grease the wheel" of public park-making processes. Philanthropists' financial power allows them to attach conditions to their donations, for example, expedited timelines, nonstandard procurement processes, matching public funding and staff resources, and unique governance arrangements and operating agreements. Meanwhile, public parks agencies are willing to offer bespoke solutions and meet conditions for complex, donor-led projects. Without standardized policies to ensure donations align with established park needs and goals, philanthropic partnerships with public parks agencies in Toronto are often negotiated ad hoc; because there is no "typical"

project, and new planning and design processes are developed for each project. While there is no standard from which to evaluate success, public parks agency staff view their roles as "shepherds" guiding a proposed donation through public processes to ensure its success. More recently, public agencies have shifted from responsive modes to more active efforts to seek and secure philanthropic funding and partnerships, influenced in part by policy ideas advanced by global networks (City Parks Alliance, 2015; Design Trust for Public Space, 2019; High Line Network, 2019).

In all three cases, donor conditions were considered critical to the project's success: the Matthew's demand of a condensed timeline and a conservancy model for The Bentway, The Westons' insistence on a phased approach with an emphasis on early community engagement for The Meadoway, and the Lassonde's focus on establishing an independent nonprofit entity to manage The Art Trail. However, without "guard rails" in place – strong policy frameworks and planning procedures to guide philanthropic donations for park spaces and ensure community input and alignment – there is a risk that donor power will subvert democratic decision-making processes and planning procedures, divert public priorities and resources toward philanthropy-led park projects, and ultimately threaten equity in park planning and development processes. To date, public agencies have largely relied on the benevolent inclinations of donors to produce projects that incorporate and respond to community needs and visions, rather than on mandated processes through which donor-led processes must facilitate participation and respond to community ideas and needs throughout park planning and design.

Proponents of philanthropy-led collaborative park governance in global policy networks emphasize donors' role in advancing innovative urban infrastructure reuse projects at a speed and scale not possible through conventional public processes (City Parks Alliance, 2015; High Line

Network, 2019; The Trust for Public Land & City Parks Alliance, 2017). But without local policies and guidelines to ensure park spaces and services are developed in an equitable and responsive manner, donor-led projects may limit participation and deepen injustices in park-making processes. Some interviewees saw donor partners adding an additional layer of input into park design and development, but others fear that donor-led park planning and design processes constrain democracy. Centering community knowledge from the beginning of and throughout a project is a critical condition for equitable decision-making, as expressed in an interview by Amanda O'Rourke, Executive Director of 8-80 Cities, a Toronto-based nonprofit organization that focuses on sustainable, inclusive, and accessible public spaces and processes:

In order for these kinds of projects to even come close to realizing the potential of an equitable approach, it means that the folks at the table making the decisions need to be reflective of the community that they're trying to serve. So if it's philanthropy at the head of the table making those decisions in a silo or in isolation, it's not going to be responsive. It's really important that the governance and decision making at the outset be intentionally thought of as reflective of the community that they're trying to serve. With any private entity or interest group, there will be blind spots, like we all have. So it's really important at the forefront to set up the collaboration between philanthropy and the local government, but also a lot of different interest holders and stakeholders. (A. O'Rourke, personal communication, October 16, 2024)

Neutralizing dissent

Policy and public discourses regarding all three parks emphasize the "innovative", "creative", and "unprecedented" nature of the projects, positioning donors as the key to making them possible. As discussed in Chapter 5, by first framing the public sector as ineffective, inefficient, and fundamentally unable to mobilize the capital and creativity necessary to transform the public realm, partnerships with donors are presented as the ideal – and indeed only – market-based means through which to improve parks and green spaces. Philanthropy is positioned in contradistinction to the public sector: able to move more quickly and decisively, to

take more risks and work more inventively, to introduce new ideas to improve the urban public realm and to "make them possible" (Rider, 2016).

The region's parks capital and operating budget crisis, the growing need for park spaces and services, and the rather limited historical scale of philanthropic donations for public realm projects have together created "a scarcity mindset" amongst policymakers, elected officials, and the public; how can these struggling park systems say "no" to a major philanthropic donation? Parks agencies face public and political pressure to "make it happen" and "prove its possible" by mobilizing public funds, resources, and decision-making power to usher donor-led projects through planning and design processes. As Zahra Ebrahim shared in an interview, "we just say yes" (Z. Ebrahim, personal communication, October 4, 2024).

This need for funding, in combination with the naturalized value of philanthropy for urban green space projects *neutralizes dissent* amongst the public and policymakers, and limits the possibility of meaningful public participation in park-making processes. While there are indeed some critical perspectives about the growing role of large nonprofit donors in Toronto's park system, emerging largely from advocates who have been organizing and stewarding small, grassroots park projects for years, many interviewees agreed that "generally people are optimistic about the opportunities philanthropy provides" (A. O'Rourke, personal communication, October 16, 2024). Some suggested that this lack of broad public critique and counter-narratives around these projects may be attributed to the fact that many individuals and organizations involved in parks are *themselves* reliant on philanthropic dollars, in the form of grants and donations. This again illustrates how donor power can frame and constrain possibilities for equitable participation - which must include dissent - in the park making process. This "self censorship" was described in an interview by Jay Pitter, a Toronto-based public space researcher, author, and

practitioner and adjunct professor of urban planning. Earlier in her career, Pitter served as a provincial funder and policymaker, experience that, combined with her current public space practice, shaped her perspective on power dynamics within philanthropy.

There is an inherent power asymmetry between philanthropic institutions and the individuals and organizations with whom they engage. Many are understandably reluctant to publicly criticize an institution that may one day become a source of funding. The difficulty in finding voices willing to offer constructive, rigorous, and critical feedback on philanthropy is therefore not incidental; it is embedded in an often unspoken yet deeply felt power dynamic. For this reason, it would benefit funders to explicitly invite constructive critique into their engagement processes. Doing so could help mitigate some of this power asymmetry while also enabling philanthropic institutions to strengthen the effectiveness and long-term impact of their investments. (J. Pitter, personal communication, July 31, 2026)

Thus, framing philanthropic investment in public parks as a broadly shared social and environmental good – naturalizing its value – limits the possibility for counter-narratives to gain ground throughout planning and design processes – neutralizing dissent. Indeed, the voices of advocates questioning the equity and democratic implications of philanthropic investment in parks were seldom represented in public or policy dialogues regarding the three parks. As Toronto faces a crisis of parks space and services, donor-led park-making processes may limit procedural justice by offering scant space to perspectives that question the benefit of philanthropic investment or present alternative visions for the distribution of such benefits.

Conclusion

To understand the equity implications of philanthropic partnerships for urban parks and green spaces, it is important to consider not only how parks look and function, but also how they are made, and how philanthropic power is mobilized to reshape these processes. With urban parks and green spaces framed as a universal good and donors framed as benevolent city

builders, uncritical narratives advanced by policy- and decision-makers, media, and donors themselves *neutralize* dissent, constraining the power of narratives that critique donor-led built environment and governance approaches or propose alternatives. Furthermore, presenting donor-led park projects to the public as *fait accompli*, mobilizing donor-led visions for the parks' design and programming, and offering limited opportunities for communities to affect the initial vision or planning and design of these parks, diminishes the possibility of procedural justice in these projects.

In all three cases explored here, donors and their supportive coalitions mobilized their financial and cultural power and political connections to establish privileged positions in envisioning and developing new urban park projects in Toronto. But key differences in early project visioning, timelines, and public consultation processes may constrain or advance procedural justice. The powerful alignment of elite donors, elected officials, and other civic leaders in establishing early, official narratives about donor-led parks may limit the possibility of democratic debate and decision-making; however, more incremental projects that incorporate community input iteratively may effectively integrate community-identified needs and ambitions. Public consultation processes that prescribe the parameters of decision-making may offer little space for counter-narratives or alternative visions to gain ground; but early engagement with local communities to establish project goals and to affect refinements as planning and design proceed may better respond to community interests. Mobilizing donor power and public sector resources to "make it happen" may assert donor power and subvert democratic processes; empowering public staff and elected officials to reject philanthropic proposals that do not align with equity-informed needs and goals may assert public power in

decision-making regarding the visioning, development, and design of urban parks and green spaces.

As The Bentway, The Meadoway, and The Art Trail illustrate, the power imbalance created by philanthropic participation may be tempered by elevating community voices in broader public dialogues and in shaping park visions, and by ensuring early and sustained opportunities for community ideas and needs to meaningfully shape park outcomes. This idea is reflected in an interview quote by Amanda O'Rourke:

"I think the role of philanthropy is as part of a broader coalition of multiple interests and stakeholders. I think they are a member at the table, and the more diverse that table is, the stronger that project will be. But if it is really driven by philanthropy, like it would be if it's driven by any other private interest, it's just going to be weaker and less responsive, and it's going to reveal blind spots. We know that the broader those coalitions and collective agreements at the outset are, the better and more responsive the placemaking and the actual design or programming." (A. O'Rourke, personal communication, October 16, 2024)

Considering the justice implications of philanthropic participation in the park making process allows us to see how donor power can be mobilized to reshape visioning, planning, and design processes in ways that facilitate or constrain participation. This analysis reveals that the benefits of participation are unevenly experienced, and possibilities for procedural justice are tenuous. Donor power is not just apparent in park planning and design processes, but also in the material public spaces themselves, and how they are used by diverse publics. This is the focus of the next chapter, which explores the distributive and recognitional justice outcomes in the material landscapes, management, and programs of the three realized parks.

CHAPTER 7: TAKING ROOT: IMPLICATIONS OF DONOR-DIRECTED GREEN SPACE

How is philanthropic power embedded in the public realm through park design and programming, and how does this shape uneven spatial and social outcomes for communities?

Ideas about how to collaboratively produce and govern urban green spaces are taking root in Toronto's policy dialogues and in its urban landscapes. In several parks throughout the city, narratives about the need for, benefits of, and best practices for philanthropy-led park development have been translated directly into park design, programming, and management practices. Inspired by paradigmatic US examples, The Bentway was the first in the city to adopt donor-led approaches to creative urban infrastructure reuse and governance, using flexible, adaptive reuse approaches to introduce four hectares of programmable public space under the Gardiner Expressway and a new nonprofit conservancy to manage it. "The Bentway model" provided an important proof of concept. Shortly after, The Meadoway began to transform a much larger, 16 km hydroelectricity corridor into a continuous, connected space for active transportation and recreation, adding new bridges, trails, and diverse planted areas to what was previously an expanse of mown grass, along with a suite of community and educational programs to help Scarborough residents connect to the space and to nature. The Art Trail recently introduced new permanent public artworks to one of the most significant flood protection projects in Toronto's history, along with a new nonprofit organization that will curate a rotating collection of temporary works and programming to activate the new Port Lands parks.

Global discourses regarding parks constructed through urban infrastructure reuse, alongside local discourses regarding urban environmental governance, have driven interest in collaborative park governance in Toronto, and this interest has inspired new green space projects. According to dominant narratives explored in Chapter 5, these projects assume the donor's benevolence and anticipate broadly shared benefits for communities, ecologies, economies. But what do these made-in-Canada approaches to philanthropy-led park making actually achieve? How does philanthropic participation influence outcomes in the design, management, and programming of green spaces, and what does this mean for distributive and recognitional justice? What are the impacts on these park spaces and across park systems, more broadly?

In this chapter, I explore how philanthropic power reshapes the material landscapes, management practices, and programming approaches of realized urban green spaces. I consider how design and programming approaches respond to local political-economic, cultural, and environmental conditions, and reflect policy ideas and paradigmatic park projects from across the globe. I then assess the spatial and social outcomes of the three park projects and analyze implications for recognitional and distributive justice. In doing so, I articulate a relationship between donor-led processes and the uneven production of urban public space. This connects insights from earlier chapters on the drivers and modes of philanthropy-led green space production to the implications for park justice.

Equity and aesthetics in urban green space

Urban parks are anything but natural; as Birge-Liberman reminds us, they are "engineered urban ecosystems in a political-economic setting and set into historical-geographic

crises of capitalism" (2010, p. 1392). In this view, cities are growth machines engaged in infrastructure projects, and parks are infrastructures that function as sites of civic identity and as investments in future growth. Some high-profile, donor-directed urban infrastructure reuse projects, for example the High Line and Little Island Park in New York City, exemplify this view. These projects mobilize industrial history and urban ecosystems as strategies for image making and economic growth. Their design centers on preserving and "selectively invok[ing]" (J. Foster & Sandberg, 2016) remnant infrastructural elements from an industrial past and integrating designed green spaces to promote urban health, share prosperity, and sustainability (Lang & Rothenberg, 2017).

While these parks may look "natural," they require intense financial, planning, design efforts. These efforts obfuscate histories of displacement, health hazards, and harms to the landscape wrought by the earlier infrastructure, diminishing our ability to read social, political, and environmental change through the landscape (Schopf & Foster, 2016), while at the same time, fetishizing industrial infrastructure and rewriting it as a carefully staged image of urban authenticity and sustainability. In addition to aestheticizing post-industrial urban decay and masking ongoing inequities, these projects enable self-interested communities of donors to shape park design and programs that prioritize place identity and urban growth, rather than reflecting the needs, desires, or aspirations of local communities (Loughran, 2014).

Stronger insight on how the design and programming of parks produced with major philanthropic support differs from those produced through conventional, state-led processes is critical to our understanding of the broader equity implications of donor-led park making. In response, this chapter traces the outcomes of donor-led green space projects in Toronto, centering questions of access, identity, and representation. For each of the three cases, I analyze

and compare how design, programming, and management outcomes are produced, experienced, and contested. Drawing on theories of the uneven production of urban space, I consider how parks produced in collaboration with philanthropists differ from those produced through conventional public processes. Drawing on urban political ecology perspectives, I consider how collaborative governance arrangements enable donors to make claims on public space, embedding private interests in the design and programming of the public realm. Drawing on frameworks of urban justice, I consider the immediate equity outcomes of these park projects and their longer-term implications for park systems and services more broadly.

I am interested in the discursive and material construction of urban green spaces, as an iterative process unfolding in Toronto today, and how this process implicates these forms of justice. I use distributive and recognitional justice as evaluative frameworks to consider both the equitable spatial distribution and psychological access to parks, as well as the ability of these spaces to support the cultural claims and needs of marginalized groups. For each case, I compare the urban design strategies and accompanying narratives; programming, education, and curation approaches; and ongoing management practices adopted in each park project, and consider implications for distributive and recognitional justice. I explore not only how donor power is expressed, obscured, and resisted in the park's design, programming, and management, but also how this informs further expansions and iterations and inspires other park projects. In doing so, I uncover the uneven social and spatial outcomes of philanthropy-led park making and the design and programming approaches that may support more just park spaces and systems.

Perspectives on park equity in Toronto

Urban parks have long been understood to support the health and wellbeing of users and to foster social integration and cohesion. Today, parks are increasingly understood as vehicles for urban equity: not only offering benefits, but actively addressing spatial and social inequalities by fostering connections across different population subgroups, building social capital and stronger communities, and welcoming diverse users (Harvey, 2010; The Trust for Public Land, 2009). Park equity, as opposed to park access, has become more prominent in global policy dialogues, particularly since the widespread 2020 uprisings against racial injustice across the US and Canada. This is evident in recent initiatives and reports by park-supporting nonprofit organizations and advocacy groups. Acknowledging that The High Line "had the potential to do more for our under resourced [sic] neighbors," in 2022, The High Line Network released its "Community First Toolkit" for embedding equity in infrastructure reuse public space projects. The toolkit aims to support other parks and organizations to "come together and commit to better serving our communities" (High Line Network, 2022) by offering practical community engagement and anti-displacement strategies to "generate wealth for the longtime residents and businesses they serve and avoid displacing them." On behalf of its members, The Network has also produced reports highlighting the importance of centering equity and throughout planning and design processes for infrastructure reuse projects (High Line Network, 2019), and also in the internal practices, policies, and staffing of infrastructure reuse organizations themselves (High Line Network, 2020).

Embedded in these initiatives is the assumption that urban infrastructure reuse park projects are *uniquely* positioned to facilitate urban equity: that there is an inherent opportunity for infrastructural sites – many of which have histories of dividing communities, discriminating

against residents, and spurring neighborhood disinvestment – to be transformed into parks that connect communities across racial and class-based difference and foster social and spatial equity. Foster and Sandberg refer to this as a process in which "post-industrial urban 'bads' are stabilised and rendered into greenspace 'goods'" (2016, p. 2), which itself introduces many environmental justice concerns: do these projects advance inclusion and a politics of representation, or do they introduce further material and procedural exclusion? Paradoxically, while many urban infrastructure reuse projects have been criticized for deepening inequalities and hastening gentrification and displacement, there remains a prevailing sense of infrastructural optimism in policy discourses: a narrative, advanced in part by these park organizations themselves, that assumes the equity-generating capacity of parks constructed through urban infrastructure reuse.

In Toronto, park policy advocates have urged local governments to consider the social value of parks, and use investments in park spaces and programs to respond to demographic change, histories of uneven investment, and environmental injustices that continue to disadvantage marginalized communities (Park People, 2022). More recently, this has included a stronger focus on reconciliation, honoring Indigenous presence and recognizing the histories of land dispossession brought by colonization, particularly as they pertain to the lands we call "public parks" (Longman, n.d.; Park People, 2022).

Historically, the City of Toronto's parkland provision measures have emphasized quantity and distribution metrics – for example, parkland per person, or residents within a 5-minute walkshed. As a result, park investments have largely responded to urban development and population growth patterns. With a limited tax-supported budget for parks, the City historically relied on a "growth pays for growth" model in which development charges and parkland dedication fees fund the acquisition of new parkland and capital investments in existing parks

(Park People, 2017b, 2023). But amidst changing demographics and park needs across the city, organizations like Park People have called for both *new methods* for measuring park access and equity, and *new planning approaches* for park investment that prioritize areas of high need and limited development (Park People, 2019). New, more holistic methods for measuring park equity might consider park quality, design, management, and maintenance, in addition to quantity and distribution. New planning approaches might adopt an equity-based lens for park investment that considers social factors including age, race, and disinvestment, in addition to standard income measures (Park People, 2023). In an interview, Jay Pitter, a Toronto-based public space researcher, author, practitioner, and adjunct professor of urban planning, argued evidence-based park equity measures must do more than support diversity and belonging: they must actively acknowledge and address histories of inequity and harm.

In response, the City of Toronto has attempted a more nuanced and responsive approach to its park access measures and park planning practices. In 2019, the City adopted the Toronto Parkland Strategy, a new strategic planning framework for park acquisitions and improvements that provides direction "to make informed decisions about how to expand, improve and connect the parks system so that it grows and evolves in an equitable manner" (City of Toronto, 2019a). The Strategy analyzes and responds to park needs through six lenses: parkland provision based on walkability and anticipated growth (rather than simple measures of parkland per person); the impacts of anticipated growth; the equitable access, use, and activation of parks; the distribution and diversity of parks in relation to needs; the accessibility and connectivity of open spaces within the network; and the role of parks in adapting to and mitigating climate change. This broadened analysis notably moves beyond quantitative measures of park access and explicitly acknowledges ecological and cultural considerations, including opportunities to protect natural

features, celebrate Indigenous presence, and create opportunities to support community gathering and culture (City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2019a). Using these measures, The Strategy introduced new parkland provision maps to illustrate areas of park need and identified parkland acquisition priority areas.

The Parkland Strategy aims to achieve equity across Toronto's park system by "addressing or removing systemic barriers so that all people have equal opportunity to the use *and* benefits from public services, facilities, and spaces" [emphasis added]. In this way, the Strategy recognizes the needs of diverse equity-seeking groups in Toronto's parks, in addition to spatial distribution needs. The strategy specifically recommends recognitional and participatory factors like integrating Indigenous place-making in park design and art, involving local communities and equity seeking groups throughout park planning processes, fostering partnerships with local groups to animate park spaces, and pursuing "philanthropic contributions to add resources and contribute to creative place-making in parks in all areas of the city" (City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2019a).

Since adopting the Parkland Strategy in 2019, the City of Toronto created a unit for data analytics, research, and evaluation that has developed a new equity index tool to track and analyze equity-based outcomes in Toronto's parks, for use in future park planning. In an interview, City Staff member Liz Corson, who was part of the team that developed the new equity index, explained that a more holistic definition of equity has been adopted. The index now considers more nuanced park equity indicators, including the age-based dependency ratio (the percent of youth and older adults against the percent of working age population), Black and other racialized populations, newcomers (the percent of population that has arrived in Canada in the

past five years), Indigenous population (as self-identified and reported), and spoken language, in addition to earlier income measures.

While the new equity index accounts for much greater social complexity, it has some limitations. It remains primarily a tool for assessing distributional equity in park spaces; the City is less equipped to qualitatively assess factors related to recognitional equity in cultural representation, participation, and belonging in parks. Park equity evaluations are undertaken at a larger scale, as related to park planning and strategy, rather than post-occupancy evaluations for individual parks. Furthermore, the unit does not evaluate the distribution of park funding or resources, including philanthropic contributions, as shared in an interview by Liz Corson:

We are trying to move in that direction. We're trying to use the equity index for that purpose to create a framework for tracking the equity of our capital investments [...] We are aware that it's a gap, and it's somewhere we need to go. The dollars are hard to track to be honest, because just the system that we use for assigning a certain expenditure to a code that then corresponds to a park amenity is just very complicated. Like it's not like we don't know where the money's going, but to put it into buckets that makes sense for the kind of work we tried to do can be challenging. (L. Corson, personal communication, May 25, 2024)

The City of Toronto has not shared publicly an evaluation of the degree to which its planned and realized park projects have achieved the equity goals established in the Parkland Strategy, using the new equity index tool or other measures. For recent donor-led park projects, City staff suggested in interviews that they aim to ensure proposals support strategic objectives and equity principles, and that, anecdotally, donor interests often align strongly with City priorities and the public good. The actual impacts of these projects are less clear. While the City of Toronto, Waterfront Toronto, and TRCA have introduced policies and guidelines to foster philanthropic donations to green space projects, to date, there have been no publicly-shared post-

occupancy evaluations at the park level, nor broader analyses at the system-wide level, of the equity implications of Toronto's parks produced through philanthropic partnerships.

The Bentway

Design - “Empty containers for Torontonians’ creativity”: Inspired by global examples of infrastructure reuse parks under and above elevated transportation structures (Waterfront Toronto, 2015b), The Bentway responded to the infrastructural opportunity offered by the elevated Gardiner Expressway, using urban design to introduce a signature open space that would "engage and transform communities" (City of Toronto, 2015). It sought to "reclaim" the unloved, impassable site into a continuous, flexible, and multi-purpose space for active programming and community use (Greenberg Consultants & Public Work, 2016a). Key public realm amenities introduced along the east-west linear space included a pedestrian and cycling trail, a "grand staircase" and amphitheater, a skate trail, and a series of flexible programming and performance spaces beneath the 55 bents; according to an early design document, "each set of bents frames a potential civic room" (Greenberg Consultants & Public Work, 2016a). The Bentway design embraced the Gardiner as "hybrid infrastructure" that can support both transportation needs and public life (City of Toronto, 2023a), and seizes the "opportunity that the structure provided" (I. Altman, personal communication, January 15, 2024).



Figure 35 (left) The Bentway skate trail in winter, February 2024. Photograph by author.

Figure 36 (right): The Bentway skate trail in summer, July 2025. Photograph by author.

The design of the pathways, planting, furniture, and even servicing infrastructure throughout The Bentway embrace the found qualities of the site and highlight the mingling of "urban" and "green" (Greenberg Consultants & Public Work, 2016a). Drawing inspiration from the Design Trust's El-Space initiative, the design celebrates the "strange beauty" of the structure and its "telescoping columns, the rhythm of concrete bents, and the play of light and shadow" (Waterfront Toronto, 2016c). The site integrates materials and elements like exposed timber, recycled bricks from the Leslie Street Spit, and bioswales and other stormwater management features to create visual and historical texture (Waterfront Toronto, 2021) and communicate an idea of "resourcefulness" and "reading what this place had" (M. Ryan, personal communication, July 8, 2024). The design plays with the tension of the space – "monumental, robust, heavy, active" and "everyday, delicate, light, passive" – through both its aesthetic approach and its aim to use design to support public life (Greenberg Consultants & Public Work, 2016a). As designer Marc Ryan described in an interview, "We were just interested in, how do you bring soul to a

place that's hard? How do you somehow warm up a place and also bring some embodied spirit to it? And especially because it's the waterfront, like it was a former shoreline."

The Bentway's design prioritizes programming, creating "highly-flexible, multi-purpose spaces that act as empty containers for Torontonians' creativity" (City of Toronto & Waterfront Toronto, 2015). Despite clear parallels to the oft-cited High Line, in both context and aesthetic approach, designer Marc Ryan shared in an interview that the team aimed to create "the opposite" by using a lower-cost and lighter-touch approach that conceptualized the design and the programming together:

At that time, in 2015, The High Line had been open for maybe five years. It was so captivating, but it was so expensive. Very clearly, everyone in the world was impressed. But as landscape architects, you can't copy that, it's just so golden. It was more an ethos, a personal challenge in our heads, how do you do this in the most raw way possible? Where we're sitting now [beneath the Gardiner Expressway], it has a quality on its own, before you do anything [...] Very quickly we [arrived at] the idea that it was a place that was not meant to duplicate our great parks or our squares. It wasn't trying to be that. It was trying to be something new." (M. Ryan, personal communication, July 8, 2024)

From the outset, The Bentway was envisioned as an iconic and unprecedented public space: "diverse, multi-functional, permanently evolving, and only in Toronto" (Greenberg Consultants & Public Work, 2016b). The donor's compelling design for the site, presented along with their proposed \$25 million donation, was framed as a "love letter to the city" – The High Line Network would later identify this brand-building approach as critical to securing financial and political support (High Line Network, 2019). But the design team maintains that, in contrast to high-profile, donor-led projects like Little Island Park, The Bentway was not a project imposed on the neighborhood, but integrated seamlessly with other planning and urban design priorities in the area. The public and stakeholders indeed had opportunities to provide feedback throughout the consultation process, but the key infrastructural elements envisioned by the

donors and presented in the initial "transformative framework design" (City of Toronto & Waterfront Toronto, 2015) by Greenberg Consultants and Public Work - the skate trail, amphitheater seating and pedestrian paths as shown in Figures 7.3 and 7.4 - ultimately came to fruition in the completed project, along with many of the initial design approaches.



Figure 37 (left) Looking east along The Bentway's paths from the Strachan Gate, July 2024. Photograph by author.
Figure 38 (right) Amphitheater at The Bentway's Strachan Gate, July 2024. Photograph by author.

Programming – “An urban oasis of leisure and culture”: The Bentway re-imagined the Gardiner Expressway as public space activated by community and artistic programming; as one newspaper article proclaimed, "an urban oasis of leisure and culture" (Cecco, 2024). The Bentway Conservancy, the registered charity tasked with managing and programming the site, frames the Gardiner as a "generative space" uniquely capable of inspiring and accommodating site-specific community and artistic and programming (see Figure 7.5), as described in an interview by Bentway CEO Ilana Altman: "We're not a traditional park, we're not a traditional

gallery, that really lends itself to engaging creatives in a different way" (I. Altman, personal communication, January 15, 2024).



Figure 39 Temporary sculpture installation at The Bentway, July 2024. Photograph by author.

Since its opening in 2018, the Conservancy has worked in partnership with the City of Toronto and artists, community organizations, and residents to deliver programming and activities that aim to be "of the city" and "about the city," including commissioned programs and exhibitions, site-specific artworks, and cultural and recreational programs like markets, food events, and block parties (High Line Network, 2019). The programming emphasizes experimentation, using public labs, play, and pilot activities to test new ideas and approaches to

public space activation (The Bentway Conservancy, 2023), with the goal to "knit together" seven adjacent neighborhoods, including Exhibition Place, Liberty Village, Niagara, Fort York Neighbourhood, Bathurst Quay, Wellington Place and CityPlace (City of Toronto & Waterfront Toronto, 2015).

While The Bentway promotes its activities as free, accessible, and inclusive, some park advocates and residents question the degree to which this programming invites a truly diverse audience. Programs to date have been heavily focused on visual and performing arts: in its first year of operation, The Bentway enlisted Canadian and global artists to present site-specific works in the space and created a touring public art exhibition with members of The High Line Network (The Bentway Conservancy, 2019). Intensive arts programming has continued, with major works including Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Pulse Topology* in 2021 (City of Toronto, 2021), along with ongoing support for local community arts initiatives and artists (The Bentway Conservancy, 2022). Some interviewees questioned the long-term financial viability of such programs, and expressed concern over the emphasis on elite art programming, as shared in an interview by Mary Rowe, a member of The Bentway's Board of Directors:

When it first started, I was a little concerned that it was an art project, because they were attracting lots of resources and funding from rich patrons, where the philanthropy was coming from. They were getting great artists and having great things, and it was spectacular. Then they put the [skating] rink in. There are a few of us on the board, Judy [Matthews] and me primarily, who fight for that rink to be there as long as we possibly can have it, because it's an activity that brings regular people down there and it's spectacular [...] I'm not against art, but I'm not for just using it for fancy art curation." (M. Rowe, personal communication, May 15, 2024)

Some accusations of The Bentway's elitism and inaccessibility have appeared, however infrequently, in newspaper coverage. Following the opening of the skate trail, a letter to the editor from a Toronto resident in January 2018 lamented the \$25 million investment in the

context of the city's ongoing homelessness crisis: "Couldn't that donor be convinced to invest in the poor and suffering rather than some two-month fling for the middle class? What's wrong with this picture? Where are our priorities?" (Lopez, 2018). The next week, the same newspaper published another letter from a resident who argued this "Bread Not Circuses" attitude hinders Toronto's greatness. This swift rebuttal diminished the legitimacy of the initial critique and reasserted the dominant narrative: "Yes, we need to tackle homelessness, but we don't have to give up the things that make our city fun and beautiful. We could cancel all public art, public celebrations, sporting events, festivals and subway stations. But then we would live in a boring, ugly city" (Shron, 2018).

Accusations that philanthropy-led park projects are "out of touch" or "tone deaf" in the context of Toronto's growing inequality were loudest in response to the The Bentway's 2019 "Dinner With a View" event: a pop-up dining event in which guests paid hundreds of dollars for a meal served in a private glass dome. Weeks earlier, the City had swept nearby homeless encampments under the Gardiner Expressway, sparking outrage and counter-actions by anti-poverty advocates in response to this "crass display of extravagance" in the public realm, adjacent to where unhoused people had been living. The event also drew attention to the fact that The Bentway had cast an infrastructural space actively used by unhoused Torontonians as "vacant" and "underutilized," erasing these inhabitants and rescripting it as a hub for arts, culture, and recreation (Gordon & Byron, 2021; Hess & Stevenson-Blythe, 2022). News articles and opinion pieces framed the issue as a tale of "two Torontos," where taxes are kept low to facilitate elite experiences, thereby deepening inequality (Beall, 2019) While the event raised concerns about the displacement of poor and working-class people from the public realm, representatives

from The Bentway Conservancy were featured in news coverage arguing that such rental events were necessary to support the parks' ongoing maintenance and free programming.

Cordoned-off, private events are a highly risky strategy for park conservancies seeking to raise funds, removing space from public access and sparking concerns over privatization (Harnik & Martin, 2015). While The Bentway's initial Use Agreement with the City permitted fundraising, rental agreements, and ongoing programming on the site (City of Toronto, 2018b), the Dinner With a View event illustrates a complicated cultural view of privatization and elitism in public parks, as expressed in an interview by Bentway designer Ken Greenberg:

We had one very unfortunate experience. You remember the bubbles? [...] That was a cautionary tale: don't do that. Nothing like that has ever happened again. Figuring out philanthropy and partnerships – this is what all these agreements are about, the five parties involved – so that publicness is not compromised. (K. Greenberg, personal communication, June 18, 2025)

Today, third-party permitted and promotional events, as pictured in Figures 7.6 and 7.7, remain part of The Bentway's revenue strategy. But the conservancy has taken steps to recognize the project's impacts on, and to build positive relationships with, its unhoused neighbors. The Bentway's public-facing staff have adopted harm-reduction and de-escalation practices on the site, in consultation with local homeless-serving organizations, and the planning process for The Bentway's future expansion included consultation with the unhoused community (UCLA Institute on the Environment and Sustainability, 2024).



Figure 40 A Sephora promotion titled "Beauty at The Bentway," presented as part of the beauty supply retailer's Clean and Planet Aware programs, July 2024. Photograph by author.

Figure 41 Pathways, lighting, planters, and bents decorated for a Sephora's promotional instalment, July 2024. Photograph by author

Distributive justice - “A catalyst, an experiment, a promise”: Initially, The Bentway was framed as a response to exponential population growth in Toronto's downtown. Amidst fears over rising density and the lack of accessible public parks and green spaces to serve residents and families in small apartments in the downtown core, The Bentway presented a strategy to creatively reuse existing City-owned space to meet local park needs of the nearly 100,000 people within a five-minute walk. The evolving neighborhood was not exactly underinvested – before and after its development, Toronto's downtown and waterfront had been the target of billions of dollars in public investment in parks and public realm assets – but rapid population growth and change demanded a diverse and accessible network of public spaces, to which The Bentway has made a novel contribution.

The Bentway's rationale was largely driven by population growth and development, rather than sociospatial inequities across the park system. While the donor's investment is highly concentrated on the small site, those associated with the project argue the distributive equity

benefits lie in the project's potential to be replicated in other equity-deserving neighborhoods. It is the "catalytic" quality of the project, rather than its immediate neighborhood impacts, that supports distributive equity, as described in an interview by The Bentway CEO Ilana Altman:

We recognize that there are equally very great needs in other communities across the city. And I think what The Bentway can offer is a way to think differently about how to find those public space opportunities and how to fund those public space opportunities...How do we really look to make public space available in the communities that need it based on the conditions on the ground? And with creativity, I think anything is possible. So that's where we see, I think the learning lessons from The Bentway can be applied all over the City. But we are a geographically-sited site, and acknowledge the neighborhoods that we're serving. (I. Altman, personal communication, January 15, 2024)

Expansion, iteration, and inspiration projects were imagined from The Bentway's outset. The project actively sought to set a new precedent for philanthropic investment in public realm design and programming, and to introduce new opportunities for collaborative governance models and conservancies to be replicated across the city. More than a "one off" project, The Bentway aimed to influence strategies to repurpose and animate underutilized urban infrastructure across the city. As described by The Bentway Conservancy, "We wanted to take an unloved, unnoticed space and help build it into a 'people place' that would inspire new thinking on how our city can come together. The Bentway is a catalyst, an experiment, a promise" (The Bentway Conservancy, 2019).

Recognitional justice – “A new type of civic organization and public space”: The Bentway is promoted as "a new type of civic organization and public space" (High Line Network, n.d.) that is working collaboratively with "city-builders, civic animators, dreamers, and do-ers" (The Bentway Conservancy, n.d.-a) to activate the Gardiner Expressway as a place for people. But who, exactly, is represented in these collaborative efforts, and who is served by these programs, is unclear. The project's design and development by the donor team, its arts-based

programming and private events, and its management by a nonprofit conservancy, raise questions about its publicness.

Despite The Bentway's "radically accessible" design and programming – "Our site has no walls and no front doors. We're a shared space open 365 days a year, and virtually all of our programming is free to attend" (The Bentway Conservancy, 2019) – the space may not be achieving its potential in terms of recognition, belonging, and cultural representation. Some interview respondents argue that The Bentway has been successful in using intensive community and cultural programming to welcome diverse populations, cultures, artists to the space and ensure their representation in what is a relatively affluent and growing neighborhood. But others cautioned that the intense focus on arts- and culture-based programs has narrowed the representation and participation of diverse communities in the space. Furthermore, the project's evolving relationship with its rapidly growing and changing surrounding neighborhood has created more challenges to community participation and representation, as expressed in an interview by Mary Rowe:

I think The Bentway's relationship with the community would have always been a challenge because the community is an evolving one. It's fairly young, it's not necessarily young demographically, but it's not been there very long. I think whatever entity had gone in there, whether it was a public thing or a private thing, it was going to be a challenge to build a relationship. You're in a place where there hasn't been anything. (M. Rowe, personal communication, May 15, 2024)

In this "unloved" site, at the center of a rapidly changing neighborhood, the donor and design team behind The Bentway made a concerted effort to craft a strong brand, compelling design proposal, and clear narrative to support its development and to create a strong sense of place. The Bentway today is a branded space: unlike other parks and public spaces in Toronto, it has its own website, managed by The Bentway Conservancy, complete with its own logo.

Wayfinding signage throughout the site features the distinctive yellow of the painted bent and The Bentway logo, and includes signs acknowledging financial support from corporate and philanthropic donors (see Figure 7.8). Visitors to the site may not know they are in a City-owned public space, but would surely be aware that they are at "The Bentway," further complicating questions of publicness and representation.



Figure 42 Bentway-branded signage, July 2024. Photograph by author.

The Meadowway

Design – “Bringing nature back into city living”: The Meadowway has set out to restore over 200 hectares of what was previously a barren expanse of mown grass into an active greenspace and native meadow habitat (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2024b), connected by a 16-km multi-use trail. Like The Bentway, the existing corridor infrastructure is seen as having great potential "to be repurposed as accessible, ecologically diverse green spaces

that permit active trail use" (The Meadoway, n.d.-d). Given the lack of an east-west active transportation network linking Scarborough to downtown, the need of accessible green spaces for community use, and the urgency to support biodiversity, the corridor offered a unique opportunity (The Meadoway, n.d.-d; Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2022a), as TRCA Director Richard Ubbens shared in an interview:

The notion of converting two-dimensional mown grass hydro corridors that occasionally skipped over a ravine, converting that into more three-dimensional interesting space with trails and native grasses and wildflowers, and not doing such aggressive mowing all the time, that could really be something that would connect neighborhoods and connect the ravines. (R. Ubbens, personal communication, February 2, 2024)

The Meadoway's design prioritizes ecological benefit, active transportation, and green space access. It is relatively "light touch," responding to the complexity of the urban-nature interface by expanding public space while centering habitat (see Figures 7.9 and 7.10). TRCA promotional materials announce, "Welcome to The Meadoway — where Scarborough is bringing nature back into city living" (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2024a).



Figure 43 (left) A trail through The Meadoway at a right of way crossing, June 2025. Photograph by author.

Figure 44 (right) Bollards at a right of way crossing in The Meadoway, February 2024. Photograph by author.

Before the project began, the space beneath the hydro corridor was grass, mown up to eight times a year, that hindered biodiversity and the overall aesthetic quality of the space (The Meadoway, 2024). The hydroelectric towers and overhead wires limited the possibility of structures and taller plants and trees below. Responding to these constraints, meadow restoration introduced a mix of native and non-native grasses, herbaceous plants, wildflowers, and small shrubs that do not interfere with the infrastructure but provide important habitat for birds and pollinators (The Meadoway, n.d.-a). While meadow restoration looks simple, "natural," and in some cases gives the impression of diminished maintenance, it in fact requires considerable effort and long-term landscape management. With its expertise in habitat restoration and flood protection, TRCA is well-equipped for such an effort. Because meadow habitats will naturally succeed – as TRCA staff member Katie Turnbull shared in an interview, "A meadow will always want to become a forest" - the sites must be mown periodically to limit encroachment and stimulate plant growth (The Meadoway, n.d.-a). Each section of the corridor is carefully planted with a different style of meadow based on the species planted, pressures from invasive species, and season of bloom. TRCA considers The Meadoway a demonstration site for meadow habitat restoration in utility corridors and continues to monitor, evaluate, and share best practices with other jurisdictions seeking to naturalize infrastructure corridors (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2022b).

In addition to important functional benefits related to ecology and active transportation, the design improves the overall aesthetic value of the space beneath the hydro corridor and creates a new public realm for Scarborough (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2019b). The design introduces "gateways" that support entrances into The Meadoway and set the stage for community and recreational use, and emphasizes key viewpoints and scenic spaces.

New wayfinding signage guides locals and visitors through the site and to connected community and park amenities and provides information about ongoing meadow restoration (see Figures 7.11 and 7.12). A variety of seating is included throughout the site to support gathering, learning, and resting, and a series of more active and more passive stretches of meadow to support different kinds of engagement with nature (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority & The W. Garfield Weston Foundation, 2019).



Figure 45 (left) Informational signage regarding the meadow restoration process at The Meadoway, July 2024. Photograph by author.

Figure 46 (right) Native and drought tolerant grasses and wildflowers at The Meadoway, July 2024. Photograph by author.

Programming – “A dynamic learning environment”: From its beginnings as the Scarborough Centre Butterfly Trail, The Meadoway was framed not only as an infrastructure reuse project but as a *community building* project centered on ecological restoration, education, and active transportation. In an interview, the donor emphasized the importance of community engagement in the planning process and programming:

"The key goal was to ensure that the people in that neighborhood felt proud and engaged and excited by what was going to change in The Meadoway. Because the way the hydro corridor was viewed, and we learned this through the public engagement process, it was like a boundary line, and people didn't talk to people on the north or the opposite side to where they lived [...] it just seemed like a great opportunity to encourage people to come into this space."

Managed by TRCA, The Meadoway's programming uses the landscape as a learning opportunity. Programs engaging community groups, school groups, and neighbors to learn about the site and its transformation with the goal to foster connections to nature and to support long-term stewardship of the lands (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2022b). The Meadoway places particular emphasis on educational programming that connects urban communities with nature, and uses the site as "a dynamic learning environment where students and residents engage directly with local ecosystems, gaining hands-on experience in environmental stewardship," with the overall goal to "foster a deeper understanding of the natural world and cultivate a shared sense of responsibility for its care" (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2025a). TRCA has dedicated staff that build partnerships with local schools, community organizations, and residents, and an Education Program that develops hands-on conservation activities, field trips, and classroom learning activities linked to school curriculum that support students' connections to and appreciation for nature (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2025a). The role of TRCA staff in "brokering" relationships to nature was described in an interview by Colin Love, Supervisor of Community Outreach and Education with TRCA:

It comes down to our theory of change as educators, as professionals, which is the belief that by fostering meaningful relationships with the natural world on a very local level, it's helping to foster this sense of care and deeper connection to one's local environment, nature. That is the precursor to change, whether it's behavior or attitudes [...] It's just got more attention and understanding that this is good for everyone, helping to broker and

foster relationships that are meaningful with the natural world. (C. Love, personal communication, October 16, 2024)

The Meadoway also supports collaborations with community groups, volunteer stewardship programs, and events and activities for different ages and interests, tailored to the seasons and the backgrounds of local community members to encourage widespread participation (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2025a). Its education staff work with English as A Second Language Learners to support newcomers, and the community outreach team has partnered with a local childcare center serving children of families escaping domestic violence (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2025a). It recently launched the Meadoway Ambassador Program, a volunteer initiative that fosters community-driven activities in the space and aims to build a network of volunteers committed to stewarding The Meadoway (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2025a).

This programming for publicness not only delivers social and economic benefits to the community, but also ensures that the next phases of the project remain responsive to community needs (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2025a), as described in an interview with TRCA project manager Katie Turnbull: "It made it easier to expand because we knew it was coming. Rather than working against the community, work with the community to try and bring in their ideas."



Figure 47 (left) Gardeners tend to a plot in the allotment gardens in The Meadoway, July 2024. Photograph by author.

Figure 48 (right) Allotment gardens in The Meadoway, June 2025. Photograph by author.

Distributive justice – “That’s exactly where it needs to be”: The Meadoway advances access to and equity in parks and green spaces, active transportation, and environmental benefit in an underserved area of the city. As discussed in Chapter 6, The Meadoway passes through thirteen Scarborough neighborhoods, several of which are designated Neighborhood Improvement Areas to which additional social investment and resources are directed (City of Toronto, 2026b). Scarborough is a highly racially diverse and increasingly dense community, home to many newcomers and low-income residents, which has historically been underserved by parks and other infrastructure and social services, in a process described as "environmental racialization" (Teelucksingh, 2007). As rapid urban expansion had put pressure on greenspace throughout the city, Scarborough's historical development patterns were misaligned with present-day demographics and needs and have separated residents, physically and psychologically, from parks. The Meadoway introduced one of the region's largest green spaces, and Canada's largest linear urban park, to this area with high park and green space needs. The project demonstrated that this underutilized, linear infrastructural space, spanning many equity-deserving

neighborhoods, could – through conscious community-focused efforts – be transformed into a community building asset that delivers significant benefits, and furthermore, that this approach could be replicated in other underserved areas.

Before the project began, 10km of multi-use trails already existed in disconnected portions of the full 16 km hydro corridor. The Meadoway will invest in the incomplete sections and introduce or improve 30 road crossings, 5 bridge crossings, and connections to 15 existing parks and green spaces to create a continuous, connected multi-use trail throughout the corridor (see Figures 7.15 and 7.16) (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2019b). Once complete, these improvements will dramatically enhance active transportation access and connectivity within Scarborough, linking neighborhoods to parks, schools, and other community spaces, and, importantly, form a continuous, safe cycling route between Scarborough and the downtown core. Such extensive new trail networks are difficult to introduce in already built up urban areas, and the hydro corridor offered a unique opportunity to make cycling more accessible for residents. The power of this active transportation connection and access to green space was expressed in an interview by Colin Love:

An objective from an equity perspective is that we now have, or will have, a 16 kilometer east-west corridor of green space for active transportation, for passive use, for engagement, you name it, that is now connecting to the north, south, Don and East-West waterfront. From an equity perspective, the Scarborough community that envelops The Meadoway is now having a direct connection to downtown ravine systems, as well as all the way to the Rouge National Park. I think that's beautiful. And I think that's exactly where it needs to be. (C. Love, personal communication, October 16, 2024)



Figure 49 Visitors cycle along The Meadowway, June 2025. Photograph by author.

Figure 50 Cycling signage in The Meadowway, July 2024. Photograph by author.

In addition to offering green space and active transportation benefits to residents, The Meadowway supports ecosystem resilience and climate mitigation in the area. Scarborough's historical and ongoing development has led to the loss of green spaces and meadow habitat (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2024b), and the previous maintenance regime of the hydro corridor had dramatically constrained its ecological function. The Meadowway introduces an ecologically rich meadow landscape that will increase biodiversity and wildlife habitat, reduce flooding and erosion, and increase carbon sequestration, all while reducing maintenance costs and associated emissions (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2022b). This carries important environmental justice benefits to Scarborough and to connected ecologies in the region, more broadly.

For community like Scarborough, The Meadowway was considered an unusually optimistic signal of investment in park equity, active transportation, and environmental justice, as voiced by designer Eunice Wong in an interview:

Early on when we started releasing a couple of renderings and the process was broadcast and there were a lot of different community events, there was a BlogTO article about this

new big linear park coming to Toronto. Because it was in Scarborough, there was a lot of pushback in the comments, like, this could never happen here [...] People don't expect such a large investment to happen in a much more underserved area that's often been overlooked in the broader GTA [...] I think there was a bit of surprise at it happening in this area, Canada's largest linear park [...] happening in Scarborough. (E. Wong, personal communication, July 10, 2024)

Recognitional justice – “That’s my meadow”: The Meadoway is often framed as both ambitious in its scale and humble in its goals to connect communities with nature and with one another. In an interview, Katie Turnbull, a project manager with the TRCA, shared an anecdote about how this "groundbreaking" initiative has impacted everyday experiences and understandings amongst The Meadoway's neighbors:

[Neighbors] start to have that ownership, like, Oh, that's my meadow. It's out there, once they start realizing the benefit. We had some experiences where a resident just down the street actually had come and said, You gotta come check out The Meadoway. We didn't know what was wrong. So he came out and he said, Come to the field. And he's like, you hear the noise? We were like, What's going on? Do you mean the crickets and the bugs? And he's like, Yes, is that okay? Is that alright? It's like, that is totally alright! That means you have nature behind you! Unfortunately, that's never been here before. (K. Turnbull & L. Chadwick, personal communication, February 16, 2024)

The mix of the ambitious and the everyday has been central to The Meadoway's design and programs for recreation, community gathering, stewardship, and learning (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2024a). These programs offer opportunities for diverse residents to engage with the space in ways that express their shared culture and values. Indeed, many of these programs support how residents were previously using the site to stroll, walk dogs, and grow their own food, suggesting the "naturally occurring" public nature of this space. For example, The Meadoway has strengthened and expanded existing community and allotment gardens, using urban agriculture as an accessible pathway to connect residents to nature and to one another, and to support residents of diverse ethnoracial backgrounds to grow culturally-

relevant foods. The Meadow's light touch design, radical accessibility to the surrounding neighborhood, and incremental approach to development and programming enables its responsiveness to community interests and needs, creating a "community powered green space."

Many interview respondents noted that the Weston Foundation has taken a quiet approach throughout the project's development and its present operations, avoiding being in the public eye in favor of centering community voices. In an interview, a director of The Weston Family Foundation shared that, despite their strong engagement in the project's development and planning, the foundation was deliberate in avoiding naming recognition:

We were very deliberate that we didn't want it to be named The Weston Park or have our name at all on it. We wanted it to be owned, for everyone to feel ownership of it. We worked with TRCA. We picked the name, The Meadoway. We picked the branding. We directed TRCA to hire Perkins + Will to create the vision around it. We paid for all the public consultations. So every way that The Meadoway is presented was our involvement and direction. We had a lot of internal discussions about how much recognition we should have [...] No one had given philanthropic dollars to Scarborough, and that was really important, too, that it was not the downtown core which, when we got involved, tended to be where public philanthropy was involved [...] So we wanted it to be out of the downtown core and in an area that traditionally had got less money.



Figure 51 Meadow restoration signage at The Meadowway, July 2024. Photograph by author.

The Lassonde Art Trail

Design – A layered approach: Unlike The Meadowway and The Bentway, The Lassonde Art Trail did not propose to revitalize and redesign existing urban infrastructure. Instead, the project added a layer of programming atop a series of new parks already planned, designed, and built by Waterfront Toronto as part of the Port Lands Flood Protection effort. This leveraged Waterfront Toronto's \$1.25 billion civil and bioengineering project to deliver more public space and more public programming, using this infrastructure to better serve residents and visitors (Lassonde Art Trail Foundation, 2024a). As Waterfront Toronto Project Manager Netami Stuart shared in an interview, "I guess the whole project is basically an infrastructure project masquerading as a restoration, ecological restoration, flood protection project" (N. Stuart, personal communication, February 14, 2024).



Figure 52 Biidaasige Park looking west toward downtown Toronto, July 2026. Photograph by Quincy Jermyn, used with permission.

Prior to the Lassonde donation, plans for a waterfront public art trail in the Port Lands had already been incorporated into Waterfront Toronto's planning and development documents and public art strategies (Waterfront Toronto, 2024b). Public art was incorporated early on, conceived as central to waterfront development overall and to Villiers Island in particular. Public art would help to build "an enduring and meaningful relationship between Torontonians and the new mouth of the Don River" (Waterfront Toronto, 2024a). The project was to be integral to the landscape and intended to bring this landscape to life. Artworks would be sited in prominent locations throughout the parks and promenades, exploring harborfront landscapes and waterways, highlighting layered cultures and histories, and showcasing Indigenous histories and presence (Waterfront Toronto, 2024b). In an interview, project landscape architect Herb

Sweeney reflected on the emergence of a waterfront art trail during the broader Port Lands planning and design process:

There was an intersection of a lot of different programmatic interests, from individuals that wanted to be able to birdwatch and touch the water and fish, but also others that saw this as a great opportunity for more typical civic, urban type programming, whether it was events or playgrounds or art. So as we were thinking about the design early on, it was how we could incorporate all those different types of layers into the park [...] When we started talking more about it being a trail, like a loop, and not spaces, that helped inform how circulation might be considered, that it's not episodic, and it wanted to be considered as connected throughout the entire park system. (H. Sweeney, personal communication, July 10, 2024)

The design of the parks, which would eventually include The Lassonde Art Trail, drew inspiration from nature, using sustainable materials and infrastructures inspired by biophilic principles, and incorporating seating, pathways, play areas, and views to facilitate visitors' connections to natural systems along Toronto's waterfront (Waterfront Toronto & City of Toronto, 2017). The parks are created to naturally accommodate flooding, reestablish waterfront habitat, and support Indigenous plant species, and connect communities with the industrial and cultural history of Toronto's harbor.



Figure 53 (left) Biidaasige Park in July 2026, shortly after opening. Photograph by Quincy Jermyn, used with permission.

Figure 54 (right) New play areas at Biidaasige Park, including the climbable Snowy Owl feature, July 2026. Photograph by Quincy Jermyn, used with permission.

The \$25 million donation from the Lassonde family was dedicated to acquiring two new permanent public artworks to anchor the 4.2 km walking trail and creating a new nonprofit organization, The Lassonde Art Trail Foundation, to curate, manage, and program the space in the future; the donation did not include funds specific to capital planning or design. Because the foundation for a waterfront public art trail was already in place, only minor changes were made to accommodate this new investment. Additional anchor point, water, electrical, and data infrastructure was added along the main pedestrian paths through the future Biidaasige Park to accommodate new pieces of permanent public art and a rotating collection of temporary art (City of Toronto, 2022a). The design team considered the artworks' relationships to adjacent landscape areas, views throughout the site, and flexibility to accommodate different artworks and performances. Incorporating this infrastructure into the parks from the outset allowed the art to be seamlessly integrated into the landscape, facilitating maintenance, lowering costs, and "future proofing" the design. Chloe Catan, CEO of The Lassonde Art Trail Foundation, described in an

interview the project as fundamentally a programming initiative, rather than a capital infrastructure or design initiative:

The Bentway, a major part of that gift was to actually build, if I understand correctly, build the physical space. But ours doesn't have the kind of concrete infrastructure. It's invisible, so you have the lighting infrastructures underneath the park, but there's not a structure. So most of the money is going into the programming and the people who run the programming, and the actual artwork. (C. Catan, personal communication, January 10, 2024)

Programming – “A landmark and gathering space”: The art itself is intended to bring the new parks and the Port Lands infrastructure to life, telling the story of the site and its transformation and setting the stage for its future, as described in an interview by Chloe Catan:

There are a hundred things you could talk about through art, but the building of this park, it has incredible bioengineering layers and thought around sustainability [...] but in a few years time, the public will see a beautiful park, they won't necessarily know all the incredible bioengineering techniques underneath the layer of grass or the layer of the wetlands. So I think art is a great way of drawing people's attention to that. (C. Catan, personal communication, January 10, 2024)

One of The Art Lasseonde Trail Foundation's first programming tasks was to launch an invitational call, in collaboration with a jury of art professionals, advisors and community leaders, to select two major new permanent public artworks: one by a Canadian artist and one by an international artist. These "destination art works" are intended to "serve as a landmark and gathering space for communities" (City of Toronto, 2022a). In fall 2024, the jury selected renowned Cree artist Kent Monkman to create a large-scale permanent sculpture (the artists' first ever public artwork) to anchor the trail (Lasseonde Art Trail Foundation, 2024a). Monkman's sculpture, titled *The Colony*, is set to be unveiled in fall 2026. The second permanent commission artwork will be from an international artist (Lasseonde Art Trail Foundation, 2024b).

Indigenous representation was an important aspect of the planning and development documents that established the foundation for the Port Lands parks and public realm system, and later, The Lassonde Art Trail. After consultation with First Nations groups, the Port Lands Planning Framework and the Villiers Island Precinct Plan recommended strategies to integrate Indigenous culture, history, and presence into the sites and related programming, including through public realm designs emphasizing connections to water, traditional placenames, and native plantings and practices (City of Toronto & Waterfront Toronto, 2017; Waterfront Toronto & City of Toronto, 2017). The final public realm design includes landscape features designed in collaboration with Indigenous consultants and communities, including marker trees and interpretive signage to support site interpretation. The Villiers Island and Keating West Public Art Plan recommended steps to "recognize and protect the desire and rights of Indigenous peoples to own and control their traditional heritage and artistic products, and actively challenge and resist cultural appropriation" in the process of commissioning works by Indigenous artists, including selecting works through invitational, peer-assessed processes, compensating artists for proposals, allowing optional self-identification in selection processes, engaging Indigenous curators and administrators, and striking Indigenous selection committees (Waterfront Toronto, 2024a). The Lassonde Art Trail's early curation has a strong focus on Indigenous histories and presence, including its commission of a sculpture artist Kent Monkman, who described the project: "I want to create an artwork that sends a message to this city—which is home to people from many diverse backgrounds from all over the world—referencing, in a playful way, the many layers of Indigenous presence here" (Lassonde Art Trail Foundation, 2024a).

Beyond the permanent artworks, The Lassonde Art Trail curates a rotating program of public art and related cultural programming, free and open to the public and open year-round.

Launched with the opening of Biidaasige Park in summer 2026, the first season welcomed a selection of temporary artworks from local and international artists, guided by the belief that "public art builds a great city, enhances wellbeing, and helps guide respectful cultural dialogue" (Lassonde Art Trail Foundation, 2024a). Continually changing artworks in the future will create a destination and welcome local visitors back to the site, and draw attention to new spaces and issues, as well as the changes underway in the Port Lands itself (see Figures 7.21 and 7.22).

The curation and programming seeks to build connections and partnerships locally and globally. To coincide with the Trail's 2026 inaugural season, the Foundation co-commissioned (with New York's Public Art Fund) an outdoor sculpture from artist Monira Al Qadiri that was exhibited in New York's Central Park from fall 2025 through summer 2026, and will be exhibited at The Lassonde Art Trail in September 2026. The Art Trail also partnered with York University to select Toronto artist Kara Hamilton to create a sculpture in collaboration with York students, exhibited for the its opening (Lassonde Art Trail Foundation, 2024b).



Figure 55 (left) "against the wind, with the wind," a temporary sculpture by Alexa Kumiko Hatanaka, unveiled with the opening of the Lassonde Art Trail in July 2026. Photograph by Quincy Jermyn, used with permission

Figure 56 (right) Hatanaka's sculpture, inspired by "the newly naturalized Don River mouth, the connectivity and sustenance of water, and the return of fish species to [the] area." Photograph by Quincy Jermyn, used with permission

Distributive justice – “The waterfront really does belong to everyone”: The question of spatial equity is complex for The Lassonde Art Trail, as it is located at the center of an entirely new mixed-use neighborhood developed on a former mixed industrial site in Toronto's inner harbor. The site connects to an exceptional ribbon of parks and public spaces along Toronto's waterfront, most of which were developed in the past two decades under the leadership of Waterfront Toronto. The waterfront has been a site of rapid population growth in Toronto, most of which is occurring in tall multi-unit towers, signaling a park-dependent community, but the Port Lands site itself is not identified by the City as a park acquisition priority area (City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2019a). As the Port Lands development continues, significant residential density will be added to the site (see Figure 7.23). Proximity to existing dense neighborhoods and its transit connectivity, in connection with its accessible programming approach, helps to broaden its impact for residents beyond the immediate neighborhood.

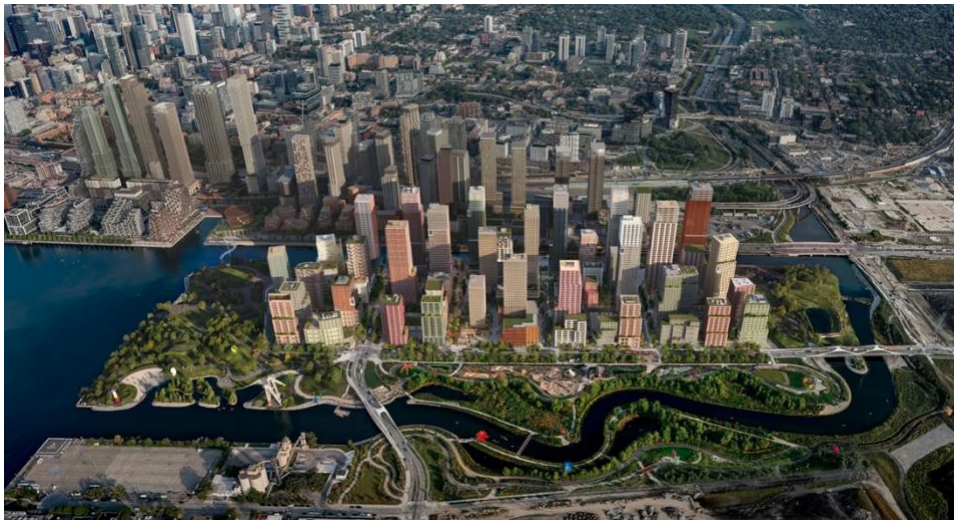


Figure 57 Rendering of future development on Oshawa Peninsula demonstrates the intensity of future mixed-use on the site. Source: News: *Building the first residential community on Toronto's new island neighborhood* (Waterfront Toronto, 2026)

Because Toronto's waterfront park and public realm network not only serves immediate neighbors but is a destination for residents from across the city, The Lasseonde Art Trail makes an important contribution to the quality and accessibility of Toronto's broader park system. In an interview, Waterfront Toronto Chief Planning and Design Officer Chris Glaisek expressed that the investment in the waterfront public realm was intended to attract Torontonians of diverse incomes and ethnic groups, creating a space that belongs to all.

The Lasseonde Art Trail provides important access to public art and related cultural programming, along with opportunities to deepen connections with the waterfront, for Torontonians across the city as well as visitors. Interview respondents and policy documents highlight the low barrier to access, as expressed in an interview by Chloe Catan: "For me, the big equity thing is we're creating massive equity by giving free art. Free access to art, year round, seven days a week. There are no tickets, there are no walls or gates. So for us, that's the key reason why we're doing this." (C. Catan, personal communication, January 10, 2024)



Figure 58 The pathways through Biidaasige Park allow access to the waterfront, July 2026. Photograph by Quincy Jermyn, used with permission.

Recognitional justice – “Public art is art for the public”: The Lassonde Art Trail raises important questions regarding who is included in the project's conception of "community." The waterfront public art trail was always framed as both a space for local residents and a landmark for visitors from across the city and around the world. Its goal was to make Toronto's revitalized waterfront "an art destination in itself" and Ookwemin Minising island "a major designation for all," (City of Toronto, 2022a). The role of The Lassonde Art Trail in defining a sense of place for the Port Lands was important because, as discussed in Chapter 5, the new mixed-use district was a neighborhood in development. The Port Lands emerged from what had previously been industrial lands along the waterfront, and so The Lassonde Art Trail had no existing immediate neighbors as it was being conceptualized. Some interview participants

question this narrative that there was "no community" adjacent to The Lassonde Art Trail prior to its development, including Erika Nikolai, Executive Director of Park People:

This is going to be a destination park, it's not just going to be for people who live nearby [...] A park like Tommy Thompson is similar, with no immediate residential community but the parking lot is full and there is a profound sense of ownership for that space. So I think there's different ways to define community when it comes to park investments. (E. Nikolai, personal communication, July 3, 2024)

The space has been described as "a magnetic destination for those seeking immersive arts and culture experiences" (Lassonde Art Trail Foundation, 2024a), but who, exactly, will ultimately be served by this space remains an open question. As The Lassonde Art Trail's operations mature, whether the space is for locals or for tourists, and how the space and programming will serve the needs of diverse Torontonians or visitors, remain important questions. In an interview, George Zegarac, CEO of Waterfront Toronto, argued against this "either/or" dichotomy between a community and destination park, advocating instead for creating an inclusive space that brings locals and visitors together.

As the new waterfront parks offer active and passive recreation opportunities for neighbors and visitors alike, including sports, kayaking, passive recreation space, and playground areas, The Lassonde Art Trail expands possibilities for cultural engagement and recognition in the space through public art and related programming. Opening in summer 2026, the full impacts of this programming will become clearer in the future. The early curation of installations and related programming has emphasized incorporating as many voices and perspectives as possible to create a rich and engaging experience for diverse visitors. The temporary art, in particular, facilitates opportunities to more nimbly respond to social and environmental issues, telling stories that are important for communities and strengthening connections to the waterfront (Waterfront Toronto, 2024a). Art Trail CEO Chloe Catan shared in

an interview that the "public" is central to The Art Trail's identity and its goal of broad engagement:

The fact that "public" is even part of public art, public art is art for the public. It's free. It's accessible to everyone, not just people who like art and go to see it purposefully, but also people who perhaps never really thought about art or don't think it's interesting, but they might be walking or running through the park or taking their dog for a walk and bump into it and have an experience, whether they like it or not, they it's part of their everyday and I think that's very much part of the content, if you if you like. There's no public art if there's no public to see it or experience it. (C. Catan, personal communication, January 10, 2024)

Unlike The Meadoway, the donors have a much more significant presence in the "Lassonde Art Trail." While the trail is integrated into the Port Lands parks, the Lassonde Art Trail Foundation is the clear public face of the project. The Lassonde Art Trail has its own brand identity, and features signage throughout the trail, distinct from the City of Toronto's signage for Biidaasige Park. Reflecting on the City of Toronto's ongoing naming process for the new streets, parks, and other features in the Port Lands, Project Manager Netami Stuart shared in an interview:

I think that naming processes often become ownership processes. That process by which everybody decides what they're going to be called really will help to establish who's...I don't know, it's going to be interesting. They will show that they are responsible through that. (N. Stuart, personal communication, February 14, 2024)



Figure 59 (left) Signage for a temporary artwork as part of the Lassonde Art Trail, integrated into the pathways and planting of Biidaasige Park, July 2026. Photograph by Quincy Jermyn, used with permission.

Figure 60 (right) Informational and donor recognition signage for the Lassonde Art Trail, July 2026. Photograph by Quincy Jermyn, used with permission.

Analysis

Discourses regarding urban environmental change not only shape how we think about the city and its relationship to nature, but actually produce material changes in the urban landscape (Hajer, 2005). In the case of the three parks examined, dominant discourses around the need for and benefits of philanthropic engagement in the production of the urban public realm shaped narratives and public opinion about the role of philanthropy in parks that have produced real change in the parks and public spaces of the city. Responding to the justice-oriented objectives of critical discourse analysis, it is important to consider not only the content of these discourses, as outlined in the findings above, but also how these discourses influence change in urban landscapes, and how the benefits and burdens of this change are experienced across factors of race, class, and other aspects of difference. By analyzing the design and programming outcomes

of The Bentway, The Meadoway, and The Lassonde Art Trail, we can trace how donor power is embedded in the public realm through philanthropic giving, how this contributes to the uneven production of urban space, and the short- and long-term distributional and recognitional justice implications for communities.

Isolated investments and equity needs

While acknowledging the need for park enhancement and expansion system-wide, and in identified areas of high park need in particular (City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2019a), the public sector in Toronto is seen as unable to invest sufficiently in park spaces and services. As discussed in Chapter 5, limited tax-supported budgets, along with limited public sector capacity to engage directly with community stewardship efforts, have motivated efforts to support collaborative governance and actively seek and secure philanthropic funding (MaRS Solution Lab & City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2021). In the context of such high park need, and such limited public sector capacity, donors' offers to invest in isolated, high-profile park projects have largely garnered uncritical support from elected officials, civic leaders, and the media, aligning with existing literature on discourses surrounding philanthropy in green space projects (Mullenbach, 2022; Mullenbach et al., 2021). This is the case even where such investments do not clearly align with identified priorities for park expansion or enhancement, as with The Bentway, or do not clearly address needs across the parks system as a whole.

In each of the three cases, the announcement of a philanthropic investment signals a public space "renaissance for the whole city;" however, the scale and scope of the parks' actual social and ecological benefits are unknown at this time, and benefits beyond the immediate neighborhoods in which these projects are sited remain unclear. These proposals raise the risk of deepening distributional inequities, as philanthropic donors are channeled towards particular

high-profile park projects. Meanwhile, park advocates' concerns about ongoing capital, maintenance, and programming needs and system-wide inequities attract little attention in media coverage and policy debates. Amanda O'Rourke, Executive Director of 8-80 Cities, emphasized in an interview the need for philanthropy to add value equitably across park systems:

We have to be very careful that we're not creating these really beautiful, amazing islands of vibrant public space in the generally more wealthy neighborhoods that attract that investment, at the expense of having a park system across the city that is not equitably distributed, and not everyone in the city gets to benefit from those investments. I think that that's the biggest challenge. (A. O'Rourke, personal communication, October 16, 2024)

Global policy dialogues contribute to this optimism about philanthropy-led park making by circulating the narrative that urban infrastructure reuse projects carry some natural capacity to enhance equity – that there is something inherent to this spatial form, its history, and its capacity for creative adaptive reuse that makes urban infrastructure reuse a vehicle for social equity (Birge-Liberman, 2010; J. Foster & Sandberg, 2016). This sentiment was expressed in many interviews and policy documents, which suggests it plays a strong role in shaping both perception of and actions regarding donations for urban infrastructure reuse projects.

Staff from public parks agencies and elected officials aim to ensure donations align with existing policy and planning priorities, but in the context of such extreme need for park investment, a \$25 million donation is difficult to refuse. The Toronto Parkland Strategy identifies areas of park need based on factors beyond simple parkland provision per person, and the more recent equity index tool enables more nuanced assessment of sociospatial need for parks by marginalized communities, but is not binding; the City can and does accept philanthropic donations for parks that do not directly respond to established park equity needs. Without strong guidelines and guard rails, and intentional planning around park funding that accounts for

philanthropic donations, the City remains largely responsive to donations, as expressed by Erika Nikolai, Executive Director of Park People:

The high profile spaces that attract philanthropic investment are often in parts of the city that people with the means to make those kinds of investments are familiar with, often more affluent or high profile parts of the city. I think that's always going to be a tension that the City navigates in terms of funders being more personally invested in certain parts of the city and certain parks. (E. Nikolai, personal communication, July 3, 2024)

Redirecting public resources

These donations direct significant private resources to targeted park projects, which may exacerbate existing unevenness in park access and quality. At the same time, parks agencies redirect public resources to match and make these donations possible. In the case of The Bentway, the City contributed \$10 million, drawn from parkland provision and community benefits funds, to support capital costs for the project – public funds enable donated funds to be channeled more directly to programming and operations (City of Toronto, 2016a). The initial donation for The Meadoway was contingent upon contributions from TRCA, the City of Toronto, and later, the Federal and Provincial governments to (City of Toronto, 2024). Former Toronto City Councillor Mike Layton reflected on this relationship in an interview:

The Bentway wouldn't have happened if the City didn't make an investment alongside the Matthews. The Matthews made a wonderful gesture and came up with this great idea. But it's not like it hasn't cost the city easily as much money as the Matthews have contributed. So I think that's important. Then when the money starts getting to be more of a challenge, we're just going to have to decide, is it an important enough cultural institution to warrant additional money? And then in that case, what happens when other people ask for it? It's not particularly equitable if some communities have them, and some don't [...] that's going to be a very real question. (M. Layton, personal communication, May 6, 2024)

That these donations redirect public funds to new park initiatives is evident; whether this redirection ameliorates or exacerbates existing park inequities is as yet unclear. Philanthropic donations are widely celebrated in local media, but, as Erika Nikolai of Park People noted, large

private gifts often require even greater investments of public funding and resources to facilitate projects, adding, "I don't know that the general public is very aware of the kind of dollars that actually go into the municipal-scale projects" (E. Nikolai, personal communication, July 3, 2024). Greater awareness of the degree to which public resources are redirected toward philanthropy-led projects may open space for counter-narratives and critiques to emerge.

Baseline public services, layered philanthropic investment

Some interviewees expressed concern that, in the longer term, the City's responsiveness to philanthropic donations for parks may not only funnel private and public funds to particular communities and geographies that do not align with established park equity goals, but also justify decreased public investment in parks city wide: as philanthropists assume a larger role in park-making, the City recedes from its responsibility to develop and maintain parks (Perkins, 2009). While the scale of philanthropic investment in parks in Toronto remains limited, there are some concerns regarding longer-term implications and public retreat from park development and management responsibility, as expressed in an interview by Dave Harvey, former Executive Director of Park People:

There's always that challenge of, the more philanthropy there is, does that potentially prompt government to back away and not fulfill their mandate?...Everyone wants it so that it's going to augment what the City does and add to what the City does. I think by and large, we've been lucky in Toronto that the parks budgets haven't been affected by that yet. It hasn't got to that level of scale in general in Canada, so we're lucky with that. I think one of the issues always is, is it replacing City resources dedicated for parks that would go elsewhere? (D. Harvey, personal communication, February 14, 2024)

The cases where philanthropic investment layered on top of existing park spaces, services, and investments – as demonstrated by The Meadoway and The Art Trail – appear to address some concerns over diverting public resources and diminishing public responsibility. These cases also appear to respond more clearly to a gap in publicly-provided park services,

from both a capital and programming perspective, introducing park spaces and services that can be more responsive to infrastructural opportunities and to community needs. The donors have a role in adding value without diminishing consistent, evidence-informed, and equity-driven investment in the city-wide park systems.

The Art Trail, in particular, demonstrates what is possible when the public sector ensures a baseline standard of park provision and capital investment - or, "does the plumbing" of capital infrastructure and maintenance in parks - which then allows philanthropy to add services and programs that support and expand the possibilities of park spaces, advancing both distributive and recognitional justice. This aligns with perspectives from collaborative park governance literature that suggests the state is best positioned to provide baseline park development and maintenance services to mitigate distributional inequities posed by park-supporting nonprofits and philanthropists (Campbell et al., 2021; Gazley et al., 2020; Gibson et al., 2018, 2018; Walls, 2014).

Power sharing and programming

A clear distinction between the three cases is their relationship and responsiveness to existing uses and community-identified needs in public space. Envisioned and designed by the donor team, The Bentway grew largely out of a vision developed and designed by the donor team that was responsive to the neighborhood's ongoing growth-related park needs but not driven by community voices. The Lassonde Art Trail was planned over a much longer term by Waterfront Toronto, which engaged the public and stakeholders in envisioning a waterfront public art trail, but the concept of "community" was somewhat constrained by the project's lack of existing, immediate residents. The Meadoway more clearly demonstrates how philanthropic donations can better support and respond to the histories, experiences, and future needs and

desires of diverse community members. The project is focused on ecological restoration and facilitating community access to green space and to active transportation; its design is relatively light touch, and its educational and community programming is widespread and intensive. This exemplifies the potential equity-enhancing capacity of philanthropic investment in not just capital improvements in parks, but in supporting community engagement and programming efforts that connect neighborhoods to their public spaces and to one another.

The Meadoway case also demonstrates how community organizations and park advocates can function as important intermediaries, bridging divides, translating ideas, and fostering dialogue and collaboration between donors and community members, particularly in the early stages of a project. This aligns with existing literature that suggests that local groups can serve as a "conduit to neighborhood knowledge," offering insight on how communities use parks and what they need from these spaces (Gibson et al., 2018), and supporting park access, use, and fit for underserved communities (Gibson et al., 2019; Loukaitou-Sideris & Mukhija, 2019). This is an area of potential in Toronto, for donor-led park projects to be grounded in community needs and visions, and to bring more voices to the decision-making table – ultimately redistributing financial and political power. Park People is an important example of this, able to educate both the City and potential donors on community needs, and building trust and common ground around new ways of collaborating, as expressed in an interview by Dave Harvey:

I think [Park People] actively played an extremely positive role in the City of Toronto to find that common ground and that trust, both from the philanthropic side and the community side and the City side. We're all trying to achieve the same things. Because there's always frustrations in the community about what could be done better, or how they could be playing a different role. There's good reasons sometimes from the City of why that role needs to be limited or framed in a certain way. Again, philanthropy can be frustrated with, you know, why can't we just do this? Why can't we build it on Monday? So I think we helped build some bridges and trust around that. (D. Harvey, personal communication, February 14, 2024)

Power sharing may be further supported through philanthropic investments in programming, rather than capital, costs in parks. This could equip communities with the resources necessary to drive activities and actions in their own parks in a way that is more nimble and responsive to community needs and interests. Park People's work has long emphasized this, and many interview respondents saw this as a clear opportunity to advance recognition equity in parks by shifting away from conventional modes of philanthropic investment in capital infrastructure and towards funding community-based programming that fosters community engagement, connection, and sense of belonging.

Programming budgets, while smaller, can go much further than investment in capital and landscape, but donors often resort to investments in physical improvements in parks, due in part to a desire for traditional philanthropy to "put a name on it," and also because it is much more difficult to understand and tell the story of investments in programming and community activation. This sentiment was shared in an interview by Asima Jansveld of The High Line Network:

Philanthropy, the biggest problem, they want to fund things that are sexy and that they can put their name on. This is very true throughout our network, people are very galvanized to fund capital campaigns. Build this, it's very tangible. I helped build that bridge, that park, that green space, put my name on that bench. Operations and maintenance is very hard to get funded with philanthropy dollars. That is the biggest downfall of philanthropy, that they want to do the sexy things to put their name on things, but then it's the long term that many nonprofits struggle with. (A. Jansveld, personal communication, May 5, 2024)

Whose park?

The tendency of philanthropy to contribute to capital infrastructure in parks, along with the noted patterns of uneven investment in particular, higher-income pockets of the city, raises the question of not only who these parks serve, but who owns the park. The cases here

demonstrate a range of approaches to donor involvement in project development, design, and ongoing programming and management: The Bentway's initiation was directly driven by its donors, but over time, the park and its conservancy have clearly assumed a unique identity. The Lassonde Art Trail and Foundation bear the name of the donors, as does the signage through the space, distinct branding from the other City-owned parks and public realm assets in the Port Lands. The Meadoway again has its own brand identity, but the donors made intentional efforts to center the community, rather than the donor, in the project's initiation and development.

Who is "the face" of the project, in terms of both public perception and actual decision-making, importantly shapes recognitional justice outcomes. The branding of all three parks conveys a distinction from conventional City parks, asserting separateness. But what does this mean for publicness? The degree to which users of the parks are attuned to the specifics of public and private ownership and management is questionable – indeed, many privately-owned or managed public spaces intentionally obscure their private management, maintenance, and security mechanisms to appear more public (Németh, 2009). But in donor-led projects, these moves raise unique conceptual questions of ownership, and the degree to which a donor is able to lay claim to a site through donation and naming. As the Trust for Public Land argued in its report on private funding for public parks: "Regardless of the legalities between the city and the conservancy, the real owners of the park are the people who use it. They are the ones who write letters to the editor, call in to radio talk shows, gossip with friends, post pictures on the internet, and generally establish the park's reputation as a 'sacred space,' 'hall of shame' or something in between. Ultimately it's the community that decides" (Harnik & Martin, 2015).

There has been broad support amongst policymakers, elected officials, the media, and the public for recent philanthropy-led park projects in Toronto. At its current scale, park

philanthropy in Toronto does not appear to be driving dramatic immediate effects in terms of distributive or recognitional justice in parks. However, the cases of The Bentway, The Meadoway, and The Lassonde Art Trail suggest that if such investment were to continue and increase, there is potential to drive further unevenness in park access and quality. While the City has established non-binding tools to measure park equity and plans to invest in park equity (City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2019a), donors themselves may not share an equity lens in their work. As expressed by Erika Nikolai in an interview:

It's the City that will bring a system wide and equity lens, so their investment plans are going to take those needs and considerations into account. Philanthropic investment is driven by donor interests, so it is far more haphazard. I think it's a real concern. American cities are grappling with the inequitable investment that can cause, and how it can cause issues around green gentrification. (E. Nikolai, personal communication, July 3, 2024)

The private sector cannot be tasked with such a responsibility to uphold the public good with an eye to equity. There is no assurance that donors, who approach the city with significant financial, political, and cultural capital, necessarily hold equity-oriented values related to green and public space. As Zahra Ebrahim argued in an interview, "We can't trade on goodwill to get things done, we need slightly more sophisticated systems than that" (Z. Ebrahim, personal communication, October 4, 2024).

At present, the scale of philanthropic funding for Toronto's parks is small. But as collaborative governance and donor-led projects expand, with support from public parks agencies and elected officials, there will become a greater need for the state to ensure that equity is embedded in the policies and practices that enable and facilitate these donations, as expressed in an interview by former Toronto City Councillor Mike Layton, who was in office when The Bentway was developed in his ward, Trinity-Spadina:

I think it poses a challenge if there's not a mechanism to ensure some kind of equity, because I think, left to its own devices, areas where people live, grew up, work, or around major cultural institutions will always concentrate around neighborhoods that mainly have a higher income, and I think you could also argue are more homogenous in the ethno-cultural makeup of the neighborhood. I think that poses a serious challenge, because unless there's some mechanism to ensure that we're investing deeply in cultural institutions across the city, then we're going to create some neighborhoods that have great beautiful things that are fun and they can be proud of and that further bring up the value of their neighborhood, and then some neighborhoods that just don't [...] I guess the conclusion would be that philanthropy like this could create greater inequality in public spaces. I think fundamentally that's a pretty solid conclusion, or line to draw. Does it mean we should say no? Maybe not. Does it allow us to free up money from areas of affluence to go and invest it elsewhere? Maybe, if that's the approach we want to take. But we have to actively do that then. (M. Layton, personal communication, May 6, 2024)

Conclusion

Philanthropic investment in capital infrastructure in parks carries clear implications for distributive equity, channeling considerable funds into particular geographies and redirecting funds and capacities from an under-resourced public sector to match, with questionable benefits for immediate neighbors and city-wide park systems. As clearly demonstrated in the literature, such modes of investment carry the risk of further deepening spatial inequities in park provision, creating a system where abundant resources are channeled toward parks in whiter and wealthier neighborhoods while lower income and racialized neighborhoods remain underinvested. The Bentway illustrates an intense investment of private funds along with City resources into what is ultimately a small public space, albeit in a rapidly growing neighborhood. Advocates argue distributive equity benefits largely lie in its capacity to inspire similar donor-led infrastructure reuse projects in other underserved geographies, presuming the model will replicate organically across the city. In contrast, The Meadoway directs the same scale of philanthropic investment, matched by public funds, toward a much more geographically expansive space, serving and

connecting many historically underserved, racialized, and low-income communities throughout Scarborough. The Lassonde Art Trail's investment is again highly localized, but given the function of the waterfront as a destination for all Torontonians, it carries benefits for those living beyond its immediate neighborhood.

The impacts of these three projects are mixed, but what is shared is the reliance on the assumed benevolence of the donors. Without redistributive mechanisms or required alignment with park equity goals, there is no means to ensure philanthropic investments in park spaces enhance park equity, rather than exacerbate and deepen existing injustices. All three cases have intentions or current plans to expand, replicate, or influence other similar projects; they are understood as important demonstrations of what is possible when it comes to philanthropy in parks constructed in reused urban infrastructure, with the goal to inspire other such projects. This signals that now is an important moment to both continue to carefully track the equity outcomes of these projects, and to lay the foundations for policies and practices that will actively facilitate park equity in future philanthropy-led projects.

CHAPTER 8: INSIGHTS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

How is philanthropic power mobilized, obscured, and contested in park design and programming, and what does this reveal about the relationship between philanthropy-led park making strategies and the uneven production of urban public space?

Urban public parks and green spaces are illustrative sites in which complex interrelationships between nature and the city, private and public, and state and society are made visible. Everyday life as it unfolds in and around Toronto's parks reveals a great deal about the local political-economic and socio-environmental changes taking place in the region. But parks also have stories to tell about global change: how ideas about green space and about philanthropy, emerging from other projects and places, circulate through policy networks and find their way into park design and governance strategies in Toronto.

In this dissertation, I investigate an important shift underway in Toronto's parks: the increasing participation of philanthropy in the production of public space. I explore how ideas about philanthropic participation in park production are developed and mobilized, how this participation reshapes park planning processes, and how this produces spatially uneven outcomes in park spaces and across park systems. These questions are consequential as collaborative approaches to urban service delivery, including parks, become more common, but the implications for participation, democracy, and distributive equity remain unclear. At the same time, urban parks are increasingly positioned as critical to urban livability and urban growth, and central to urban policy agendas. Collaborative governance allows private interests to become embedded in the public realm through philanthropic giving – but what does that mean for park

justice? A clearer understanding of how parks produced through donations differ from parks produced through state-led processes, and of how these processes reflect local and global environmental governance changes is needed.

Using a theoretical framework grounded in the production of space, I apply an urban political ecology lens to consider the interrelations between the ideological construction and material production of urban parks, and use park justice frameworks to evaluate the equity implications of philanthropy-led strategies for urban green space planning, design, and governance. By interrogating the relationships between donor-led park making and the uneven production of urban public space, I uncover important ways in which changing political-economic and socio-environmental conditions, at multiple scales, are reshaping the possibilities of park justice. This analysis connects political-economic theories of the uneven production of (public) space with social theories about the social construction of urban greening to interrogate the premise, process, and outcomes of philanthropy-led park making.

Insights

This study examines the discursive and material construction of urban public space, or, the interrelations between urban environmental imaginaries and urban landscapes. Through three connected case studies, each representing a recent, high-profile, donor-led park in Toronto, I explore how particular ideas about parks and philanthropy are produced and mobilized in actual park planning processes and park spaces. To do so, I consider changing environmental discourses, environmental design, and environmental governance strategies. I focus on the everyday activities – the public dialogues, planning meetings, design decisions, and parks programs – that illustrate how philanthropic power is wielded in the park-making process. This

mode of analysis connects everyday life in urban public environments to the public and policy discourses surrounding these environments and the power and capital mobilized in and through them to consider the production of urban green space, the implications for justice, and the possibilities for resistance.

More concretely, I investigate three questions that together tell a greater story about power, parks, and philanthropy: what are the key *drivers* motivating philanthropic participation in park production, how does this participation reshape the *modes* through which parks are designed and developed, and what are the *implications* for park justice.

Drivers of green space philanthropy

Chapter 5 investigated the drivers of green space philanthropy: how ideas about philanthropy in urban green space are produced, how they are mobilized, and how they gain power to shape how we develop, design, and govern urban parks. The Bentway, The Meadoway, and The Lasseonde Art Trail have introduced new design and governance approaches to park spaces and programming, signaling a shift in how Torontonians think about parks and about philanthropy. Historically, both political-economic and cultural factors have kept Canadians wary of private donors in public parks: stronger tax-supported park budgets, a relatively smaller philanthropic sector, and a cultural resistance to the perception of privatization have limited philanthropic engagement, when compared to other large US cities.

To understand how parks have come to be understood as a policy problem and philanthropy as a policy solution, I drew from perspectives in urban political ecology that emphasize the interrelationships between the ideological construction of urban environments and the materiality of urban environmental change (Keil & Boudreau, 2006). Using the theoretical and methodological approaches of critical discourse analysis, I looked beyond the text of

policies, plans, and news articles to confront the uncritical acceptance of these particular ways of understanding and intervening in urban parks and green spaces (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Lees, 2004). I interrogated how ideas about the goodness of greening and the benevolence of philanthropy are not natural, but actively produced and mobilized discursively, through power-laden processes. Drawing on policy mobilities literature (Goh, 2021; Peck, 2011), I traced how global policy discourses regarding collaborative green governance, emerging from other projects and places, have gained ground in Toronto and have been adapted to the local political, cultural, and environmental context. This connects particular changes in park design and governance in Toronto to political-economic and cultural changes unfolding globally.

I find that Toronto's "park crisis" is framed as a product of Toronto's inefficient, ineffective, and under-resourced public sector, unable to meet the changing park needs of a rapidly growing city. At the same time, parks are positioned as drivers of economic, environmental, and social sustainability in policy discourses and urban imaginaries, key to achieving Toronto's ambitions as a global city. Global networks of park professionals and peer-to-peer networks like The High Line Network extoll the benefits of creative parks constructed through urban infrastructure reuse and collaborative governance approaches, equipping powerful civic actors - philanthropists, advocates, and elected officials - with compelling narratives to advance donor-led urban infrastructure reuse projects as a natural solution to Toronto's park crisis. The agency to produce and mobilize discourses regarding philanthropy in parks is highly uneven: in all three park projects, I found coalitions of donors and their supportive actors, including elected officials and public sector staff, hold outsized influence in news coverage and thus the ability to mobilize "official" narratives about the need for and benefits of philanthropy-led park projects.

Because urban environmental discourses shape how urban problems are understood and how solutions are enacted in policies and plans (Allan & Tolbert, 2019), I argue these discourses do not merely represent but actually *produce* urban realities and, in this case, urban landscapes. I argue that structural, cultural, and environmental changes at multiple scales have transformed how Torontonians think about parks and about philanthropy. This, in turn, has reshaped the discursive and material construction of urban space in the city. Extending from Wachsmuth and Angelo's (2018) argument that the assumed social, environmental, and economic benefits of urban greening have become "a new policy commonsense," I argue that, despite distinctively Canadian critiques, the value of philanthropy-led approaches to urban park design and governance has become *naturalized*. Amidst frustration over insufficient park investment, donors are positioned as the ideal market-based means to make parks: decisive, creative, and efficient where the public sector is slow, risk averse, and tied to convention.

Underpinning this uncritical acceptance of the social and ecological benefits of philanthropy-led parks created through urban infrastructure reuse is the assumption that these benefits are universal and widespread – which, as further investigation reveals, is not clearly the case in any of the three park projects. Naturalizing the value of philanthropy-led park making obfuscates concerns over green gentrification and displacement and assumes shared social, environmental, and economic benefits. The dominance of this narrative, in combination with the intense need for park investment across the system, limits the ability for counter-narratives and alternative approaches to park development to gain discursive space.

Modes of philanthropy-led park making

Moving from discourse to practice, Chapter 6 investigated the modes of philanthropy-led park making: how the participation of philanthropic donors reshapes power relations and

processes through which parks are planned, designed, and governed. Global policy discourses advance collaborative approaches to fund, design, and program urban green spaces, and these approaches are taking root in Toronto. As the first donor-led projects of its scale, The Bentway was a "proof of concept" for philanthropic engagement in envisioning, designing, and funding a major infrastructure resume park project, and for establishing Toronto's first park conservancy. The Meadoway and The Lassonde Art Trail drew inspiration from and adapted approaches used by The Bentway's donors to deliver park projects above and beyond what is conventional through City-led processes alone.

To understand how the introduction of donor power transforms park planning and design processes typically undertaken by the public sector, I turned to theories that explore the growing interdependence between the state and civil society in the delivery of public spaces and services (Swyngedouw, 2005), blurring the line between parks – a quintessential public space – and the private sector, with a particular focus on questions of process and participation. Without presuming a public-led planning process to be inherently equitable, I explored how the process of development and design for each park framed the opportunities and constraints of participation. While there is some evidence that grassroots, community-led collaborative park governance and stewardship efforts can be pathways to participation and community control, planning processes may be captured by elite interests; this appears largely a question of power and scale. Employing procedural justice frameworks, I analyzed the processes, dialogues, meetings, and media that constituted the park visioning, planning, design, and development process, and uncovered the conditions in which philanthropy-led park projects create or constrain possibilities for participation.

My findings showed considerable variation in park-making strategies across the three cases. The Bentway was a project envisioned and advanced by its donors, who used strict conditions to ensure the project's expedited delivery according to their initial plans. Offering a pre-conceived plan and a matching donation constrained the possibility of community participation in shaping the project. Conversely, The Meadoway developed incrementally over time, expanding in successive iterations from a small-scale pilot project to the largest linear urban green space in Canada, and along the way, offering avenues for meaningful community participation at key junctures. Unique in its position as a new park in a new neighborhood, The Lassonde Art Trail's participatory processes were largely attached to the broader Port Lands planning efforts, positioning the park and its programming as a small but integral part of a much larger infrastructure project. Each of these projects demonstrated a different approach toward the reorganization of responsibility for park making from the state to nonprofit actors, with distinct implications for procedural justice.

These findings support three important insights on how philanthropy infuses the park making processes with new power relations. First, the political and cultural capital of philanthropists facilitates increased access to and ability to influence media and policy dialogues - to shape the conversation. Donors have an outsized influence in the initial framing of park projects, shaping public opinion to gain support and pre-empt criticism, while diminishing the ability of counter-narratives to gain ground. Second, donors may assume different approaches to establish initial project ideas and goals - to shape the vision. The Bentway's announcement presented the project as a *fait accompli*, a once in a generation opportunity offered by the donors. The donations for The Meadoway and The Lassonde Art Trail were offered long after the projects had been envisioned by public sector leaders and supportive community members. The

timing of a donor's engagement - whether it supports an existing park initiative or proposes a new one - appears to meaningfully shape the possibilities for procedural justice. Third, donors wield power to shape the parameters of participation and the nature of the park planning process itself. Where meaningful opportunities to shape a park project remain, as with The Meadoway, donor support may expand participation through robust and creative consultation processes. Where donations hinge on pre-established project visions, as with The Bentway, participatory justice is hindered.

With considerable power to shape conversations, visions, and the parameters of participation, donor power may limit the possibility of meaningful community participation in park-making processes. I argue that this, in combination with the naturalized value of urban greening and urban philanthropy and the need to invest in green spaces to support social, environmental, and economic goals, *neutralizes* dissent amongst the public and policy makers. The power of philanthropy even beyond these park projects may further limit counter narratives and critique, as park advocates and community groups with a stake in these projects may be reliant on these very same donors for grants and donations. Discourses that frame philanthropic investment in public parks and green spaces as broadly shaped social and environmental goods, thereby *naturalizing* its value, further limit the possibility for counter-narratives to gain ground throughout planning and design processes, effectively *neutralizing* dissent. The balance of power may be tipped when community voices are actively engaged in efforts to shape park visions from the outset and in ongoing and iterative conversations throughout development, suggesting that time is a key variable influencing procedural justice.

Implications of donor-directed green space

From process to outcomes, Chapter 7 examined the implications of donor-led park production: how philanthropic power is embedded in the public realm through park design and programming, and how this shapes uneven outcomes for communities. The three sites in Toronto have all been proposed and produced in the past decade, and outcomes are still unfolding. But given the claims made regarding the equity-generating power of urban infrastructure reuse projects, and the broadly shared benefits of philanthropy, it is important to assess how these projects are delivering on their promises and what they actually produce on the ground - in the park spaces and across parksystems.

Extending from the discursive to material construction of urban parks, I analyze how philanthropic power transforms park design and programming approaches. I begin with theories of the uneven production of urban space (Smith, 2008), and extend theoretical perspectives on the more specific relationships between private power and park equity through the nonprofitization of park provision (Perkins, 2010). Because the parks in question are urban infrastructure reuse projects, laden with symbolism that obfuscates industrial histories in order to advance an image of urban health, sustainability, and prosperity, I draw also on framings of parks as "engineered ecosystems" and investments in urban growth (Birge-Liberman, 2010). Using distributive and recognitional justice as evaluative frameworks, I consider how the parks themselves respond to established equity needs in their immediate neighborhoods and across the city, conceptualizing park equity as more than just access, but also belonging (Goh et al., 2022; Low & Iveson, 2016).

Despite Toronto's adoption of more nuanced measures of park equity and more fulsome, equity-informed plans for park investment and enhancement, I find that philanthropy-led projects

are not required to adhere to established equity frameworks. Design and programming decisions are driven by related infrastructure investments and development goals, as well as broader trends in urban design and creative placemaking that advance art- and culture-led green spaces. While The Bentway adds public space to a rapidly growing and park deficient neighborhood, its small scale limits its distributive equity impact; those close to the project emphasize its replicability as supporting park access by inspiring imitator projects in other geographies. The Meadoway has the benefit of scale, stretching 16 km and linking many equity-deserving neighborhoods, home to racialized populations that have been underserved by parks and green space. The Lassonde Art Trail's location along the waterfront, as a destination public space for all Torontonians, expands its impact beyond its local neighborhood. The recognitional justice outcomes are also mixed: The Bentway's intensive, diverse, and according to some, elite arts programming attracts a particular user group. The Meadoway's everyday activation of the urban/nature interface invites adjacent community members to use the space in ways that reflect their identities and needs. The Lassonde Art Trail's outcomes are yet to be seen, but the initial focus on Indigenous arts programming aims to address an injustice and assert the continued presence of Indigenous communities as part of the waterfront's evolution.

What these examples demonstrate is how political, cultural, and financial power enables philanthropic interests to become embedded in the public realm and its design and programming. The three projects have produced rather spatially isolated investments, rather than system-wide change, despite the considerable geographic and financial scale of need across the city. The Bentway responded to considerable park needs in the growing downtown, The Lassonde Art Trail delivered a new park for a destination waterfront, and The Meadoway, due largely to its linearity and scale, has delivered new park space accessible to residents across many park-poor

neighborhoods. While these investments have not tipped the scales too much to date, they raise important questions about whether continued philanthropic investment channeled toward particular geographies could deepen distributional inequities across the park system.

Furthermore, these cases show that philanthropic investment is matched with public investment: public funds are necessary to facilitate and manage these donations, through staff time, capital funds, and other resources redirected to ensure donor-funded projects proceed, raising fears over diverting public resources away from existing, equity-informed needs and towards a responsive stance to philanthropic pledges.

Donor investments in programming layered on top of existing public-funded capital and baseline services, as demonstrated by The Lassonde Art Trail, may support park enhancements without exacerbating distributive inequities, and may prove more responsive to community-based needs than capital investments. Ultimately, all three projects illustrate a shift away from the public production of public space and towards more collaborative approaches, blurring the boundary between public and private dollars and public and private space. Where donors have strong equity-informed goals, this may facilitate distributive and recognitional justice, but donors alone cannot be tasked with upholding the public good in public parks.

Synthesis of the findings

Thinking across the three embedded cases of philanthropy-led park making in Toronto, it is clear that the participation of donors in the production of urban green space is not necessarily "more or less just" than conventional, state-led processes. While the privatization of public services and spaces often drives inequality and injustice, philanthropy-led park design and governance does not directly map onto these observed patterns. When considered alone, each

case presented here delivers a range of social and environmental benefits, and provides the people of Toronto with new park space that supports recreation, community, and culture. But it is essential to consider these cases together and in relation to change underway in other cities: to view these park projects as representations of shifting discourses regarding state/society and city/nature relationships, which have real material effects in the urban public realm.

The most clearly observable pattern across the cases is not the impact of philanthropy on park justice outcomes (creating more or less just urban green spaces), but the ways in which the public, policymakers, and philanthropists have collectively shifted expectations about how parks ought to be made in the city and who ought to make them. In the context of diminishing park budgets and increasing need for parks services, these projects illustrate a repositioning of philanthropy as an ideal, and even necessary, partner for delivering high-quality, sustainable urban parks and green spaces in the growing, post-industrial city. Here, it is essential to consider the power – political, cultural, financial – of the philanthropic donors, who may be motivated by social and environmental goals, but lack accountability for the public good.

Theoretical Implications: Power, park making, and urban political ecology

Synthesizing these findings and extending from existing theory, I offer an emerging analysis of how local philanthropy-led park production strategies are influenced by and implicate global processes of socio-environmental change through which urban landscapes are produced in the capitalist city: how the participation of philanthropic donors transforms the discourses through which parks are understood, the processes through which parks are produced, the material sites of the parks themselves.

The production of urban parks, like other urban infrastructure, is fundamentally a process that links the built environment with capital, politics, society, and ecology (Ernstson & Swyngedouw, 2019). Contemporary trends in park production, design, and programming transform both the urban environment and its symbolism: parks are reframed as authentic environments in the post-industrial city, poised to enhance livability and attract investment (Gandy, 2022a). This reframing reflects a new cultural and economic role for urban parks and green spaces, which I argue invites the participation of philanthropy, which shares an interest in urban identity making, urban growth, and, by extension, urban greening.

Philanthropists mobilize their political, cultural, and financial power to develop and disseminate dominant discourses about the need for and benefit of their participation in park production. This is supported by global policy mobilities that promote creative reuse projects and related collaborative governance strategies, alongside discourses that frame parks created through urban infrastructure reuse as inherently equity-making. I argue that, together, these discourses naturalize the value of philanthropic engagement in park production, and in doing so, carry very real spatial implications: these discourses materialize in actual park spaces and programs, inscribing the public realm with private interests. Through socio-political flows, local philanthropy-led parks are connected to, reinforce, and are reinforced by other urban environmental changes in distant geographies (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2015) and to global processes of urban image making and uneven development.

Collaborative governance, like other forms of urban environmental change, is not a technical intervention but a political one, seeped in economic, political, and cultural power relations (Angelo, 2024). Philanthropy-led park production mobilizes donor power to create change in urban environments, confronting space, race, and class to produce uneven patterns of

park access and inclusion. I argue these power dynamics are uniquely obfuscated by the assumed goodness of urban greening and the assumed benevolence of civic philanthropy, which together neutralize contestation and counter-narratives, and constrain alternative claims to park production. The material production of urban green space is interconnected with discursive representations of greening, growth, and philanthropic giving. So what appear to be "natural" transformations in urban green space design and governance actually constitute planning processes and public environments embedded with private power. Attention to these discursive and material changes, and the ways in which power operates in and through them, is essential in order to seek more just alternatives.

Practical Implications: Recommendations for more just park making

Uncovering injustices in donor-led parks and the processes through which they are produced reveals avenues toward more just planning, design, and governance practices (Ernstson & Swyngedouw, 2019; Keil, 2003; Smith, 2006). Here, the state has an important role to play. Indeed, by creating the conditions for collaborative governance, the state is not devolving responsibility to private actors but fundamentally reorganizing responsibility while remaining actively engaged: roll-out neoliberalism as a fix for the crisis of parks funding (Peck, 2008). The cases analyzed here, in their successes and failures, point to several promising pathways through which local governments may mitigate the risks of philanthropy-led park projects while harnessing the potential of collaborative models of park production and governance.

First, the timing of philanthropic engagement in a park project is consequential: when a donor envisions a new park project and proposes funding to match, there is limited room for public participation in determining the vision and goals of the project and developing its design

and programming, and limited room for policymakers and elected officials to reject a much-needed donation. Dramatically increasing the transparency of these early visioning processes and creating processes and standards for public engagement in advance of project announcement could broaden possibilities for community voices to be centered early in the planning process.

Second, the place where philanthropy may be most needed is in supporting existing, community-led park projects. Networks of park friends groups emerging around neighborhood parks have the experience, knowledge, and connections necessary to understand park needs and opportunities and deliver responsive community programming. While these small-scale efforts often lack resources to support their work, park programming may be more impactful when compared, dollar for dollar, with capital investments. With network-building support and grant programs led by local governments, philanthropy could dramatically expand access to much-needed resources to support community-led park projects. Alternative visions of collaborative governance, in which donors support community-led initiatives to care for people and place in parks, present opportunities to redistribute power throughout the processes that produce park environments.

Third, donors may be most effective when supporting park programming, rather than capital investments. Local governments often struggle to adequately support ongoing cultural and community programming in parks, due in part to a lack of expertise in programming and curation, lack of knowledge of local community interests and needs, and lack of funding to support operations. If local governments were to make meaningful capital investments and enhancements across park systems and craft detailed terms and conditions for donations to physical park improvements, this could secure a baseline of support for physical park spaces and

infrastructures, thereby freeing donors to more readily add a "layer" of programming on top of existing parks to expand their relevance and reach to diverse communities.

Finally, to address distributional equity issues, cities ought to create guard rails to ensure donations reflect and respond to demonstrated park equity needs in individual neighborhoods and across the system as a whole. Non-binding collaborative governance guidelines and park equity goals are not sufficient; donors are not responsible for adhering to public processes or priorities. If cities are to work in productive collaboration with private donors, there must be policies and procedures in place to ensure these donations do not further deepen distributional equity across park systems.

Limitations and avenues for future research

What the sitedness of this case study research offers in descriptive and analytical depth, it lacks in straightforward transferability; Toronto represents a unique political-economic and cultural context in which philanthropy-led park making has only recently taken hold. While the aim here is not to achieve statistical generalizability but rather analytical generalizability, or the ability to extend theory for application in different sites and stories, the findings and recommendations presented are not a one-size-fits all solution. To that end, additional cases are needed to add further variation and support a more nuanced, and ultimately stronger, analysis of the justice implications of power in park production.

This study explored how philanthropy-led park projects respond to existing park equity goals and needs; I did not set out to evaluate outcomes on the ground in terms of green gentrification and displacement. As these park projects are completed and continue to operate, such analyses will be important to understand their full impacts. Tracing impacts and iterations

over time is a worthwhile project: if urban environmental discourse and urban environments are co-constitutive, exploring how these change as philanthropy-led park projects age, grow, and inspire other projects is sure to yield new insights.

Finally, as argued here, philanthropy lies on one extreme end of the spectrum of collaborative park governance. There are many other models of civil society engagement in park production and stewardship that deserve exploration. In particular, there are opportunities to compare these approaches across factors of scale, power, and community control, to understand a typology of collaborative park governance and its implications for park justice.

Appendix A: Interviews Conducted

Altman, Ilana. Co-Executive Director, The Bentway Conservancy. Toronto (virtual), January 15, 2024.

Bennet, Doug. Senior Project Manager, Partnerships, City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation. Toronto (virtual), January 03, 2024.

Carter-Shamai, Sam. Former Manager, Planning, The Bentway Conservancy. Toronto (virtual), January 25, 2024.

Catan, Chloe. Executive Director, Lassonde Art Trail Foundation. Toronto (virtual), January 10, 2024.

Chadwick, Lorraine. Project Manager, Restoration and Infrastructure, Toronto and Region Conservation Authority. Toronto, February 16, 2024.

Corson, Liz. Acting Manager, Research and Analytics, Policy and Strategic Planning Branch, City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation. Toronto (virtual), May 24, 2024.

Ebrahim, Zahra. Co-Founder, Monumental Projects. Toronto (virtual), October 8, 2024.

Glaisek, Chris. Chief Planning and Design Officer, Waterfront Toronto. Toronto, July 11, 2024.

Greenberg, Ken. Urban Designer, Greenberg Consultants. Toronto, June 18, 2025.

Harvey, Dave. Former Executive Director, Park People. Toronto (virtual), February 14, 2024.

Iacovino, Christina. Director, Client and Business Services, City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation. Toronto (virtual), February 01, 2024.

Jansveld, Asima. Managing Director, Friends of the High Line. New York City (virtual), May 03, 2024.

Kinsey, Kris. Senior Project Manager, Ravine Partnerships, City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation. Toronto (virtual), February 12, 2024.

Layton, Mike. Former City Councillor, Ward 19: Trinity Spadina, Toronto City Council. Toronto (virtual), May 06, 2024.

Lindsay, Lois. Chief Program Officer, Evergreen. Toronto (virtual), May 27, 2024.

Lorinc, John. Freelance Writer. Toronto (virtual), August 15, 2024.

Love, Colin. Supervisor of Community Outreach, Toronto and Region Conservation Authority Education and Training Division. Toronto (virtual), October 16, 2024.

MacIntosh, Ben. Manager, Cultural Partnerships, City of Toronto Economic Development and Culture. Toronto (virtual), February 12, 2024.

McKelvie, Jennifer. City Councillor, Ward 25: Scarborough-Rouge Park, Toronto City Council. Toronto (virtual), June 04, 2024.

Nagel, Catherine. Executive Director, City Parks Alliance. New York City (virtual), April 29, 2024.

Nikolai, Erika. Executive Director, Park People. Toronto (virtual), July 03, 2024.

O'Hara, David. Manager, Park Design, City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation. Toronto (virtual), January 24, 2024.

O'Rourke, Amanda. Executive Director, 8-80 Cities. Toronto (virtual), October 11, 2024.

Pitter, Jay. Researcher, Author and Practitioner; Adjunct Professor, Urban Planning. Toronto (phone), October 04, 2024.

Rowe, Mary. President and CEO, Canadian Urban Institute. Toronto (virtual), May 15, 2024.

Ryan, Marc. Partner, PUBLIC WORK. Toronto, July 08, 2024.

Stuart, Netami. Senior Project Manager, Parks, Waterfront Toronto. Toronto, February 15, 2024.

Sweeney, Herb. Principal, Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates. New York City (phone), July 10, 2024.

Theofilogiannakos, Chris. Policy and Partnerships Advisor, City of Toronto Strategic Partnerships. Toronto (virtual), April 16, 2024.

Thompson, Michael. City Councillor, Ward 21: Scarborough Center, Toronto City Council. Toronto (virtual), May 17, 2024.

Turnbull, Katie. Senior Project Manager, Toronto and Region Conservation Authority. Toronto, February 16, 2024.

Ubbens, Richard. Director, Conservation Parks and Lands, Toronto and Region Conservation Authority. Toronto (virtual), February 01, 2024.

Wilcox, Suzy. Director of Development, Evergreen. Toronto (virtual), May 27, 2024.

Wong, Eunice. Urban Designer, Associate, Perkins + Will. Toronto (virtual), July 10, 2024.

Zegarac, George. President and CEO, Waterfront Toronto. Toronto, July 11, 2024.

Interview participants' titles correspond to the date of the interview. Participants who wished to remain anonymous and those who participated in informal interviews have been omitted.

Appendix B: Sample Interview Protocol

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (adaptable for public agency staff)

Nature and extent

1. Explain your **role** within your organization, and your major areas of work when it comes to parks and the public realm.
2. In your work, do you engage in **cross-sector partnerships** with nonprofit and philanthropic organizations in parks?
 - a. If so, how common are these partnerships?
 - b. How, if at all, has the nature, scale, and scope of these partnerships changed in recent years?
 - i. What factors do you think account for this change?
3. Does your organization actively **solicit new partnerships** with philanthropic donors?
 - a. If so, what are your strategies to support or facilitate these partnerships?
 - i. Dedicated staff teams, budgetary, or other resources?
 - ii. Policies or guidelines structures to guide these collaborations with nonprofit organizations? (e.g. guidelines, legislated policies, long-term plans)?
 - b. To what degree are these practices codified or legislated?

Goals, benefits, challenges

4. What are your **goals** for partnerships with nonprofit and philanthropic organizations in parks?
 - a. Are these goals connected to other organizational strategies or plans?
5. What do you believe are the primary **benefits** of collaborating with philanthropic donors in park production?
6. What do you believe are the most pressing **challenges** when it comes to collaborating with philanthropic donors in park production?

Specific cases

7. How was [park project] and the partnership with [donor] **initiated**?
8. How would you describe the **role of the donor** in:
 - a. Establishing a vision for the project?
 - b. Designing and delivering the planning and public consultation process?

- c. Determining the design and programming direction of the park?
 - d. Managing the ongoing operations and programming of the park?
9. Based on your experience with [park project], do you see this project as a positive advancement for parks in Toronto? What are the lasting **impacts**?
10. Knowing what you know now, is there anything you would **do differently** if you were to undertake a similar philanthropy-funded park project in the future?

Equity impacts

11. There is some concern over philanthropic participation and park equity. What do you perceive to be the role of philanthropic organizations in **addressing park equity** issues?
12. How do you see the relationship between [park project] and **equity**?
- a. How would you characterize the **consultation and planning process** for [park project] in terms of diversity of participation and meaningful engagement?
 - b. How would you characterize the outcomes of this park project in terms of park **spaces and programs**?
 - c. How would you characterize the outcomes of this park project in terms of how the space **reflects the public space needs** of the local community?

Influence

13. Has this project been **influenced by** other recent philanthropic investments in the public realm in Toronto or elsewhere?
14. What do you hope will be the **influence of** this project on cross-sector partnerships in parks and the public realm?

Snowball sampling

15. Are there any key **contacts** within your organization or others that you recommend I connect with?

Appendix C: Summary of Policy Documents Analyzed

Type	Date	Title
City of Toronto		
Report	2001	Canada's Urban Waterfront: Waterfront Culture and Heritage Infrastructure Plan
Report	2001	Fort York and Garrison Common: Parks and Open Space Design and Implementation Plan
Report	2001	Waterfront Heritage and Culture Infrastructure Plan
Report	2003	Central Waterfront Secondary Plan
Report	2004	Fort York Neighbourhood Public Realm Master Plan
Report	2006	Fort York Pedestrian and Cycle Bridge, 2006
Report	2013	Parks Plan 2013-2017 Staff Report
Report	2013	Parks Plan 2013-2017 Summary
Report	2014	A Summary of the City's Donation Activity for 2013
Report	2014	A Summary of the City's Donation Activity for 2014
Report	2015	A Summary of the City's Donation Activity for 2015
Report	2015	Gardiner West Public Realm Improvements Reserve Fund
Report	2015	Private Donation to Animate the F.G. Gardiner Expressway from Approximately Strachan Avenue to Spadina Avenue
Report	2016	A Summary of the City's Donation Activity for 2016
Report	2016	Governance and Funding Options for Project: Under Gardiner and Class Environmental Assessment for Crossing of Fort York Boulevard
Report	2016	New Implementation Approach for the F.G. Gardiner Expressway Revised Strategic Rehabilitation Plan
Report	2017	Toronto Ravine Strategy
Report	2018	Downtown Parks and Public Realm Plan Public Space Public Life Study
Report	2018	For Public Benefit: City of Toronto Framework for Working with Community-Based Not-For-Profit Organizations
Report	2018	Use Agreement for The Bentway
Report	2019	Parkland Strategy Final Report
Report	2019	Toronto Public Art Strategy 2020-2030
Report	2019	Parkland Strategy: Growing Toronto Parkland

Report	2019	Parks Plan 2013-2017
Report	2020	Ravine Strategy Implementation
Report	2021	Increasing Engagement in Ravines through Partnerships
Report	2021	Next Phase of Waterfront Revitalization
Report	2021	TOcore Implementation Strategy: Downtown Parks and Public Realm Plan
Report	2021	Waterfront Strategic Review Update Background Study
Report	2021	Collaborative Governance Report: A Framework 1.0 for Toronto Parks
Report	2022	A Summary of the City's Donation Activity for 2022
Report	2022	Authority to Negotiate and Enter Into Donation and License Agreements for a New Waterfront Public Art Trail
Report	2022	CivicLabTO: Advancing a Culture of Innovation and Collaboration
Report	2022	Igniting Innovation A Call To Action for Innovation-led Economic Development on Toronto's Waterfront
Report	2022	Next Phase of Waterfront Revitalization Public And Stakeholder Engagement Summary
Report	2022	Priority Downtown Parks and Public Realm Opportunities
Report	2022	Ravine Strategy Implementation Update
Report	2022	Update on the Next Phase of Waterfront Revitalization
Report	2023	Cycling Network Plan: 2023 Cycling Infrastructure Installation
Report	2023	Social Development Grants - Addressing Reconciliation and Equity via Community Funding
Report	2024	Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan
Report	2025	Report on the FIFA World Cup 2026TM Final Draw and Match Schedule
Report	2025	Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan - Multi-Use Trail Study Delivery Agreement
Press Release	2021	News Release: City of Toronto officially opens Canoe Landing Community Recreation Centre
Press Release	2022	News Release: Pierre Lassonde Family Foundation donates \$25 million to City of Toronto to create new waterfront public art trail
Press Release	2022	News Release: Toronto City Council endorses work plan to accelerate delivery and expansion of major downtown parks
Presentation	2022	A Vision for a Waterfront Public Art Trail
Presentation	2023	Toronto's Waterfront: Partnerships and Opportunities

Meeting Minutes	2018	Authorization to Transfer Section 42 Funds to The Bentway - by Councillor Joe Cressy, seconded by Councillor Mike Layton
Meeting Minutes	2020	The Bentway Under Gardiner Corridor Plan Proposal - by Councillor Joe Cressy, seconded by Councillor Mike Layton
Meeting Minutes	2022	Expanding Canoe Landing Park Under the Gardiner Expressway - by Councillor Joe Cressy, seconded by Councillor Mike Layton
Meeting Minutes	2023	A Request to Review City Partnership Programs - by Councillor Stephen Holyday, seconded by Councillor Shelley Carroll
Meeting Minutes	2023	Agenda Item History: Advancing University Park
Meeting Minutes	2023	Authorization to Release Section 37 Funds to the Bentway Conservancy to Advance the Development of the Space South of Canoe Landing Park Under the Gardiner Expressway - by Deputy Mayor Ausma Malik, seconded by Councillor Gord Perks
Meeting Minutes	2024	Authority to Negotiate and Enter Operation and Maintenance Agreement with Toronto and Region Conservation Authority to Realize Meadoway
Meeting Minutes	2025	Authorization to Release Section 37 Funds for the Gardiner Public Realm Plan Strachan Gate Connection Design
Meeting Minutes	2025	Authorization to Release Section 37 Funds to the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority for Improvements to the Gatineau Hydro Corridor
City Parks Alliance		
Report	2015	Closing the Gap: Public and Private Funding Strategies for Neighborhood Parks
Report	2019	City Parks: A Smart Investment for America's Health, Economy & Environment Case Studies
Design Trust for Public Space		
Report	2019	El-Space Toolkit
High Line Network		
Report	2019	Best Practices Toolkit Strategies and Tactics for Early-Phase Infrastructure Reuse Projects Volume I
Report	2019	New Monuments for New Cities: The Inaugural Joint Art Initiative
Report	2020	Building Equity Within Our Organizations: Six Takeaways from the High Line Network
Report	2022	Embedding Equity in Public Space: An Overview of the Community First Toolkit

Lassonde Art Trail Foundation		
Press Release	2024	Press Release: Innovative Public Art Trail Announces Renowned Artist Kent Monkman as First Major Commission
Press Release	2024	Press Release: New York's Central Park and Canada's New Art Trail Connected through a Co-Commissioned Public Artwork
Park People		
Report	2013	The Weston Family Parks Challenge
Report	2015	Making Connections: Planning parks and open space networks in urban neighbourhoods
Report	2017	Breaking New Ground: Lessons and impacts from the Weston Family Parks Challenge
Report	2017	Financing City Parks in Canada: What might be done?
Report	2017	Sparkling Change: Catalyzing the Social Impacts of Parks in Underserved Neighborhoods
Report	2019	The 2019 Canadian City Parks Report
Report	2020	The 2020 Canadian City Parks Report
Report	2021	The 2021 Canadian City Parks Report: Centring Equity & Resilience
Report	2022	The 2022 Canadian City Parks Report: Nurturing Relationships & Reciprocity
Report	2023	InTO the Ravines: 2020-2022 Impact Report
Report	2023	Report on Park Use and Stewardship High Park Nature Centre 2021-2022
Report	2023	The 2023 Canadian City Parks Report: Surfacing Solutions
Report	2024	The 2024 Canadian City Parks Report
The Bentway Conservancy		
Report	2019	The Bentway Annual Report 2018-2019
Report	2020	The Bentway Annual Report 2019-2020
Report	2021	The Bentway Annual Report 2020-2021
Report	2021	Waterfront Reconnect Design Competition Call for Expression of Interest
Report	2022	The Bentway Annual Report 2021-2022
Report	2022	Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan Background Report
Report	2022	Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan Interim Consultation Summary
Report	2023	The Bentway Annual Report 2022-2023
Report	2023	Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan Consultation Summary
Report	2024	Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan Vision and Opportunities Report

The Friends of Fort York and Garrison Common		
Report	2000	Fort York: Setting it Right: Fort-Centered Planning and Design Principles
Report	2005	Fort York: Adding new buildings - A long-term plan for capital improvements at the Fort York National Historic Site, a cultural property owned by the City of Toronto
The Trust for Public Land		
Report	2009	Measuring the Economic Value of a City Park System
Report	2015	Public Spaces/Private Money The Triumphs and Pitfalls of Urban Park Conservancies
Report	2017	The Field Guide for Parks and Creative Placemaking
Toronto and Region Conservation Authority		
Report	2018	The Meadowway Aerial Map
Report	2019	The Meadowway Multi-Use Trail Municipal Class Environmental Assessment Schedule C Environmental Study Report
Report	2019	Trail Strategy for the Greater Toronto Region
Report	2019	The Meadowway Visualization Toolkit
Report	2022	Meadowway Manual: A Blueprint for Naturalizing Infrastructure Corridors
Report	2022	The Meadowway: Vegetation, Bird, and Butterfly Monitoring 2016, 2018-2022
Press Release	2018	The Meadowway: Creating and active greenspace connection between downtown Toronto and Rouge National Urban Park
Press Release	2023	News Release: Government of Canada Supports the Meadowway
Press Release	2023	Toronto and Region Conservation Authority announces second phase of The Meadowway revitalization
Meeting Minutes	2022	2022 Capital Budget Briefing Note: The Meadowway
Meeting Minutes	2018	Minutes of the Board of Directors Meeting #8/18
Meeting Minutes	2018	Minutes of the Board of Directors Meeting #9/18
Meeting Minutes	2019	Minutes of the Board of Directors Meeting #10/18
Meeting Minutes	2020	Minutes of the Board of Directors Meeting #1/20
Meeting Minutes	2020	Minutes of the Board of Directors Meeting #6/20

Meeting Minutes	2025	TRCA Board of Directors Meeting #2/25
Meeting Minutes	2025	TRCA Board of Directors Meeting #4/25
Meeting Minutes	2021	Minutes of the Toronto and Region Conservation Foundation Board of Directors Meeting
Waterfront Toronto		
Report	2016	Project: Under Gardiner Backgrounder
Report	2016	Project: Under Gardiner Municipal Class Environmental Assessment Notice of Study Commencement
Report	2016	Project: Under Gardiner Consultation Summary and Public Feedback Report
Report	2016	Project: Under Gardiner Naming Jury
Report	2016	Under Gardiner Walkshop Community Consultation Notes April 10, 2016
Report	2016	Under Gardiner Walkshop Community Consultation Notes June 2, 2016
Report	2016	Under Gardiner Walkshop Community Consultation Notes May 8, 2016
Report	2017	Gardiner Expressway/Lake Shore Boulevard East Reconfiguration Environmental Assessment and Integrated Urban Design Study Record of Consultation
Report	2017	Port Lands Planning Framework
Report	2017	Project: Under Gardiner Municipal Class Environmental Assessment Environmental Study Report
Report	2017	Gardiner Expressway and Lakeshore Boulevard East Reconfiguration Environmental Assessment and Urban Design Study
Report	2017	Villiers Island Precinct Plan
Report	2022	Waterfront Toronto Rolling Five-Year Strategic Plan 2023/24–2027/28
Report	2023	Waterfront Toronto Integrated Annual Report 2022–2023
Report	2024	Villiers Island & Keating West Public Art Master Plan
Press Release	2015	\$25 million gift to create new trail, connections and cultural spaces under Gardiner Expressway
Press Release	2016	Project Under Gardiner launches Reclaim the Name, an invitation to Torontonians to help create a new name for the emerging public space under the Gardiner Expressway Waterfront Toronto
Press Release	2022	News Release: Visionary \$25-million gift to create new public art trail on Toronto's waterfront
Presentation	2015	Project: Under Gardiner
Presentation	2016	Project: Under Gardiner Design Review Panel Update

Presentation	2016	Project: Under Gardiner Introducing Toronto's Missing Link and Hidden Public Terrain
Presentation	2016	Project: Under Gardiner Operations & Maintenance and Governance Structure Study
Presentation	2016	Project: Under Gardiner Public Information Center #1
Presentation	2016	Project: Under Gardiner Public Information Center #2
Presentation	2016	Project: Under Gardiner Stakeholder Advisory Committee Meeting #2 Presentation
Presentation	2021	Bentway Bridge Re-Design Schematic Design
Meeting Minutes	2016	Minutes and Summary of the Project: Under Gardiner Stakeholder Advisory Committee Meeting #1
Meeting Minutes	2016	Minutes and Summary of the Project: Under Gardiner Stakeholder Advisory Committee Meeting #2
Meeting Minutes	2021	Waterfront Design Review Panel Minutes of Meeting #143

Appendix D: Summary of Media Articles Analyzed

	Total articles analyzed	Percent from local sources	Percent of all quotations across all articles, by actor type				
			Park Organization (including donors)	Government (public agency staff, elected officials)	Advocates	Residents and Community Members	Subject Matter Experts (unaffiliated with park project)
ALL CASES*	99	90.91%	37.44%	30.26%	18.97%	10.26%	3.08%
The Bentway	85	92.94%	39.34%	26.78%	20.22%	10.93%	2.19%
The Meadoway	13	92.31%	0.00%	55.56%	22.22%	5.56%	16.67%
The Art Trail	3	33.33%	20.00%	80.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%

Articles coded to multiple cases and quotations coded to multiple actor types, where applicable.

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