

Healthy Communities and Planning for the – Public Realm –

A Call to Action



Murray Street, Niagara Falls, ON



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Introduction



The Shipyards Waterfront Promenade, Collingwood, ON

The Ontario Professional Planners Institute (OPPI) calls upon planners, government, municipal departments, agencies, other related professionals, builders, developers, community groups and members of the public to make the public realm a focus in community building and placemaking efforts across Ontario.

The public realm is defined as the publicly owned places and spaces that belong to and are accessible by everyone. These can include municipal streets, lanes, squares, plazas, sidewalks, trails, parks, open spaces, waterfronts, public transit systems, conservation areas, and civic buildings and institutions. It can be a passive environment, such as sitting at a cafe, or an active environment, such as cycling in a bike lane, or a combination of both. It can also be an interior space such as a library or a recreation centre, or an exterior space such as a multi-purpose trail or a public square.

The public realm is crucial in achieving healthy communities across Ontario as it is in this realm that people are encouraged to interact. Too often the public realm is considered an afterthought in community building efforts. It is this, however, that shapes our relationship with our surroundings. In doing so, the public realm establishes a community identity, local character and a sense of place. Investing in the quality of the public realm is vital in creating harmonious and socially inclusive communities. A well-planned public realm can increase physical and mental well-being, enhance public safety, encourage private investment and allow citizens to embrace and celebrate their places and spaces.

As professional planners, we are at the forefront of planning for the public

realm. It is incumbent upon us to seek out opportunities to enhance the experience and promote investment in a public realm that is accessible to all. As shifting policy objectives and competing interests in community building continue to evolve with social and technological changes, we must encourage people to think about the public realm first and the role it can play in unifying those interests.

OPPI challenges those involved in creating and fostering healthy communities to fully integrate the public realm into key aspects of their work. In this Call to Action, OPPI evaluated a broad range of key issues and actions related to the public realm. This Call to Action is not intended to be the definitive response to each topic. Instead, we encourage all to explore these sub-topics in your everyday lives and practice.



Marathon, Yonge Street, Toronto, ON

The Changing Role of Parkland

The provision of parkland has always been fundamental to the planning of Ontario's towns and cities. People need places to gather, to play and to socialize. Parks also frequently provide a sense of place for new neighbourhoods that help to organize and create a focal point for the community. As communities continue to intensify, a change in the way people use parks is beginning to occur. In the future, the adequate provision of parkland will remain important in order for communities to respond to the changing needs of an area.

Parks in higher density areas are relied on by residents who do not have access to private backyards as their "outdoor living room." Parkland provides places necessary for exercise, to socialize with friends, or to experience cultural activities. To meet these types of needs, park design is becoming more flexible, supporting a range of community activities and incorporating supportive infrastructure such as power and water access. Higher quality materials that can withstand a more intense use of the space are also being incorporated.

Maintenance, while still a challenge, frequently finds an ally in engaged local residents and volunteers with an interest in a park's upkeep. In addition, towns and cities are beginning to use new ways of funding and acquiring parkland, whether sharing maintenance costs with nearby property owners or seeking stratified ownership of a park to enable amenities such as underground parking.

Creating parks for dense urban settings requires planning for new categories of parks, such as linear parks and innovative urban squares. Communities also need to re-evaluate what forms part of the larger urban open space system, recognizing that in an urban area, infrastructure corridors, schoolyards, streets, and other public spaces can play an important role.

While the role of parkland is changing, one thing is clear – as communities intensify, parkland remains an integral part of planning for vibrant and healthy places.



Multi-purpose trails and park system, Simcoe County, ON



Courtyard Square, Goderich, ON



Sugar Beach Waterfront Park, Toronto, ON



Nick's Dragonfly Playground, Guelph

Nick's Dragonfly Playground is a fully-accessible playground located in the City of Guelph. This park serves as a memorial to Nick Mykitschal, a child with Duchenne Muscular dystrophy, who spent many happy hours in the City of Guelph parks, especially enjoying the accessible swing at the Daisy Pope Play structure in Riverside Park. The name also serves as a tribute to Nick's family who established the "Nick's Dragonfly Fund" following Nick's death in 2000, raising money to supply and install accessible swings for the community parks in Guelph for children with disabilities to enjoy.



Inclusiveness and Barriers



Nick's Dragonfly Playground, Guelph, ON

Now, more than ever, planners need to consider inclusiveness and barriers in the planning and designing of the public realm. Factors such as safety, accessibility, and age-friendly design all need to be considered in the design and planning of the public realm. Likewise, planners need to encourage the provision of public facilities, programs, and spaces that foster inclusiveness and appeal to the diverse populations within neighbourhoods. Ontario needs an approach to public realm planning that is based on good policy, planning principles and data that will serve present and future generations. This is key as many Ontario municipalities have established, or are in the process of establishing, policies and practices related to the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) standards, barrier-free design and cultural inclusiveness.



Roncesvalles Avenue complete street with the integration of barrier-free movement of pedestrians, cyclists, vehicles and transit, and areas for sitting, Toronto, ON

Public space planning and design does not reside solely in the realm of planners. To implement it requires a multi-disciplinary approach involving planners, government, municipal departments, agencies, other related professionals, builders, developers, community groups and members of the public. Within this multi-disciplinary approach, planners should provide leadership to advance the adoption of AODA standards and implementation of barrier-free and inclusive design. The design of public spaces should take into consideration all elements covered by the AODA standards including sidewalks, pedestrian walkways, parking lots, outdoor public use eating areas, beach access routes, recreational trails, pedestrian transit systems and playgrounds. The design of public spaces should also consider and support new Canadians and how can we accommodate those needs and enhance diversity in the way that we build and create our public spaces.

Planners need to rethink the singular use of public spaces and ensure what is designed today can adapt over time to changing populations.



Active Life and Streetscapes



Killarney Provincial Park, ON



Sustainable Infiltration Planters, Kitchener, ON

Planners need to recognize the importance of the interface between mobility and land use. The movement of people between buildings and neighborhoods, if planned properly, can create more livable communities. Public spaces should include deliberate design elements that create connections between modes of transportation. Choices range from simple measures such as bike racks in parks and plazas to more fulsome elements such as public change facilities or bicycle share program nodes at major transit stations. Well thought out amenities within the public realm can foster increased mobility options for residents and commuters. These public areas are transportation connection points and also spaces where people make human connections, resulting in higher levels of social cohesiveness within a community.

Streets are key components of the public realm in urban spaces, however, the primary function, form and prevalence in cities and towns often means these are not considered a focal point or area of importance in relation to public realm and design. Planners must acknowledge the importance of the pedestrian realm within streets, their associated streetscapes, and the relationship with the adjacent built form and land uses. Streetscape elements, such as, trees, flowers, benches, light poles, transit shelters, paving, signage and waste receptacles, form an important element of the public realm and the pedestrians experience while moving through a city or town. In addition to providing functional benefits such as shade, light, places for rest and observation, or safety, streetscaping also helps to differentiate and identify areas along a street and/or create gateways to an area. Given the importance of these linear public spaces, planners should strive through their work to enhance the quality of the public realm along streets to encourage use and promote active life in our communities.



The Former Windsor Star Newspaper Building, which dates to 1926 and former commercial and apartment block dating back to 1915-20, will house the University of Windsor's Schools of Social Work, Centre for Executive and Professional Education and will include classrooms, Student Study Lounges, Research Labs and Faculty and Administrative offices, multi-use seminar and break-out rooms and a courtyard open to the public. Windsor, ON - Source: University of Windsor

Reuse and Multi-Purpose Function of Spaces and Places

The term “reuse and multi-purpose function of space” refers to reclaiming underutilized places and spaces and re-energizing or bringing these back to life for community use. In other words, it is the adaptive reuse of public spaces and places. Reusing and/or making a space multi-functional can transform areas into vibrant community spaces and places that play host to a range of year-round activities. Such spaces can also stitch together neighborhoods and isolated pockets of activities and create continuous and blended public spaces by filling gaps and connecting missing links.

Re-energizing spaces can transform the public realm and offer “eyes on the street” for underutilized spaces in the public realm, enhancing safety and security of residents. Through infrastructure improvements, such

as road rehabilitation and sidewalk improvements, the public realm should be designed to include multi-functional spaces such as walking, seating, playing and beautification. These should provide shade and reduce the heat island impact. Streets must be safe for pedestrians and other modes of transportation.

Public buildings within the public realm are also serving multi-purpose functions through the adaptive reuse of their traditional function. Libraries, for example, can also become community hubs and support centres for the local community as well as new Canadians. Underutilized school buildings can adapt spaces for social and community services during and after school hours. School gym and playground facilities can be opened to neighborhood residents associations and other sports and culture organizations.



Splash pad in the summer, skating rink in the winter, Thunder Bay, ON

The reuse and multi-purpose function of spaces should also consider our climatic conditions, ensuring that these are flexible to accommodate programming all year round. An outdoor trail in the summer can be, for example, transformed into an ice skating trail in the winter, ensuring peak activity year round.

It is the planner's role to lead the initiative to invigorate the underutilized public realm to ensure the creation of complete communities. Gaps in public spaces and places should be identified and inventoried to reclaim these assets for people; retaining the existing community assets and capitalizing on the existing infrastructure. Community Improvement Plans could be used as a tool to re-imagine spaces and places, providing an incentive to attract redevelopment.



Main Street – Bowstring Bridge, Cambridge, ON

Public Art

Public art animates and adds cultural expression to our streets, places and cities. It can bring people together and allows people to learn about the community's history, significant events and culture. Well-designed and properly placed public art should become a meeting place for people, a landmark and identifiable asset to the community. Public art is an important piece of infrastructure that should instill a sense of place and meaning in the community fabric.

Public art should be sited so it is accessible and viewed by all. If art is located in a semi-private area, the art should always be visible from publicly accessible areas. Public art comes in all shapes and sizes and will be experienced in many different ways by young and old. The local context and intent of the art

will govern how it is experienced. When public art is designed as a focal point in public space, it should be something that can be physically experienced (touched, climbed on, and sat on) as well as visually experienced. This allows the art to be enjoyed by a wider cross-section of people.

Policies in a community's Official Plan should lay the groundwork for the acquisition and placement of public art. Many municipalities have developed specific public art policies that provide clear policy objectives for the acquisition of art through development applications. Other municipalities have included public art policies in their Official Plan for the acquisition art through "Bonusing" pursuant to Section 37 of the Planning Act when an increase in height and density is sought for a development. Typically, one (1) percent of the total construction value is allocated to the installation of art. Whatever implementation tool is used, the objective is to strive for public art that keeps pace with growth and change, building a public art legacy in the community.

Garbasaurus - Royal City Park, Guelph, ON



Programming

Programming is an overarching term referring to design, policy, tools, and planning strategies with the objective of bringing people to a space within the public realm and enticing them to stay. The objective of programming is to create inclusive, comfortable public spaces that foster a sense of community and develop connections among users and to the space itself.

Traditionally, programming has been perceived as event planning and was delegated to volunteer organizations, Business Improvement Areas (BIAs), or even professional event firms. In order to have public spaces achieve success as safe, welcoming, and interesting spaces, municipalities must adopt a more holistic perspective towards programming. We must recognize that considering the community's social infrastructure needs in the design process is critical. At times planners need to think outside of the box to achieve this objective.

There are four ways planners can build community through programming:

Design

Design spaces with flexibility, opportunities for users to interact with it, and incorporate opportunities for passive enjoyment of the space. Examples of this are trails, incorporating park benches, public washrooms, and movable tables and chairs. This gives people a sense of control over their environment and they are more likely to feel comfortable. Other examples include sports fields that can be adapted for soccer, baseball, cricket, etc., or informal spaces that can serve as stages for performances or seating areas when not in use.

Tactical Urbanism

Retrofit existing spaces to incorporate elements of surprise and fun in public spaces on a temporary basis. Tactical urbanism encourages people to rethink the use of existing open spaces through cost-effective installations. The installations are evaluated on a trial basis, and can often lead to a more permanent fixture of programming. Examples include pavements to plazas, road diets and pop-up patios.

Policy

Provide efficient policy channels and/or protocols to make it easy for community organizations and the private sector to plan events and activities in spaces. This can include the provision for grants or the permission for the use of public spaces by the public.

Plan Activities

Activities should be planned to encourage the use of various spaces. Municipalities should play a leadership role in cultivating cultural shifts within a community. Where local groups, such as BIAs and community groups exist, these should be empowered to take on the programming roles to animate the spaces and places, and be supported by municipalities.

In order to achieve long-term revitalization, planners must transcend traditional planning tools and look at way to enhance the social infrastructure of a community. This will require collaboration among municipal departments, agencies and community groups with the objective of optimizing the use of the public realm.



Temporary sidewalk extensions to accommodate patios, Newmarket, ON



Ski trails, Thunder Bay, ON



Programmed parking, Niagara on the Lake, ON



Farmer's market, Westboro, ON

Summary

This Call to Action challenges planners, government, municipal departments, agencies, other related professionals, builders, developers, community groups and members of the public to make the public realm a focus in community building and placemaking efforts across Ontario. OPPI also encourages members and all stakeholders to continue discussions on topics related to the public realm, and how they can help to create healthy communities.

About OPPI

OPPI is the recognized voice of the Province's planning profession. Our almost 4,500 members work in government, private practice, universities, and not-for-profit agencies in the fields of urban and rural development, community design, environmental planning, transportation, health, social services, heritage conservation, housing, and economic development. Members meet quality practice requirements and are accountable to OPPI and the public to practice ethically and to abide by a Professional Code of Practice. Only Full Members are authorized by the Ontario Professional Planners Institute Act, 1994, to use the title "Registered Professional Planner" (or "RPP").

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