

# COOKING

IN DUFFERIN GROVE PARK  
FROM 1993 TO 2013

# WITH FIRE IN PUBLIC PARKS

WHAT CAN HAPPEN IN  
A NEIGHBOURHOOD  
WHEN YOU  
LIGHT A FIRE



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ILLUSTRATIONS: JANE LOWBEER

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1993 - 2013 at Dufferin Grove Park

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when you light a fire

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## Preface

Campfires started in Dufferin Grove Park in 1993, and the first park bake oven was built in 1995. The first version of this booklet was written in 2001. It's been posted on our website but not available in paper for years now, and there's been a lot of water under the bridge since 2001. Now, in 2013, we've been cooking with fire in the park for twenty years.

In 2001 I wrote that the park bake ovens seemed to be a story magnet. When people walked by and smelled the bread baking, they began talking about what their Polish grandmother did to test the oven heat for baking the plum cake, or about what particular kind of wood was used in a village oven in Guyana, or how the Jewish dish cholent looked like tar, after being baked in the oven's residual heat from sundown Friday until the end of the Sabbath – but tasted like ambrosia.

In the spring of this year, while on a visit to the home of Tanya Berry in Kentucky, I was explaining to her about the existence of these wood-fired bake ovens in a downtown Toronto park. I said that the ovens, unhappily, had turned into a kind of *brand* over the last decade, and moreover had

become very contentious at City Hall. Then I stumbled around a bit, trying to describe how this had happened. Tanya really seemed to want to know what I was talking about, but how could I briefly sketch the tale of Facebook-meets-slow-food, or bureaucracy-meets-cooking-fires? My awkward answers bothered me. I returned home resolving to bring the “Cooking with Fire” booklet up to the present. Here it is. The original text is a little condensed from the first version (but not leaving out how-to-build-it, the stories from the beginning, or even the recipes). There is a long-ish afterword describing what happened next. Whether this afterword chronicles the end of an odd, ephemeral experiment in a city park, or whether instead there will be another sequel, to be written in a few more years...time will tell.

Thank you to the GH Wood Foundation and the Metcalf Foundation for helping with production and printing costs, to Nayssam Shujaiddin for design, layout, production, and patient good humour, to David Cayley for his helpful counsel – and to the park staff (current and former) for their truly remarkable persistence.

## Introduction (2001)

This is a booklet for people interested in cooking with fire, over campfires and in outdoor wood-fired bake-ovens, in urban parks.

The mid-sized park where my experience is based is in downtown Toronto. It's called Dufferin Grove Park. In the summer of 1993, half a dozen friends began a project there, which we called "the big backyard" adventure playground. As part of that project we started cooking over campfires with a small group of children aged 6-12 who had settled on that park as their turf and spent most of their days hanging around there, on their own.

Two years later we took another step, building a wood-fired bread oven. The oven eventually had so many people using it that after five years we built a second one. People who live in other neighbourhoods, or who live near this park and are moving away, often asked how they could get an oven built in their local park. So this booklet relates what my friends and I learned as we cooked and baked with fire in our park.

It's easy to be clumsy, cooking as a nomad might, in the open air, but without the skills that nomads have. (A few of us got some inspiration about being more graceful from a homeless Ukrainian group who lived in our park for a while. They wouldn't talk to anyone, but as we watched them from a distance we saw how they arranged their mealtimes, their wash-days, their reading and nap-times, their storage

problems and their campaigns to get through the night. They were skillful, they left no tracks, and they made living in the open air look like an art.) Early photos of our cooking fires show the ground littered with boxes and dishes and styrofoam plates. We learned, but some readers of this booklet will probably be more graceful right from the start than we were.

There are some suggestions in this booklet for engaging the bureaucracy when there's a problem, and there are other hints for keeping a low profile when you don't want to attract their attention. There are also various ways (which I'll list in this booklet) of diminishing the power of people who want to do damage - vandalism in a park. Thwarting vandals is a pretty interesting game, sometimes with a bitter taste, but more often successful than you'd expect.

There are also some recipes in this booklet, and some cooking-fire-related stories from our park. Part of the motive in telling the stories is to make it obvious that you can be clumsy and foolish as we often were, and still have a very good time. Another part is to show how plentiful the gifts of ordinary people are. When people are not prevented from using their gifts, there is no real scarcity of the kinds of adventures we've had in our park. Transplanted elsewhere they'll take on different forms, equally interesting.

## About Dufferin Grove Park (2001)

This park covers fourteen acres in west-downtown Toronto, about the area of two city blocks. The two park ovens are next to some flower and vegetable gardens, with split-rail fences to keep dogs out. Roses grow over the fences, and beans and squashes in season. The park has the usual sports areas and big old trees, but also some wildflower beds, a little native-plants marsh with a fountain, a big sand-pit with a water tap and logs and shovels, so that children can build tipis and make rivers and dams, and a double-pad outdoor artificial ice rink for the winter. An old field house next to the soccer area, built in 1913, now houses the Clay and Paper Theatre Company, whose members construct their giant puppets out on the park lawn during the warm months. The company stores some of their puppets in the park's rink house garage, suspended from the high ceilings overtop the rink Zamboni. They've done a park production of some kind for the past six years, sometimes touring other city parks afterwards. Every year just before Hallowe'en they put on a parade involving many hundreds of people, which starts in the park and then hits the major streets in this neighbourhood, drawing people out of their houses and their stores, dancing in the streets.

Our park has several campfire areas, one near the sand-pit and another near the basketball court, and, unlike many other parks in this city, it also has quite a few picnic tables and benches. Some of the benches are cast-offs from locker rooms, backless and by now

very weathered, but not anchored to the ground. Others are benches made by some of the park's program staff, using old railway ties and scrap lumber from the Parks Maintenance yard. These benches wander all over the park, depending on who moves them to their picnic or their conversation, but they almost never seem to wander right out. Theft and graffiti are not very common in this park, even though the park is located in an economically mixed area sometimes referred to in the newspapers as "the troubled west end."

The wood ovens are - by careful intention - near the basketball court and the ice rink. On summer evenings there is sometimes a haze of marijuana smoke near the ovens, and police cruisers drive over the grass from time to time looking for their suspects. In the winter, the air near the ovens can get a little blue with the four-letter word that forms the language matrix for some of the shinny hockey players at the rink.

But mixed into this racy atmosphere, also, is the wood-smoke drifting from the ovens, summer and winter (yes, winter - even on the coldest days it's possible to bake bread in an outdoor wood-oven). If it's really cold out, skaters sometimes come over when the oven nearest the rink is being fired, to try to warm themselves. But the fire in the bread oven is not very warming, since the oven was ingeniously designed to channel all the heat into its dome and its hearth. This means that the skaters eventually go inside the rink clubhouse to warm up (a clubhouse with no

membership fee - if you walk in, you're a member). Some skaters stay in there by the woodstove for hours, talking about the big questions or playing checkers - and also, eating slices of really excellent bread and butter.



Dufferin Grove Park has slowly become like this over the last seven or eight years. There was no big plan, just an idea that a park could be a place where people find out who their neighbours are. If their neighbours are younger or older or richer or poorer or different-looking, or with different manners, so much the better. The fabric of neighbourhood life is meant to be textured and colourful! And since, across those differences, admiration and sometimes friendships have resulted, people say “what a great park we have.” It’s the people who are great, but they attribute the good they see to the park.

One thing is true: it’s possible to arrange things in a park, or in other kinds of public spaces, so that it becomes much easier for the people who come there to enjoy one another. This doesn’t mean they talk to each other, necessarily. Cities are places where many people desire distance from others. But even when people are just watching one another, they can find interest and enjoyment in what they see and who they see. The tall trees and the community-planted flower gardens in the park create a backdrop to the scenes that play out there; the beauty of the setting makes

what people are doing look even more interesting.

When we began having cooking fires at the park eight years ago, everything changed. We thought that fire and food would draw people in, giving strangers an excuse to have a conversation. That was just common sense, and it certainly turned out to be true. We didn’t think so much about the beauty of the fire itself until the campfires were frequently in the park, in all weathers. A campfire in the rain, for instance, with steam hissing off the lid of the soup pot, is lovely. People don’t want to leave such a place just because it’s wet out. They might borrow some big park garbage bags from the staff instead, and hold them over their heads like a tarp - a huddle of damp people, with drops of water rolling off their noses. It’s a lot like camping, except that the people in the huddle might have met only an hour before, and by the time the rain stops, the sun comes out, and the soup is cooked, they may have discovered that they live only blocks apart and their children go to the same school. The soup becomes a memorable adventure. Whether the memory is of the drops of water, the mist in the trees, or the taste of the food, the next time these people meet on the street they have a shared story.

Cooking fires are a strong tonic for introducing neighbourliness into parks. They hearten people and help them enjoy one another. The details of how this happens will vary utterly from one place to another, according to who makes the fires, who comes to them, and what they want to do. But here’s



a warning: although, as a secondary effect, activities of this sort in public space will raise neighbourhood real estate values (ask our local real estate agents), cooking fires are as resistant as any other beautiful thing to being turned into a formula. They won't work out for long if they're used as a "community development tool," with a certified cooking-fire specialist to teach people how to be neighbourly. Wherever that happens, the fires I'm talking about will sputter and die. Neither can bake-ovens be added into park designs as "a village concept," as a planner proposed to me early on. He was thinking of a kitchen backdrop, put up like a movie set, near park playgrounds, with an oven

nearby. It sounded to me like a kind of Disney feature, to give people a warm feeling.

A German friend told me about a beautiful park in her city, which was lavishly redesigned about fifteen years ago. The plans called for an attractive old-fashioned bake-oven, stucco with a very nice ironwork door. It was built, and it stands unused to this day.

This booklet will not be helpful in devising such plans. It's about the piece-meal, eccentric doings of ordinary people when they cook over fire in a park. What happens when people are not prevented from cooking and being together in this way, is as powerful as a law of physics. It can be midwife'd, but it can't be planned.



## Park Campfires



The light and the warmth and the smell of a campfire gather people in. A fire reminds people of when they were younger, perhaps of singing together and playing music, or of telling campfire stories. Almost everyone, no matter what country they were born in, seems to have a recollection of eating something delicious cooked over fire. People feel strongly about campfires. When we began to make campfires at our park, everything changed.

### Why should parks encourage campfires?

A campfire is such an old sign of human gathering that even today its power to signal community is undiminished. Wherever there is a campfire, one knows there are some people nearby. There also seems to be an ancient etiquette common to all cultures, that allows strangers to stop and watch a campfire. One can't come right into the circle but one can draw near.

For that reason, a campfire in a park is very suggestive of *what is possible* among strangers. It may be that most people living in cities treasure their privacy and their distance from one another, but for almost everyone, that privacy sometimes feels like loneliness. For some people, the occasion of a campfire may make the awareness of bonds that have been lost more acute, for instance if the fire evokes memories of village life in a different country.

But at the same time, many people, when they draw near a campfire, seem to feel that they can talk a little to the strangers near them, perhaps about some overlapping memories of other campfires. Even when there is no talk, but rather, a reflective silence — people staring into the flames — the campfire seems to make a connection between those around it, although they may never have met before.

Because a campfire in an ordinary city park is so unusual, when people come across such a fire they are surprised, amazed. They may feel that *tonight*, in the dark, they've seen something worth thinking about. It reminds them that their park, and perhaps their city, is beautiful. It may even make them brag, the way the young guys who use the basketball court beside our park's fire circle boast: "nobody else has a park like this one, man, *nobody*."

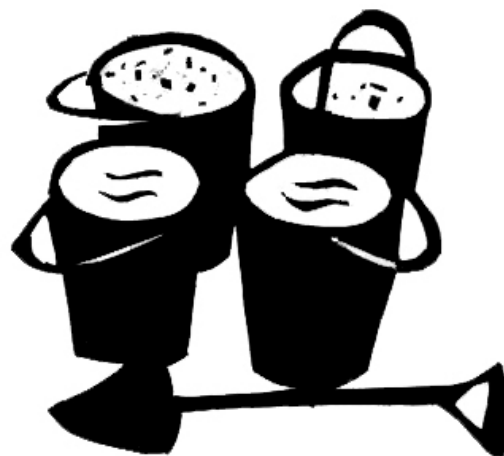
## Some campfire pointers that worked for us

### *Campfire Safety*

In eight years of frequent cooking fires at Dufferin Grove Park, with between 5 and 25 people around each campfire, with school classes and day camps and people who don't speak each other's language, we have never had an accident. That's partly good fortune — unexpected things can happen — but also good attention to safety details.

The main thing is to locate the fire on level ground, with ample room for people to keep a distance on all sides of the fire. There should be no nearby obstruction — a bush, a wall, a picnic table, a path — that requires people to walk too near the fire to get somewhere else.

Because of its heat, fire carries its own natural incentives for people to stay back and have respect. Once in a long while you encounter a person who seems not to notice their position relative to the fire and gets dangerously



close without appearing to be aware of it. Point this out to them if they persist. If they don't respond with greater awareness, or if they actually clown around or enlarge the fire or take out pieces of flaming wood, make sure they leave the fire-site at once.

If they don't listen to you, put out the fire right then. Permission is given on the assumption that the person in charge behaves responsibly. You have to be the boss of your campfire, since the buck stops with you.

### *Children's curiosity about fire*

In our experience, children are very careful around fire, and also very curious. If you feel strongly that children must not be allowed near the fire, it's probably best to have the campfire without children present, or not to have a campfire at all. Otherwise it's too frustrating for the children. We've noticed that when we allowed

very curious children to have long sticks which they could poke into the fire, they could experiment safely with us right there watching. They quickly learned what they wanted to know about combustion. Fire safety for children means allowing them to learn under the watchful attention of adults, not barring them from the fire site.

## Campfire Recipes

A lot of people use a campfire to cook hot dogs or toast marshmallows. If you want to go beyond that, you could

try: bread on a stick - corn roasted in the coals - bread baked in the coals - potatoes in the coals - donuts - apple fritters. Or:

From *Iroquois Uses of Maize and other Food Plants*, by A.C.Parker (1910):

### -- *Corn-cob in the husk*

Wades'konduk o'nis'ta

The embers from the camp or hearth fire were brushed aside and a row of unhusked ears laid in the hot stones or ground. These were then covered with cold ashes from the ash pit. Embers were now heaped over and a hot fire built and continued until the corn beneath was thought sufficiently baked. "Corn baked in this manner has a fine flavor and never becomes scorched." (p.68)



### -- *Baked scraped corn*

Ogo n sa' ohon'sta'

The corn is scraped from the cob, pounded in a mortar or mashed in a wooden bowl with a stone, patted into cakes, sprinkled with dry meal.....For baking in the ashes the cakes are wrapped in husk and covered with ashes. Embers are heaped over and a brisk fire built, this being kept going until the cakes were considered baked.....a British traveler.....says of this dish "better flavoured bread I never ate in this country." (Sometimes cooked cranberry beans or berries were mixed with corn before it was baked.)

### *Campfire apple fritters:*

The batter is adapted from *The Joy of Cooking*.

To make the batter:

- 2 eggs, beaten
- 2/3 cup milk
- 1 tablespoon melted butter or sunflower seed oil
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1 tablespoon sugar

Mix it well. *The Joy of Cooking* says, let the batter stand for two hours at least. Then beat the mixture again.

While your batter is resting, make a medium-size campfire, and tend it until you have a solid bed of glowing coals as a base. While you're tending the fire, peel and core twenty ripe but firm apples, cut into 1/2 inch thick cross-sections. Have a bowl of sugar on hand for dipping the fritters.

When the campfire is well established and the batter is two hours old, set up a small table or cooking platform by the fire. Put on this table: your bowl of sugar, your apple sections, a colander lined with paper towel for draining the apple fritters, your batter, a slotted spoon, a pair of tongs, and a pile of paper napkins weighed down with a stone, so they don't fly off in the wind. You can use the paper napkins for wiping your fingers from time to time. Have a trash basket nearby, for the used napkins.

Position a fire stand in the fire and put a cast-iron dutch oven on it, with about three inches of vegetable oil. When the oil is hot, test it with a small piece of apple-in-batter. If the apple rises quickly to the surface and foams, the oil is hot enough. Dip each apple slice into batter and drop it gently in the hot oil, being careful not to overcrowd the pot and thereby take the oil temperature down too much. Turn each slice once with the tongs and deep fry until it's golden on both sides. Remove with the slotted spoon and roll the slice in sugar, then wrap it in a napkin and pass it to the eager eaters who may be waiting.

Make sure you keep feeding the fire with small pieces of wood so the flames are hot enough to keep the oil hot. If the apple fritters begin to sink to the bottom, put more wood on the fire and cover the pot briefly with a lid (leave a slit open) until the oil gets hot enough



again. (When the oil isn't hot enough, the apple fritters will cook, but they'll be very greasy.)

Apple fritters are most delicious in mid-winter. If you make them when there's snow on the ground, pick your fire location carefully. It should be on a slight hump, because any hollow will quickly fill up with melted snow from the fire, and if you're standing there making the fritters, you'll be standing in an icy puddle.

Deep-frying outdoors in winter is a very challenging way to learn to manage a fire. You begin to learn the meaning of "variables" — all the different factors, all inter-related, that affect the transformation of food through cooking: the outdoor temperature, the wind, the type of wood you're using, the kind of apples you have, what happens when it starts to snow. It's a very interesting activity, and so many people will tell you how delicious your food is that your head will spin (but your feet will be cold).

## Campfire Stories

### *Isabel*

Our park's "cooking-fire lady," Isabel Perez, grew up cooking over a fire in Guatemala, and she used to miss that kind of cooking, living in Toronto. She told us that when the first people in her neighbourhood back home got gas stoves, most of their families refused to eat the food cooked on them, saying the gas made the food taste bad. Everyone wanted to keep on eating food cooked over fire. When we asked Isabel whether she would try cooking over a fire at the park, she said she'd love to. But she wasn't used to it anymore, and some familiar arrangements were missing. Back home in Guatemala her father had built a clay fireplace in their courtyard, with support for a grill. But in our park we had no fireplace. Isabel wanted to cook tortillas with the kids at the park, and for that she needed a level grill. In the park we first tried to balance the grill on some rocks stacked around the campfire, but the rocks were unsteady, and then we tried a semi-circle of firebricks but the bricks were very heavy to set up each time. One day we happened to come across a



window display of cast-iron four-legged pot stands, built for cooking-fires, at a hardware store in an Italian part of town. We bought a big stand, one foot high and two feet in diameter, for \$39.95. A week later we went back and bought a smaller stand, 8 inches by 16 inches, as well. That was the end of our troubles. Pots sat on the cast iron stands as steady as can be, or if we wanted, we laid a grill across the stand. Isabel made donuts with the camp kids in the summer, and tortillas, and dobladas, and pasta with sauce, in a big iron pot. A farmer named Krow came and did a corn roast. She brought a sack of corn picked a few hours before, and two chickens in a cage for the kids to see. They fed them corn until we thought the chickens might explode. (They didn't.)

In the spring and the fall we invited school classes, and they made hot chocolate and roasted marshmallows, and one winter we cooked french fries every Sunday over a fire beside the skating rink.

Sometimes when Isabel was cooking at the fire in the summertime, the smoke would curl slowly upwards through the trees and people going by would just stop in their tracks and stare. Cooking over a fire is a time warp. The cook moves more slowly and the food smells different. The sight of such a thing is surprising and disorienting for people walking through the park, and after they have stopped to take a look, they often walk away shaking their heads and smiling.

## *A school visit*

The second year after we got the campfire permission we began to let the nearby schools know they could book a park day with us and we would set them up with a fire and some food. One time soon after we started this, Margie Rutledge, who was in charge of the playground then, had booked two classes at the same time, on a Monday. It threatened rain all morning until just before the kids arrived, and then, as they made their way from the bus stop across the park, it began to pour. We thought we should send them home. But when the classes – a little United Nations - got to the campfire area, the kids were excited, squealing and hugging each other as they took shelter under the half-in-leaf maples. We said to the teachers – you should probably just go back to the school. But they said, no, it's really warm today and there's no wind, and we'll have a good time anyway. Can we maybe put up your tarp? So we unfolded the giant blue tarp and ten or more kids helped stretch it out and tie it to the tree branches. They pulled the picnic tables underneath and set themselves up in their "kitchen," with the cooking fire steaming and sputtering nearby. The teachers lined up the kids with paper plates and one of them held a big black umbrella over Isabel while she dished up warm macaroni and sauce from the pot.

There was a grand banquet under the tarp, with the kids shouting

loud, outrageous stories back and forth while they ate. The rain fell in sheets. Every few minutes one of the kids would poke a big branch upwards to raise the centre of the sagging tarp and a great fall of water would slide off the edge, with excited screams from everywhere.

After half an hour the rain slowed down to a light drizzle. A few groups began to break off into their own little umbrella-houses, six or seven umbrellas with a tipi-cloth stretched ovetop. Soon the big central banquet was split up into a village of smaller "huts," with some of the braver kids leaving shelter altogether, to try out the park's stilts or dig a river-channel in the sand pit.

By the time the rain stopped, fort-building was in progress in the sand pit, with a bridge over the river channel and a stone-reinforced embankment for a castle that only girls were allowed to go into. The staff and the teachers built the fire back up, so that it would be warm for the kids who were wet. The fire was the centre of this scene, with kids going out to build and to play and then coming back again to get warm.

By the end of the afternoon, when the two classes left, Margie and I thought we should present medals to those teachers, real gold medals with shovels and fire and tarps engraved on them, for being so kind and adventuresome with their students. What a day that was.

### *The rink campfire*

When we first started to try making the rink a bit more civilized, I used to come down on Sundays and make a campfire, beside the rink. Sometimes Fabio (aged 11) and Jennifer (aged 13) and I made chicken soup, cutting up the chicken and the vegetables at a picnic table beside the fire. We'd sell styrofoam cups of soup right from the fire, and we'd have a pot of hot chocolate simmering there too. Skaters would come over and sit on the benches and warm their hands on their soup cup or their hot chocolate cup. Even when I had two fire helpers, there were a few times when I felt a little overwhelmed. People would come over to the fire and they would want to talk, which was the original point of doing this fire – neighbourliness. The problem was, they didn't only want to talk to each other, they also wanted to talk to me, and I was trying to concentrate on keeping the food clean and the fire burning. Sometimes I used to get a little short with people, and afterwards I felt sorry.

One Sunday a man came over with his three children and sat by the campfire, and I noticed his right hand had no

fingers. The stump looked swollen, dark red. He saw me looking. He said, "next week it will be one year since I lost my fingers." He said he worked in a tool and die factory and he'd been trying to fix his stamping machine. It was stuck. Suddenly it came unstuck and came down on his hand. As he told me this I could see he was back there again and the machine was coming down again. He told me that he now has terrible phantom pain. They had told him at the clinic that the pain would get better after six months. But it had got even worse.

His wife came over. She wore a sari under her winter jacket. I had never met her (or anyone in this family) before, but she, like her husband, seemed to have no desire to hide their situation. She watched him as he poked at the campfire with his other hand, and said, "he suffers all the time." And, indeed, he sat there suffering, getting his children some soup, talking to them, and suffering in the intervals, his shoulders hunched.

The campfire was his rightful forum, where he could find witnesses for his suffering, and for his bravery. This is another ancient reason for campfires.

### *The basketball campfire*

Sam, the basketball player, approached me to ask if he and the other regulars from the basketball court could have a campfire one evening. I got him two pails of water and a shovel and showed him the wood supply, and gave him a talk about his responsibilities.

He said, "no problem."

Later that evening I went over to the fire circle and saw they had set up a grill and were making hot dogs. There was some beer but it didn't look bad, and the lot of them, about a dozen, looked so pleased, both with the fire



and with themselves, that I left quickly, not wanting to intrude in their club. The next morning we saw that the fire site was tidy and the pails and shovels had been neatly propped next to the rink house door.

In the week after that, Sam came almost every day, saying they were going to barbecue some chicken that evening, or maybe try baking pizza dough on a stick. The scene by the campfire was a little louder as the week went on, but very friendly, with maybe fifteen people most evenings. By eleven at night there would be only a small group left, staring into the glowing coals. One night I could hear the group singing, and drumming with sticks on the park bench. When they saw me coming toward them, they free-styled some complimentary verses about fire and parks and ovens. Very graceful. Then on the weekend they had a fire in the afternoon, but when I went to check later, all the youth had left. Two older homeless men who store their stuff in the park compost bin had taken their places, and they were grilling sausages with three other homeless-looking guys I had never seen before. I saw some bottles in brown paper bags, but nothing seemed out of hand, and this group, too, looked very pleased



with themselves. They seemed to me like gypsies, free under the sky, lacking nothing. They urged me to have a sausage, but I was too squeamish and said I had to go back home.

In the days that followed, Sam said he was getting tired of being in charge of the campfire every evening, and he brought his friend Gerry over as his alternate, but then Gerry said he didn't want to stay all the time either. I said, I only trust a few of you to be in charge, I don't even know some of these guys. So Gerry said he'd stay, because the others were all pressuring him.

Late one evening, I found neither Sam nor Gerry there. There was a fire, though, and the half dozen youth sitting around it must have run out of wood part way through the evening. They were burning a piece of one of the park's homemade checker tables. I made them put the fire out and gave them a sharp lecture. They looked at me but didn't say anything.

Next morning, a bleary-eyed Sam was waiting for Lily at the door of the rink house when she arrived for work. Sam asked her for wood to cook breakfast. They intended to make steak and eggs. It turned out that when Sam returned the previous evening they had resurrected the fire and stayed in the park all night, drinking beer and burning up most of a park bench to keep warm.

That put them all in the dog house, and we didn't let them have any more campfires.

But they did have a really good time at the beginning.

## *The beating*

A group of five families were having a campfire on the Sunday of Labour Day Weekend. At about 9.30 that evening a fight broke out near the basketball court, and it turned into a group attack by 6-10 guys who kicked one person repeatedly about the head and chest. When the families at the fire circle realized what was happening, they yelled at these guys to stop. Some of them left the park then, but three of the attackers continued with the kicking. Because there were so many people in the campfire group, some of them got up the nerve to run over. That finally made everyone else leave. But the fellow who was being kicked wasn't moving – he was unconscious. They called 911 and gave him first aid. Then the ambulance came, and he was just coming around when they took him away.

The families put out the campfire and left too. They told us the next day

that seeing this terrible beating was revolting, and also they were really worried about the effect on their kids. But I said, how many children get to see for themselves that their parents are brave and help out people in danger, instead of turning away? They said they guessed that was true.

It turned out later that the guy who was being kicked had stolen several bikes from people in the group on the basketball court, and they were administering rough justice. But we said to them the next day – “so what if he was a thief? Nobody gets to kick somebody into unconsciousness in a park, whatever the reason. You guys were lucky there were campfire people around to stop it, what if he had stayed unconscious? There will be campfire people around very often, so don't start with that stuff.”

## *Hallowe'en*

Children from the Hawthorne-on-Essex Daycare Centre, and their parents, held a Hallowe'en Fundraiser. I went over to check on them after dark. They had made a bright campfire in the fire circle, and there were sheet ghosts flapping in the trees. The park is usually pretty empty at this point in the year, but not that night. There were children everywhere, playing games in the dark and rolling down the hills and jumping out at each other from behind the trees. A lot of the parents had dressed up. I asked the kids what they were

eating, and they told me: *haunted hot dogs* and *terrible treats* (popcorn stuffed into see-through latex gloves with jellybean fingernails). They were drinking *eerie drinks* (mulled cider). There was a storyteller off to one side of the fire, telling a ghost story to a group of big-eyed kids, all of them very quiet. Charlotte, who organized this campfire, told me that the kids had such a wonderful time that everyone wants to make this event a yearly happening. And she said they raised \$380 for new toys for their daycare.

## *Chestnuts*

A woman named Anna told me this: “At our campfire in the park last Saturday, it was already pretty cold out. When I came into the rink house with my little boy a few days later, the staff asked me if we all froze. But we didn’t. We made a good fire and kept warm.

“We roasted my parents’ homemade Italian sausages and a kind of hard homemade cheese that doesn’t really have a name. We also roasted chestnuts, by making a slit in each nut and shaking them over the fire in an old frying pan. It worked okay, although my parents said it would have been better if we’d had a pan with holes in it, like people use back home for roasting chestnuts.

“Some kids we didn’t know came over from the playground and we gave them some nuts. There was so much food, it was no problem sharing it.

“My parents had told me beforehand that having a campfire at this time of year was silly. But at the park (there were twelve of us there), my parents started telling us about when they were young and still lived in Sicily. They used to go out to other farms to pick olives and if the weather turned bad, they’d make a fire and roast some food, and then go home without picking any olives, but with a full stomach. Now here they were again so many years later, cooking food over a campfire on a cold day in Canada, with their children and grandchildren. We had a really good time.”



## A Wood-Fired Community Brick Oven In The Park

The sight of a crumbling village oven, in a documentary film about Portugal, started our bread oven idea here at Dufferin Grove Park. The film showed the village priest encouraging the people to repair their old communal oven, and then there was a short clip of some village women baking at the rebuilt oven, their faces lit up by the fire. When I described this movie scene to people at the park, their faces lit up too. Over the following weeks I was astonished at the strength of people's reaction to the oven story, as I was asked to tell it again and again. Of all the ideas ever proposed for the park, there had never been such a uniformly enthusiastic response. There must be an old memory (of bread baked on the hearth with fire) that people don't seem to let go of, even after half a century or more of sliced bread in plastic bags.

Many older people still remember outdoor brick ovens from the countries they came from, Portugal or Trinidad or Italy or Guyana or France or almost anywhere. In Quebec there is a small outdoor-oven revival because it's one way to keep traditional Quebec cooking alive. But in most parts of the world, the old communal outdoor ovens are falling into disrepair or are already gone. At the same time, restaurants all over North America have begun to offer pizza and many other dishes cooked on the hearth of a brick oven right in the restaurant. People like it, but often times this food is expensive, because it's slow food, not fast food, prepared by the hands of cooks rather than by machines that

can turn out a thousand assembly-line "food products" in under an hour.

Wood-fired outdoor ovens built for communal use are certainly one

way to bring slow, excellent food back. We didn't know anything about the Slow Food movement in 1995, when we resolved to build an oven. We didn't even exactly "resolve" — it would be more accurate to say we put out feelers to see if anything would stop an oven, and nothing did. The building inspectors said the oven was too small to come under their inspection. The park supervisor said he didn't see anything wrong with our oven plans, and then he went away on holidays. The Ontario Government had given us a "child nutrition grant," meant to open up new healthy food possibilities in our neighbourhood. The grant administrators said that fresh bread from an oven sounded nutritious to them. So we were allowed to use some of the grant to pay for the oven. A friendly and capable contractor in the neighbourhood looked at our plans and said, sure, he was busy in the week but he could get the oven built in a couple of weekends.



So with nothing to stop the oven, and want to explain to the people in charge why it's a good idea, here's what you could tell them.

## Why should parks encourage the building of an outdoor community oven?

An oven is a story magnet. People rarely pass by the park oven when something is baking without stopping to talk. Ovens like ours were used in Portugal, Italy, Poland, Trinidad, Germany, Greece, Spain, Guyana, rural Canada. Different kinds of ovens, made with vents that could direct the flames, were used almost everywhere else. Because ovens were so common and so much a centre of communal activity, many people have been told family stories about what was cooked in them, and they recognize the oven as something familiar.

At the same time, because communal ovens later became scarce, almost lost, seeing such an oven is always a shock for people. This means that the natural inhibitions of strangers about speaking to one another are overcome by the natural desire to tell what one knows about this surprising object. Such stories have to do with recollections of smell and taste and physical movement, and tend to be accompanied by large, lively gestures. This attracts other people walking by. There is a lot of enthusiastic interruption, as people pile on layer after layer of description:

*"This is how my grandmother tested for temperature..."*

*"This is how my mother marked her loaves so she could tell them apart from her neighbours' loaves after they were finished baking...."*

*"This is how our plum cakes smelled when they were carried home through the streets of my neighbourhood after baking in the baker's big oven...."*

*"This is how we opened the oven to get out the stew at the end of the Sabbath...."*

*"When we were children we had to gather kindling from this certain wood....."*

A public oven that gives a strong push for strangers to share overlapping stories is a very good thing, in a city where so many people know so little about one another's stories, past or present.

An oven attracts festivals and community events. This only makes sense. People want to share food on special occasions. If we had built substantial stone barbecues instead of an oven, the festivals would still have come. But an oven is more sheltered from the elements, and in winter we can bake bread and roast vegetables or meat even when it snows.

We don't have to put on the festivals ourselves. People call up and say:

....six folk-dancing groups get together once a year and there are too many people for a small hall — could they come and dance outdoors and bring a potluck to augment our bread and pizza?

....A theater company has devised an open-air park performance about the mythology surrounding baking in ancient times, could they get us to bake some bread for opening night?

....A community Halloween parade needs a destination for the parade to end at — could they end near the ovens around a big campfire, with fresh bread for the participants?

....The local city councillor's office wants to host an all-neighbourhood

lawn sale, could they put it near the oven and have some pizza available?

Park staff offer "pizza days" once or twice a week. Anyone can come and buy a lump of dough and some tomato sauce and cheese,

bring their own toppings and make lunch. Getting your lunch like this takes much longer than ordering a slice from the pizza place up the street. But people tell us speed is not the point. They want to be in the park to eat with their neighbours.



## How to build an oven in a park (2001)



Building a communal oven is neither easy nor terribly hard to do. But before I describe how it can be done, I have several cautions.

### 1. A Bread Caution:

Baking bread is not a *virtual* activity in any sense. It's a very physical activity spread out over real time. Making bread slowly (less yeast, slower rise), which tastes better, is an activity spread out over quite a bit of real time. Making a fire increases the time. It also means there's smoke, splinters, soot, and heat. All senses become involved, intensely.

In addition to that, baking or cooking with fire in a park draws other people, always. They almost always want to tell you a story of older ways of cooking food where they come from. Hearing stories from your neighbours or from strangers takes more time. This means that a community bake-oven runs on a different time (an older kind of

time) than most people's watches, or schedules, do. If you want to live in a slower time a few days a month, this is a wonderful way to do it. If you love good bread but you have to keep

moving *fast*, a visit to a good bakery will be more satisfying. Don't try to bake in a wood-fired bake oven, at least not until your life enters a different season.

## 2. A Pizza Caution:

If your motive for putting a community bake-oven in your park is mainly to make pizza for neighbourly events, school visits, day camps, etc., this will need paid staffing. At Dufferin Grove Park, we found that so many groups wanted to use the oven for pizza, during their outing to the park, that we built a second, smaller oven to accommodate more baking. When school groups came, the children seemed to delight in rolling out the dough, putting together their own toppings, and seeing their pizza bake, bubbling up before their eyes and finished in three minutes. The kids had so much fun, and so did the grown-ups at neighbourhood events. But it's hard work to set up, supervise, and clean up



after big groups — far too much work, over time, for an unpaid volunteer. The most logical way to handle this work is assign it to a park staff person who does other things as well but who can concentrate on pizza when a group wants to use the oven. You will have to persuade your park supervisor, or higher powers, that community-building through a wood-fired bake-oven is logically part of the park staff's mandate. If you find this effort of persuasion too daunting, think again about putting effort into the building of an oven.

*If, despite (or even because of) these two cautions, you decide you want to put a community wood-fired oven into your park, here is a way to proceed.*

## 1. Finding the Spot

Everything begins with a walk, or several walks. Walk around your park, maybe with a few friends, and see if there's a place that seems right for an



oven. Is there a water source? Is there a storage area? Is there shelter nearby? Is the location near a commonly used area, not out-of-the-way or dangerous? Is there room to plant a small kitchen garden near the oven, to supply herbs and some vegetables for roasting? Is there by any chance an existing slab of concrete to build the oven on?

## ***2. Finding the wood source***

Can you think of a local wood source? Is there a carpentry shop in the neighbourhood that will give you their scraps, or a lumberyard? Would they deliver the wood to the park?

(People often will, because it costs money to send wood to the dump, and in any case, a lot of people hate putting wood in the trash.) Where could you store the wood?

## ***3. Finding the plans that suit you***

If you want a brick oven, a good place to start looking for plans is *The Bread Builders* by Daniel Wing and Alan

Scott. If you want to build cheaper, and smaller, Kiko Denzer's *Build Your Own Earth Oven* is the standard reference.

## ***4. Getting people's blessings***

Once you've thought about these things, consult with friends and with the people you see at the park. If you feel

that an oven could find a home at your park, then it's time to start talking to the authorities and thinking about funds.

## ***5. Getting the money to build the oven***

You'll need between \$3000 and \$8000 for a 20-loaf (mid-size) oven. What you need is to find a charitable foundation that can see this is a pretty ingenious way to enliven a park. Foundations that have any kind of "community-building" or "neighbourhood-strengthening" as their mandate are good to approach.

Chances are, if you are really just trying to get an oven built in your park, you won't be a registered charity, and most foundations only pay out money when there is a charitable registration number. In our case, we asked our local office of the Catholic Children's Aid Society (a registered charity) if they would accept money on our behalf. They did this gladly because, as their director said, anything that makes

life more nourishing for families in the neighbourhood will help reduce their client load. So then we asked the foundation to send the cheque to Children's Aid and the Children's Aid's accounting department re-issued a cheque to us.

If you can't find a foundation to pay for the oven: You could ask 50 people to pay \$100 each. Good luck, but maybe.....? Or you could find out whether anyone in the neighbourhood works for a company that makes donations occasionally, and if they would approach that company with the oven proposal. Or you could have 62 bake sales (no! no!). Or you could ask five people. If you're lucky, one of them will know an affluent person who wants to help out somewhere, in



some way. Or if the five people don't know such a person but they like your idea, maybe they'll each ask five other people who might in turn know one person who can give your park the money you need.

The money will turn up. If the only thing that's holding up your oven is an absence of money to pay for it, the money will come. This is a strange fact, but probably true. And while you're waiting, you'll learn some interesting things, things you maybe didn't know, about how the world works. Getting

an oven built, just as I said earlier about baking bread, is not a *virtual* activity in any way. You will become involved in a small continuous drama of finding out which of the people drawn in by your project have something substantial (I don't just mean money) to bring with them. Many won't bring much to the project. They will imagine that wishing will make the oven, but it won't. What's left after the wishing-people have moved on to their next wish? That's the interesting part, the small suspenseful drama.

## **What to do to get started when you have the money**

### ***Not everyone makes a good helper -- a cautionary tale.***

A youth gang called the "L.A.'s" used to hang around a park near ours, around the time when we were ready to build our first outdoor oven. Five of the more ambitious (or broke) gangsters had some work with us at Dufferin Grove Park from time to time, digging flower beds and helping Isabel with the cooking fire. I thought we should hire them as labourers to work with Nigel Dean, our oven contractor — we'd provide good work experience for these fellows and at the same time we'd get some extra help for our oven project. The city had given us a small grant meant for rescuing troubled youth, and so for \$10 an hour we set these young fellows to digging the foundation hole and filling in the gravel. Then Nigel, the contractor, got them to help him start building the oven. The

more tricky the work got, the more our five workers rebelled at taking orders. Nigel was actually a pretty cool guy, a drummer in a band when he wasn't a contractor, and he was a cheerful boss, but he knew what had to be done and how to do it, and our workers didn't want to go along. They wanted to dream out loud about how they intended to set up as independent contractors right after they finished this job. They wanted to have lots of smoke breaks. They wanted to argue with Nigel about what should be done next. They wanted to rest when the cement was freshly made in the mixer and ready to pour. When Nigel insisted that they come and help him NOW, they threatened to beat him up. That was, of course, the end of their careers with us.

### *About using volunteers*

When we built our first oven, we thought we might get help from some of the retired Calabrian men who played cards at the park every day. Several of them were experienced bricklayers. The first thing we found out was that none of the old men had the slightest intention of giving their labour for free, and most of them weren't interested in building the oven for money either. The point of retirement was that their days of labouring were

over, and finally they could play cards and talk or shout all afternoon, every day of the week. That kind of paradise did not include temporarily going back to their former trade. Those few who were willing to work for money couldn't speak English and we couldn't find out about their credentials. (Their friends implied that they might not be very competent, a conviction that seemed to be mutual among many of these old card cronies.)

### *About city or union labour rules*

In the end it seemed that the best thing was to hire an active contractor, whose work was known to some of us, who lived in the neighbourhood and was interested in our small project. He sub-contracted the bricklayer and did the rest of the work himself. After we fired the gangsters, we got him one young assistant (a local youth, unemployed at that time but handy and cooperative) as a labourer, whom we also paid.

Before we started building, we had asked for an oven cost quote from the City's Buildings Department. That quote came in at exactly twice the cost of building the oven with our contractor. Every motion of the city workers would have been counted. The contractor had more leeway. Since his labourer was a youth who was learning on the job, an unofficial apprentice, his wages were half those of a city labourer. Also our contractor was a local resident who was committed to the oven project as a good thing for our neighbourhood,

so he gave us a bit more time than he charged for. And the final consideration was that the city would have put us at the bottom of a long list of pending projects, whereas our contractor was able to fit us in sooner.

Were we breaking the City of Toronto labour rules? It's hard to say. Our project was small and unusual, so it probably wasn't seen as a precedent for other incursions. The contractor was known to us, committed to the project, and giving us a bit of his time free. This seemed to allow the city workers to consider him as a volunteer rather than an outside hire. The fact that the oven-building was mainly on weekends and evenings, outside of regular park workers' hours (most Park staff work five days a week from 7-3) also helped — nobody got in each other's way, or even had to take notice of one another.

Probably in the end an outdoor community bread oven in a public park is too small to prompt a union

grievance. Many of the city's unionized workers are either very busy with bigger things, or very tired of working and mostly thinking about when they can go home, or very cynical about bureaucracy and secretly (or openly) happy to see something unorthodox in a park. In

gratitude for their acceptance of our project's irregularities, we always make sure to offer any passing park worker bread or pizza when the oven is going. They like to see how it works. Curiosity trumps strict regulation, when the stakes are not too high.

### *Building regulations and fire regulations*

When we bought our oven plans from Alan Scott we showed them to a city building inspector who had been a bricklayer by trade. He said the plans looked good, and he also told us that the oven was too small to come under the building code. So we didn't need a building permit.

The fire department's safety chief said that since the wood fire to heat the oven would be inside the oven chamber, the fire would not be an "open fire" with the associated fire safety issues. In addition, this oven would be 40 meters away from the nearest building (our rink change-house) and therefore it would pose no fire danger to another building.

We also decided to build it only two meters from a water outlet. And except for the roof framing, which would be made of wood, all building materials would be fireproof.

The fact is, there's so much fireproof insulation around these ovens (inside the roof and wall cavities) that even when such an oven is over 800 degrees Fahrenheit inside, the outside walls and roof are hardly warm at all.

In case someone burns themselves while baking — a common problem of cooks — we have an aloe plant growing beside the oven. The aloe plant has been a good friend, and it works *very* well.

### *The interesting problem of vandalism*

An oven in a park is vulnerable to unobserved damage by vandals or silly children. For this reason we commissioned an iron oven door with a lock, and we keep the padlock on

at all times when the oven is not in use. That means that the oven's working surface won't be damaged. Here are the other rules of vandalism that we go by:

### **Watch new structures more closely:**

A new structure draws attention at the beginning. After that it seems to fade into the background. Potential vandals lose interest. Our oven had extensive shingle damage two days before the

mayor came to inaugurate it. We had our ceremonies with plastic stapled to the roof. We should have been watching the park more during the first two or three months, but we didn't know that then.

### **Repair vandalism (including graffiti) right away:**

Vandalism damage is a song about power. While the damage is there, the song keeps playing: "we *own* this park, this is *our* turf, you should be *worried* about what we'll do next, you *can't* stop us because we're invisible." But that's not true. The message only works when the damage is on display. When trash cans are set upright, shingles are replaced, gardens are replanted, fences are mended, graffiti is painted over right away, the power song stops

playing. After two repairs to the same site, it's seldom necessary to do another repair soon. The vandals get bored.



### **Give the vandals a few very easy targets:**

It's pretty easy to rip off shingles, and *also easy to repair them*. For the first few years, we had to replace a few shingles about twice a year, so we kept a supply on hand. The reason the oven shingles are the main focus for vandals is that most vandals, thankfully, are quite lazy. Tearing shingles off the oven takes only a little effort. That's good, because it means the vandals can quickly accomplish

their foolish aim and go away satisfied. The rest of the oven is brick and concrete, which is hard to chip and crack, and also harder to repair. Vandals will usually only do the more strenuous damage if there is nothing easy nearby for them to wreck. If we hadn't had shingles that were easy to rip off, we might have added them later, because they are such a good decoy for vandals.

### **Supply alternative targets:**

On the same note, it's helpful to have a few picnic tables nearby so vandals can carve their initials (if they're energetic) or draw some obscene figures (if they brought their felt marker). That

way they will be distracted from carving or marking up the oven, which is more difficult to fix. We scrub the obscene stuff off the tables and leave the initials. Some people need to leave their mark.

### **Let the oven make friends for itself:**

Our second oven is covered with barn board, much easier to damage. But there hasn't been any damage. By now, many youth have eaten the bread or the pizza, and many children have made pizza at the park with their class. These young people consider the oven

as their partial possession, an important element in "their" park, which they say is the best park anywhere, better than the oven-less parks of their unlucky friends. Their gloating helps us more than any video surveillance. People want to protect what they're proud of.

### **Take vandals to court if they're caught:**

Regrettably, our parks managers in Toronto doesn't have a practice of following cases of more serious vandalism through court. If the police make an arrest in a park they don't always notify the parks staff either; in fact they rarely do. The message is that trashing things in parks is not likely to bring much inconvenience to persons who are caught. This is not a good message.

*"It was a dark and stormy night..."* When a friend of the park caught a group of young guys trashing the playground one November night, these guys threatened to beat her up. But she went home and called the police. The police caught one of the vandals. In the process of trying to follow his case to court we spoke to judges, crown attorneys, defence lawyers, and probation officers, and we tried to make many people aware of the effects of vandalism and threatening behaviour in parks. Even though the charge was later mislaid by the police and therefore never went to court, we learned the young suspect's name, and all our court-visiting paid off. One day we got a call from the probation department saying that the same young man had been ordered by the court to

perform 50 hours of community service for an unrelated charge (assaulting a police officer). He was willing to do the hours at our park. This meant we were able to talk to him directly and also he did some useful repair work for us (repairing damage done in the park by other people, whom we did not catch). This young man was unusual in that he, when drinking, did much more damage than vandals normally do (i.e. he didn't follow the "lazy vandal" rule). We found out that when he was sober, he was also able to do much more constructive work than court-ordered workers generally do. Among other things, he built us a really excellent insulating barrier for the door of the oven, which otherwise lets out some heat during baking. He has seen, when sober, how a good park works, and other youth in the park have seen that the park staff will follow through on vandalism. We get respect for that, and the ovens, the buildings, the benches, the gardens, and the playground structures get remarkably little damage.



## A Wood-Fired Communal Oven In A Park: Why Bother?

An oven in a park is nice to look at when you're walking through the park, and the food tastes good, but cooking in a wood-fired oven is a lot more trouble than turning a dial on your stove. Cooking with fire in *public* means people will come and talk to you while you're working, and that can make

it very hard to concentrate. If lots of people come for a festival, the clean-up can be a nightmare. So what's in it for the person who goes to all this trouble?

There are two things I can think of as an answer. The first has to do with an attribute of food that is no longer common, a kind of simplicity.

### 1. *Simple food: a little history*

Elizabeth Meyer-Renschhausen, a German historian of food preparation and women's work, has written about 18th century ways of cooking everyday meals in rural households. She writes that grains were then the staple of the European diet. The main labour connected with grains was at the front end — growing and harvesting them (much of this done by men). Once the grain was harvested, it had to be hulled or winnowed, then ground in a mill (much of this also the work of men). By the time the grain was ready for the kitchen, its preparation was often very simple. The women took the oats, barley, millet, buckwheat and so on, soaked them and then put them in a pot on the fire. The grains were fresh, the soaking/cooking water from the springs pure, and by all accounts the taste of this grain porridge when cooked over a fire was so satisfying that country people seem to have longed for little else to be the mainstay of their diet.

But as the industrial revolution transformed Europe, driving the

country people away from their land and into the towns and cities, it transformed the way they ate as well. By the middle of the 19th century, when people's diet had diversified everywhere, older people still sighed for the taste of their grain porridges, fallen out of fashion or displaced by the efficient mass marketing of foodstuffs. When we look back and see how plain the early meals were, we may feel sorry for our ancestors, living that way, even if it turns out that the women didn't spend much time slaving over a hot stove. But maybe our ancestors would have felt sorry for *us*. Fresh grain and pure water, when cooked together over a fire with a little salt, *may* have tasted better than anything we could ever get at a fast-food place or even at the supermarket. We can't know for sure, because everything has changed and those other times are gone. But at our park, when people dry tomatoes in the park oven, or dig up some potatoes from the garden beside the oven, wash off the dirt, cut them in quarters and roast them in the oven with



just some oil and rosemary, these simple things taste astonishingly good. The same is true for the bread, which can be made with such simple ingredients. If a sourdough starter is used, even the dried yeast package disappears from the preparations. While the loaves are baking, the smell is rich and subtle. When the bread is pulled out, there are the gold-brown crusty loaves. These foods look and taste — different. Maybe it's a little bit like the food people ate in older times.

There are people still living who experienced the simplicity of exchange anchored by a bread oven. Bernard Clavel, a French writer whose father was a baker, wrote that the family's bakeshop was located on the road to local saltworks, and that his mother would open up at five in the morning so that the salters could buy bread on their way to work. His father sold bread to the wine-growers, some of whom gave a cask of wine in exchange, and to the wood-cutter (huge eight-pound loaves), who in return would deliver the wood needed to fire the bread-oven. When the baker ran out of salt, he would drive up to the saltworks to pick up a sack, paid for — in bread. [Jerome Assire, *The Book of Bread*, Flammarion, 1996]

We can't go back there: We're cut off by centuries from the experience of our ancestors. Our flour was brought by truck or train from Western Canada;

we didn't grow it and we don't know how to find out who did. Right across the street from the oven is the Dufferin Mall, feverish commerce all the time; there's nothing simple about that. When we want to know if the oven is the right temperature for the bread to go in, we go over to the mall and buy a thermometer at Wal-mart, a store owned by an immensely rich man in Arkansas. And I'm writing this description on a computer, in a medium owned by an immensely rich man in Seattle.

And yet: there are the interesting bodily sensations of loading and lighting the oven, the heat, the shaping of the bread on the rough wooden peel. There's no dressed-up "historical guide" in sight to tell us about the old days. There are just these old, simple motions happening *now*, with the aim of baking bread, or maybe just potatoes. If it's raining you get wet, and you might feel clammy, smoky, greasy with soot like a peasant. It's not at all glamorous. You might be hungry and you might want your bread to bake up properly. Of course it's true that, unlike your ancestors, if the bread fails, you can go to the mall supermarket and buy some. But over there you can't buy the kind of bread you can make here, so you need to attend to *this* bread with a single-mindedness that feels out of date — exciting.

That's one reason a person might want to bake bread in a wood-fired communal oven, and it leads us, as well, into the second reason:



## 2. *The chance to have surprising encounters without going to another country:*

It seems that a change is as good as a rest. That must be one reason why people are willing to put up with crowded airplanes and tour buses and cramped hotel rooms and pulling their rumpled clothes around in heavy suitcases — to see something exotic, something astonishing, something that's quite different from one's daily routine. But such trips are expensive and if something goes wrong you're far from home, and besides, mass tourism is a pretty odd way to experience the world.

It's possible to get outside of everyday happenings right in the place where one lives, of course. One alternative to searching, through travelling, for memorable people different than ourselves and experiences unknown to us is *to stand somewhere* — in a public park, for example — and see whether people and experiences search us out.

Of course, literally “standing in one place” so you can see what other people are doing isn't really such a good idea. People who stand in one spot and stare at other people scare those people away. It's unnatural, it's acting like a tourist or a person whose mind is unbalanced. But if there is a baker in the park, baking bread, firmly located by that oven for some hours, she is occupied with a very engaging activity of her own. People are drawn to take a look, coming as near or remaining as distant as they choose, or as the baker chooses. The encounters that may happen as a result of this approach are a side effect of the baker's activity in the park. But they may be so vivid at times that they become an adventure in themselves, and the baker may return home at the end of a long day with much more than fresh bread to think about.





## *Oven stories, early days*

1995

### **Public Health:**

Margie invited Richard Boehnke, the West Toronto public health inspector, for lunch. Richard and I had had some testy discussions when I first wanted to get food into the park. One day he told me to relax, that he didn't care about the red tape, he cared about food safety, and that he was willing to give us advice without throwing the book at us. So that made Margie invite him. And in fact he came with a very friendly manner. We asked him, how will we keep the baking legal? He said, don't worry about it much. There's a loophole in the Health Act. It started out with church suppers. Sometime fifteen years ago some health department tried to shut down the church suppers at a county fair, and their member of parliament just about lost his seat over it. Politicians know that community suppers are practically untouchable. You're a community group. You don't



come under the restaurant rules. So don't worry too much about our red tape. Concentrate on keeping your food clean and not poisoning your neighbours.

Handwashing, handwashing! Get all your community people washing their hands when they cut up food. Try to wash the dishes hot. Forget about adding a lot of chlorine disinfectant. Some people think that too much chlorine can make food workers sick. Just have lots of clean hot water, and clean hands, and only very fresh food. Don't let things spoil.

What a gift this sensible man gave us.

### **First fire:**

*September 8.* Lisa, the artist who painted our wildflower signs, lit the first fire. Dave Miller, who had been such a good amateur helper to our oven contractor, assisted by giving her a bundle of twigs and she stuck them in the oven on top of some newspapers, struck a match and then --- by glory! The oven was lit. The flames flared up and started spreading back.

The Italian men were walking round and round the oven, exclaiming and muttering. All of us looked at each other and laughed, and slapped each other on the shoulders, and laughed, and scratched our heads. It didn't really make sense, but here it was. A real bread oven, far from Calabria. Real smoke coming out of the chimney. There it was.

### **Basketball guys, watching:**

We decided to have an opening ceremony, and Mayor Hall let it be known that she would be the right person to “open” the oven. It was scheduled for October 7th. There is a bylaw that says, if we wanted to serve some wine with the bread, we

had to fence off the area around the oven. The Parks crew brought the temporary fencing and pounded in the steel stakes. I could see the basketball guys watching. All summer long they had watched the oven being built, but had kept their own counsel.

### **Radio:**

*October 5.* I sent out a press release about the oven, and the CBC morning radio show said they wanted us to do a phone-in interview. Yesterday afternoon one of their staff came by with a cell phone, and left it here for us. Dave Miller and I started a twig fire in the oven early this morning and stood there with the cell phone and an umbrella, because it was raining. At about 8.30 the phone rang and it was the show’s host, saying, “one minute to air time.” We waited in total silence until he said, “well folks, we’re back and we have a report for you now on Toronto’s first outdoor community bake oven.” I chattered into the phone for a while and then Dave got on. He held the phone near the fire so people could hear

the twigs burning. The host finished the interview with a little joke: “Dave Miller and Jutta Mason. A miller and a mason for Toronto’s first brick bread oven in a park. How about that?”

While we were speaking into the radio world, some people walked up the hill from Dufferin Street, over to the oven. They stood and watched the two of us under our umbrella, taking turns talking on a cell phone by the bake oven. When the interview was over they said they’d been driving by the park and heard the start of the interview on their car radio. They looked over and there was the oven with us standing there, so they stopped their car and got out and watched the rest of the interview in person.

### **Anger:**

*October 6.* Fabio, the boy who always knows everything first, came to my house early in the morning. “You should see the park,” he said. “It’s a mess.” I said “What do you mean?”

“The oven roof shingles are all over the ground and the benches are turned upside down and also all those extra trash baskets they brought when

they put the fence up, they’re lying in the flowerbeds.” I walked down to the park with him, and sure enough, somebody had decided to go ahead and wreak havoc. Fabio and I pulled the wire trash baskets out of the flowers, and picked the shingles up off the ground. We set all the benches upright again. When we were done it looked better, but the roof

was ripped right down to the plywood in places. I called Dave Miller and we stapled plastic on the plywood, in case it rained.

### **The Mayor's opening:**

*October 7, D-day.* I got up very early, at 5.30, and biked over to light the fire. The park was dark, and cold, and very



damp. The twigs were so long and so tangled in the firewood barrel that they came out in big bunches that still had to be pulled apart. They scratched my arms and hands. I stuffed the oven full of twigs, hoping they were not the green ones we were saving for the spring — I couldn't tell. As I lit the match, very faint light began to appear in the east, showing outlines of heavy clouds. The wood caught, but it burned feebly. The park seemed lonely and dangerous and I felt so foolish. But there was no way out of this official oven opening.

While I waited for the fire to catch properly, I took the Parks Department's three-colour bunting and started fastening it to the fence. This was a cumbersome job and I didn't know what I was doing, but it distracted me from the morbid regrets I was having about stupid park bake-ovens and stupid, ugly, menacing public space.

An hour after first light Dave and

Later someone told me a rumour that the basketball guys thought we were putting up a permanent fence, and didn't like it.

another staff arrived. I was struggling with the bunting, and the fire was still flickering feebly. It was by now fairly obvious that the twigs must be green. But which twigs weren't? They all looked identical. Dave showed me his secret (why secret?!?) stash of drier wood, so we squeezed some of those pieces in the oven too, trying to leave a bit of room for air to circulate. The fire responded, and we were rewarded by a giant plume of white smoke that hung a few feet off the ground and floated all the way down to Dufferin Street. Then the wind came up, lifting the smoke higher into the air and also tearing off my feeble fastening for the bunting.

By then, though, the park was in full morning light and the rest of the special-events staff had arrived. Someone went to buy coffees and someone else turned out to be a bunting expert. My pre-dawn desperation gradually melted away.

By the time the mayor came at noon, the fire was not half-way burned back and the oven didn't feel very hot. We couldn't bake bread yet but Isabel had made a soup over a campfire beside the oven. There were thirty people there at most. The mayor made a little speech, first outside by the oven and then in the rink house, because it began to rain. She spoke about love and community. We offered her a bowl of Isabel's soup and no bread, and then she went off

to her next engagement. After she left, though, a neighbourhood baker came with dough and said — the dough's ready. We'll just have to bake it with the fire still inside. She pushed the fire as far back as possible and stuck the loaves in. The clouds divided to show a little blue, and more people began to straggle over from the neighbourhood. We poured out glasses of red wine and cups of soup and half an hour later the bread came out. It was lumpy and dark on one side but it smelled so extremely good that I thought people were going to tear it, or each other, to pieces to get some. Another baker came to help out, and another batch went in the oven. A photographer arrived from the *Toronto Sun* and took photographs. More bread came out and was eaten, and a third baker put her bread in. The sky cleared

completely and it grew even colder. The bunting flapped around in the wind and we realized that all the wine drinkers were inside. All the trouble we went to, to get an *outdoor* wine license! We would have never had to put up the fence if we'd said on our liquor permit that the wine would be inside. Maybe then no one would have got alarmed and ripped the shingles off the roof. And all that infernal bunting, that took half the morning to put up.

But there wasn't time to think about that. More people came, more bread came out and more bread went in, and musicians made music. By the time the oven was officially opened and the bread was all eaten and the people went home, the oven was lovely and hot.

We realized we definitely need a better wood supply.

### **Immigrants:**

*October 13.* Thirty-nine years ago today my mother, my little brother, and I got off the boat in Montreal and embraced my embarrassed, emotional father, who had come to Canada from Germany a whole year before us. On that day thirty-nine years ago I thought that I would just stay in Canada until I could decently leave home (I was nine) and then sail the high seas for the rest of my days. Who would ever want to live anywhere other than on an ocean liner? But then I got stuck on solid ground, and now I seem to live much of the time in a park. I stay in one place and other people sail by. I was watching at the oven while Nigel attached the oven door, and three different people came

by to tell us something about the ovens of their youth. There was a woman from the Ukraine, a man from Trinidad, and another man, very old, from Poland. He spoke about his mother, who baked once a week and always tested the oven heat by throwing in a handful of flour and watching how quickly it turned brown. You never taste bread like she baked, nowadays, he said.

I told him I will never bake bread like his old mother baked, but I hope I'll learn, in ten or twenty years, how to bake something very good. Unless, of course, I've left on an ocean-going ship before then.

There was a phone message when I got home. A Parks staff person had

phoned from another community centre, saying there was a very rude man who wanted to get hold of me, something about firewood, and here was his number. I called the man and he said, "I'm sorry. I was very rude to the employee because she behaved so stupidly. I asked her about the bread oven and she said she knew nothing about it. But she is supposed to know if she answers the telephone!"

It turned out he had read the *Sun* article about the oven and he wanted to offer us an unlimited supply of perfect firewood. "I'm from Guyana," he said, "and in Guyana people believe in helping each other out. You could even say that's their main hobby. I have a small factory here in Toronto, in which I employ 12 of my countrymen to take apart big hardwood skids which are cracked. Then we rebuild them into smaller, sound skids, which leaves a lot of hardwood scraps that are waste.

### **Hussain:**

*October 15.* I waited in the park today until an old, blotchy van drove up, its back doors tied shut with rope. Hussain Ali got out, and his wife, and their teenage son. We shook hands, I pointed out the oven, he backed his truck up to the garage, and the three of them unloaded the promised barrels of wood. The wood looked perfect, as he said. Four-foot-long, mainly hardwood pieces, from all over the world. Some of the pieces were rose-coloured with a beautiful grain. Some of them were dark, almost black.

But I, Hussain Ali, do not wish to take this wood to the garbage dump when I could be giving it to the park for the bake oven. I have twenty barrels of it right now, and I'm willing to deliver it to you myself, if you will just give me the directions. Then you can show me the oven and I can see for myself whether it's the same kind of oven my family used to bake in, in Guyana. It sounds to me like you are doing the perfect thing, and you should be supported. I want nothing for this, only the satisfaction of doing something helpful. Thanks to Allah I have the means of doing so."

So I gave him the directions. After I hung up, I thought, *so that was the point of the oven-opening festival.* There was the cold and the rain, the empty park and the green twigs, the wretched bunting blowing off in the wind, but then the reporter came and he wrote his article and this man from Guyana read it and wants to bring us perfect wood, forever.

I've heard that in Malaysia, mahogany trees are sometimes cut up for skid-wood, sold by corrupt politicians to the Japanese for next to nothing. Then this wood travels across the world bearing its loads of refrigerators or television sets, or boxes of cheap plastic toys bound for our local dollar stores. Eventually the wood cracks under its loads and is picked up by our friend Hussain Ali at the trucking terminal. He and his immigrant countrymen scavenge the good wood, and the cracked ends are converted into heat

and bread in our oven. The wood has travelled so far from its original forest grove – now perhaps turned into a wasteland. It's hard to know what sense it makes, and why we would end up baking an out-of-date bread with such squandered materials.

But that's only one, regrettable layer of reality. Another layer is the kindness of the Ali family, all three expertly rotating the heavy drums

on their bases, until they were neatly stored in the corner of the garage. We walked around the park, and they were curious about everything they saw. "The oven is somewhat like the ones in Guyana," Hussain said, "and in another way not like them at all. Those ovens back home are long gone anyway, at least in the larger places. I can't really remember them."

### **The firebrand boys:**

*November 15.* We had rink staff orientation for the winter skating season. Since only one of last year's rink staff elected to return, we had quite a few new rink guards (three of them female!), plus Lily Weston as the daytime building attendant and Jacqueline Peeters to make pizza at the oven on family Sundays. Last week Jacqueline came with a pizza-dough recipe from the restaurant where her husband works. We practised making it in the oven. It was really good.

So we decided that at this rink staff-meeting we'd serve pizza from the oven. That meant that while Tino was meeting inside with the rink staff I was out at the pizza oven making pizzas. When the first four pizzas were done I brought them inside to the meeting and went back outside with four more to cook. Five older boys were sitting on the oven roof. I knew a couple of them. They were clowning dangerously and they seemed in a strange state. They obeyed when I told them to get down, but then one of them grabbed the rake from me and pulled some burning

twigs from the oven. In two seconds they were waving the burning wood at each other's faces. I shouted at one kid I knew, to stop his friends, but he didn't acknowledge me. They were completely caught up in a new game, pulling out more flaming branches, flinging them at each other like snowballs. Because of the early snowfall we had, the flames were snuffed as soon as the pieces hit the ground, but it seemed like any minute someone would get a burning brand in the face. I screamed at them but they were possessed with the thrill of their strange game. I kept hoping someone inside the building would hear all the yelling, but the distance was too great, and no one came out. I was caught. I couldn't get them to stop and I felt I couldn't leave them to get help in the building, with the firebrands flying around.

When the wildest one of the boys went back to the oven with the rake, to get some more fire, I yanked the rake from his hands and threw it on the ground. He cursed me and I grabbed him by the sleeve and shouted at him

and just started pulling him toward the rink house. He resisted but I was so angry at him not listening to me that I was stronger than him. So I just kept dragging him along.

Part way to the rink house his resistance stopped and he began to wail loudly. When I opened the door of the rink house, the rink meeting was interrupted by the spectacle of their pizza cook (me), grim and a bit hysterical, holding a weeping boy by the scruff of his jacket. I handed him over to Tino and ran outside with three staff to bring in the others, but they had run off across the park. When we came back inside Tino was gone — the kid he

was holding had twisted out of his grasp and taken off, with Tino in pursuit.

Tino came back a few minutes later, saying the kid, whom he knew very slightly from another community centre, had got away. Even when he was running, Tino could still hear the kid cursing and sobbing loudly.

I couldn't understand their behaviour other than to think they were all under the influence of some speedy drug. If anyone had got hurt by the fire, would that have been the end of the oven? The end of an eye? A huge lawsuit against the Park?

Jacqueline cooked the rest of the pizza. I had to calm down.

### **St. Nicholas Day bread:**

*December 6.* I decided to bake some bread, so I came down early and put a fire in the oven. Hussain's wood was just as he said, dry and hard and perfect for heating a bake oven. In the afternoon I mixed bread at a table set up in the rink house. I wanted to do the mixing near the kids who were skating, so I had all my ingredients set up on the table and I went back and forth between stirring and kneading, three times for three different kinds of bread. At first the kids ignored me but after a while some of them came over. One of the girls helped me mix



herbs into the final dough, and told me her mother makes corn bread at home. She said, "if my mother saw me making bread, she wouldn't believe her eyes." Some boys she knew went by and jeered at her, in a friendly way, and she turned red and cursed them, in a friendly way (I think). And then she kept kneading, with great concentration, until the dough was ready to put in the pans.

### **Jacqueline:**

*December 21.* It was Jacqueline's last pizza Sunday at the rink before Christmas. How she accomplishes these days is almost unfathomable. But each Sunday there have been more families than the previous week. I guess people like the exotic combination of skating

and wood-oven pizza, even just the smell of the smoke that drifts over the ice from the oven. Maybe some people come just to see how Jacqueline manages to juggle it all — surely a piece of performance art.

She usually arrives first thing when



the rink opens at 10, as often as not with all three sons. The little one is only five but already a fine skater, as are the older two. As soon as they get here they all four go out to the garage and fill the wheelbarrow with wood and newspaper to start the fire in the oven. This is not so easy. Vigilance is required, in case a piece of skid wood has paint spots or some other suspect substance on it, that might not be destroyed by burning at 800 degrees. To keep the food pure, four pairs of eyes are needed to scan every board that's put in the wheel barrow.

Once all the wood has been put in the oven, the newspaper crumpled up, and the match struck, they go into the rink house and the boys get their skates on. Jacqueline tightens their laces and adjusts helmets and sorts gloves until they all leave for outside. Then she hides their bags under the counter in the kitchen and gets her dough started. This is easier now that we've got the loan of an old Hobart mixer. Jacqueline puts water in the mixer bowl, and yeast, then flour and oil and salt and pepper (her secret ingredient from the restaurant recipe) and turns the mixer on. She stays right beside it because the mixer came with a warning: if anyone tries to reach in when the dough hook is going around — it goes so smoothly and slowly — they will probably die. The dough hook will catch the person's arm and tear it off and they will bleed to death. Even

though only one arm is caught and pulled out of its socket, it's not possible to reach around with the other arm, to turn off the switch, because the pain is too horrible for movement.

I was telling this to one of the kids who was watching us use the mixer, and he nodded. Yes, that's how his uncle died. He was a baker in Portugal and when the household got up one morning they found him on the floor beside his mixer, in a pool of blood, dead.

We've told the story to everyone who comes near the mixer. Some of the kids won't even come in the room now. Who needs a horror movie if you can stand at the rink kitchen door and just shudder at the mixer going around?

And yet, the sound of it is wonderful to us. Jacqueline can stand right beside it and let it work the dough while she cuts up peppers and sausage and onions and mushrooms, gets out the pizza sauce and puts corn meal on the wooden peels. Once the dough is mixed she puts it in a huge bowl and covers it with a damp cloth. She attends to her boys, runs out and checks the fire, runs back in and punches the dough down, rolls it out, puts it on the wooden peels, and attends to the boys again. Meantime people come by the kitchen/office and ask her, what are you doing there? When she has time, she answers. But already people are asking, is it almost time for the pizza to be done? So Jacqueline spreads the tomato sauce, and sprinkles the cheese, and puts on the toppings, and drizzles the olive oil, and out she goes to put the first few pizzas in. Once they're in she runs back inside and grabs oven mitts and platters and



the hoe that we use to move the pizzas around. Then she's back out, a quick check on the boys - "I love you too but I can't talk right now," - and then back to get the first pizzas out and put some more in. She runs inside with the done pizzas and puts them on the tables in the kitchen/office, cuts them up, runs off again calling out the price over her shoulder, to the rink guard who has a line of hungry people at his counter - back in again with the next pizzas, — oh no, the first ones are gone already — and into the other kitchen to get some more dough. She told me once she feels like Charlie Chaplin in his speeded-up assembly line movie, and it's easy to see why.

Sometimes her kids come in and help. They're home-schooled and they know that Jacqueline has to work and they have to help sometimes; children

are not allowed to be childish when their mother needs help. They're good, too, but they're young and they get bored, and eventually they set up a chess game in the other room and Jacqueline is on her own again. There are pauses, and times when there's help from other staff or skaters. But mostly it's Jacqueline's dance, choreographed by her, and with her as the principal dancer, dancing all the time.

Meantime people skate around with traces of tomato sauce on their faces. Then they go home and tell their cousins, or they invite their friends to come for the day from Mississauga, and next Sunday even more people come to the rink. Now that the holidays have started it will surely get worse. It's wonderful that so many people are rediscovering the rink, but sometimes I worry — how many more can fit?

## 1996

### TV show:

*February 17.* An afternoon television show "Round About Town" has been filming an item about this unusual skating rink where you can also cook pizza. They did the inside portion of their filming last week and today they came to do the outside part, on a family Sunday, because they wanted some more bodies. So first they got some footage of the show's very blond host skating around the ice holding a pizza on a peel, smiling and talking about how much fun she was having here at Dufferin Grove Park. Then the camera

man wanted to shoot a sequence where the show's host and Jacqueline are at the bake oven putting the pizza in.

All this filming was in the middle of the usual pizza line-ups on Sunday afternoons. I had to be in the picture too, according to the producer. Just ten minutes, he promised. Afterwards I went into the rink house to help Jacqueline and usher the TV people out of there. The rink was packed with skaters just arriving, the kitchen was chaos, the trash cans were overflowing, the camera man was in everybody's way

and anxious about his equipment. It was a little piece of hell.

After a while, though, the skaters got their skates laced and went outside, the TV people disappeared, and the kitchen got tidied. Jacqueline

and I start to laugh and we couldn't stop. A strange pizza-rink and a very blonde TV host skating around on her very white figure skates, pointing her pizza peel toward the camera. *Surreal!*

### **Cleaning the hearth:**

*May 19.* A provincial member of parliament came to the park to give us an anti-crime award. He brought along his secretary and a reporter and several police sergeants. We had some teenagers there to make pizzas after the ceremony. They were pretty experienced, but somehow the hearth didn't get cleaned as well as it should. The skid wood we use often has nails in it, which get swept out of the oven after the wood is all burned up. Then the hearth is washed with the mop, but people must have been in a hurry that day. So when the boys brought the cooked pizzas inside to serve, and began to cut one up for the member of parliament, they hit a great big nail with the pizza wheel. The nail had been baked right into the bottom of the pizza. I knew nothing of this until I looked at the boys, who were

all whispering to one another, their faces red with the effort of trying not to laugh, or to tell. They had already put that pizza in the trash and checked the other ones very carefully. The member of parliament complimented their pizza and ate quite a lot of it. He never knew. But the kids talked about it all over the park, the near-miss of making the member-of-parliament-guy crack his tooth on a nail, the disgrace it would have been for the park and everyone connected to it, the award that might have been rescinded right after it was given. *Scandal*, narrowly avoided! I don't think any of us washed out the oven hearth afterwards without thinking about that almost-disaster.



### **Singing in the rain:**

*June 26.* The kick-off concert for the Dufferin Mall Summer Concert series was today, but it was rained out. The performers — a Portuguese cultural group and a Georgian choir called Darbazi (singing music from the former Soviet Republic, not the state in the U.S.) and a salsa group — came to the park anyway because for a while in

late morning it looked as though it might clear up. But then the sky looked dark again and the rain fell steadily. We had the pizza oven fired up already so we thought we might as well make the performers some lunch while we waited out the rain. Half of my “youth crew” came by and we got them to help put the pizzas in the oven.

As soon as they brought back the first pizzas the sky really opened, so everyone jammed into the rink house and pizzas were passed from hand to hand because no one could get near the pizza table. The Darbazi choir formed a little circle and began singing, with a background of the drumming of the rain on the pavement outside the open doors. Two of our youth crew put on Parks Department yellow raincoats and ran outside and cooked another round of pizzas. Then the Portuguese group decided to dance, and somehow they managed to find enough room in the rink house. They had an old man who plays a squeezebox and an even older woman who sang in a strange, exotic keening voice, and all the others in the group, some of them teenagers and young children, lined up

across from one another and danced, and sang at the same time. They have bright red scarves and sashes that flash when they twirl.

A few people from the neighbourhood had come over despite the rain. They lined up outside the windows, under their umbrellas, looking into the room, because that was the best way you could see the dancers. There was no room inside but it didn't matter — the dancers were dancing and singing for each other.

When they finished a piece, the Darbazi singers would start up again, and so on back and forth. The sound bounced back off the walls and was somehow further amplified by the torrents of rain. It was so beautiful I thought I could die right then.

### **Cholent:**

*Summer.* The first time I made the stew called cholent, it was for the performance of a show outdoors at the park, called "A Jewish Wedding." The "wedding" was a staged event with the bride and groom chosen from the audience, and the rest of the wedding party were actors and musicians. I had prepared cholent from a recipe calling for onions, beef, and prunes. The performance ended at the bake oven, and I opened the oven and took out three pots of what looked to me like an almost black mush. I was appalled. We had baked challah and it was all

sliced and ready to accompany what I took to be an inedible and perhaps burned mess. To my surprise, some older people from the audience said, "oh, cholent, how wonderful!" They dished it up and as I waited, uneasy, they said, "it's as delicious as butter. This is exactly what it's supposed to taste like. Come on over here, everybody, come and taste this!" And in two minutes it was all gone. It was the prunes, I guess, that had turned it black, and the long cooking had broken it down into one substance that people felt was a kind of ambrosia.

### **Homesickness:**

We planted wheat and oats and rye and buckwheat this year, in the gardens beside the oven. Those grains were ruined today. A flock of sparrows flew down and ate up all the grain in one five-minute raid, like a bunch of feathered vandals, leaving only bent stalks.

I don't want to grow grain again like that. It was a bit of whimsy - let's plant some samples of grain, in honour of the bake oven. But the grains grew very tall and took over the whole garden, and the wind would blow through them in waves. People used to lean on the fence and stare. I had the impression they

were thinking heavy thoughts. More than once I saw someone weeping, and the tears looked bitter and painful.

So I don't want to do that again. There's no reason why memories should be happy, especially when there's homesickness, and not all stories are nice. But we don't have to play with that, to test how evocative we can make the oven. It was a mistake. We didn't know how much people would take it to heart - people for whom grain once did grow right near their oven, and who for various reasons went away, or were driven away, from all that, forever.

### **Stealing tomatoes:**

*September 21.* Tonight when I passed by the vegetable garden by the oven, an old man who always feeds the birds in the park was in the garden with two plastic bags, stealing tomatoes. I said, "don't do that. We grew those tomatoes for putting on the pizzas when the school classes come to the oven." He smiled a smile of "oh, come on," and said, "just one bag. You have so many." I said, "we need so many. Don't take one bag, not even one tomato. Buy them at the grocery store." He looked at me and frowned and suddenly shook his

fist in my face and flushed red. He looked so fierce and angry that I actually thought he might hit me. But I stood my ground and he turned around and walked off. He sits outside the rink house by the hour, the picturesque bird-man with all the little sparrows pecking around his feet. Meantime in his heart he's plotting the theft of our vegetables.



### **Sanity:**

*October 10.* The old man and I have glared at each other but not spoken since that day. This afternoon I was cleaning up after a school pizza-making visit, and when I went outside to put out the garbage, four older women

from the apartment building across the street were sitting on the bench in front of the rink house. We started talking and one of them showed me a photograph. It turned out the old man is her husband. The picture was

of happier days, a formal family photo of a father, mother, and two teenage daughters, all of them dressed up. I found out that the old man had worked all his life on high steel construction, as a welder. He was working on the highest building in Toronto, and one day they found him dangling in mid-air from his safety harness. It seemed that he might have had a stroke while he was sitting on the steel beam. He couldn't remember anything about it. His mind was never all there after

that, his wife said, and sometimes he became irrationally angry. He never worked again.

I waited for a few days until the old man was on his usual bench, and tried to catch his eye as he sat waiting for the birds to come. When he looked at me I nodded and smiled slightly. He smiled too. Since then we've waved and smiled, no more clenched fist from him, no more scowls from me. I took this whole thing so seriously — a tomato thief. What a dope I was.

### **Night before Solstice:**

*December 20.* David Anderson, the park's puppet director, brought his giant-puppet troupe here to have their dress rehearsal for their winter solstice parade downtown tomorrow. Last week we put up signs to invite people for "the night before solstice," and today in the late afternoon, when darkness was already falling, we made a large bonfire near the oven. We put up our yellow tipi, too, just to attract attention, and made some giant pots of hot cider at a smaller campfire.

Across the street the parking lot of the mall was jammed with Christmas shoppers, none of them with time to spare for a medieval ritual of the rebirth of spring out of the darkest day of winter. At this time in December you can almost see an electric charge over the mall, the last-minute shopping is so intense, so desperate.

About a hundred people came and watched the performance of "The Green Man," drum rolls, figure of death, dragon, and all. It's a

contemporary mummer's play, and the little kids looked a bit daunted by the giant puppets silhouetted against the flames of the fire. We baked bread in the oven and cut it as it came out. The slices were steaming in the cold. After the play was over, everyone was eating hot bread and talking. The little kids were smiling again, now that the play was over and the dragon was clowning around with them. Across the street there were long lines of car lights, streaks of yellow light and red, cars bumper

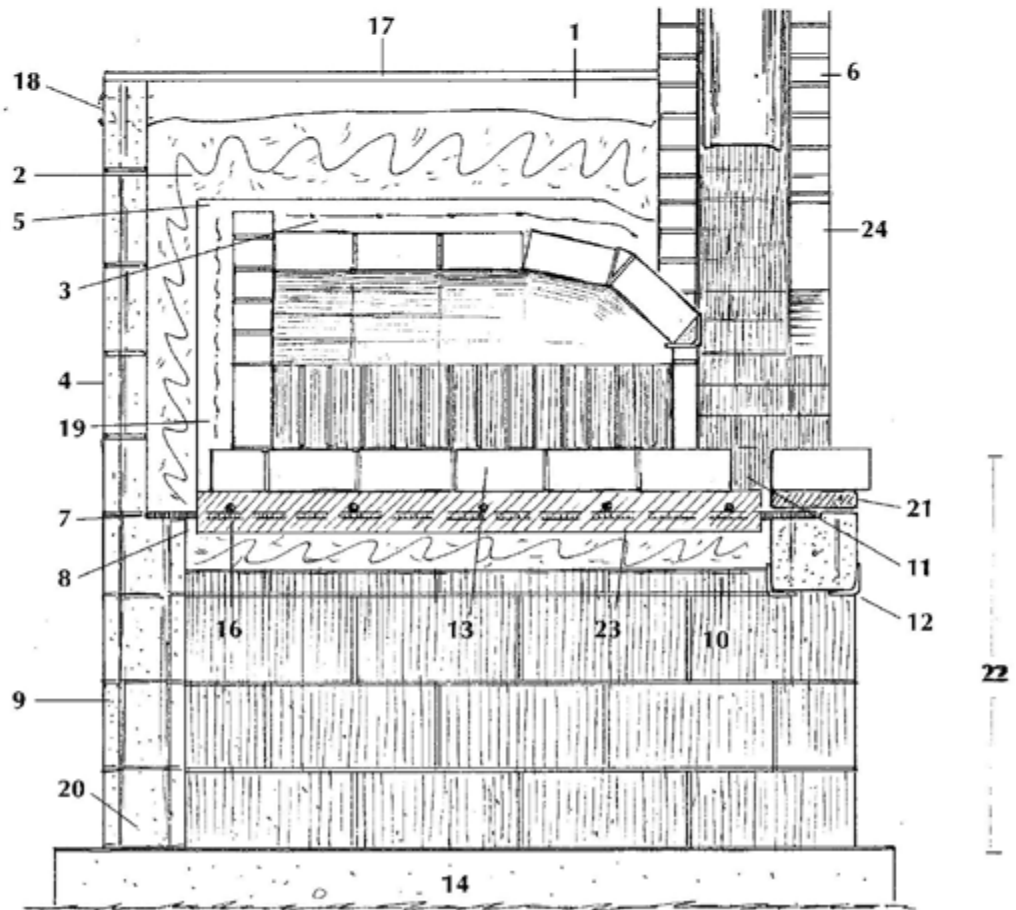
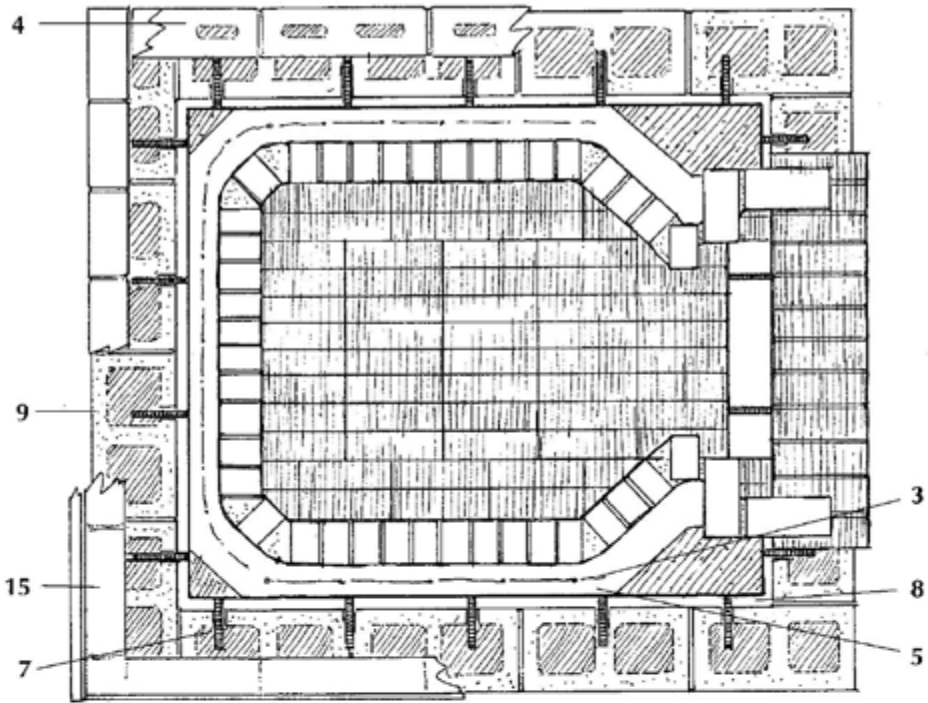
to bumper, entering the mall parking lot, illuminating the solstice over there. They have immensely greater candle power than the solstice bonfire, but maybe less warmth all the same. At least, when I looked over, it made me shiver.



# Oven Plans

Daniel Wing and Alan Scott

*The Bread Builders: Hearth, Loaves, and Masonry Ovens, 1999*



## Afterword (2013)

The cooking fire booklet was written in 2001. A year later, a retired teacher named Elizabeth Harris, well-known in her neighbourhood, got a bake-oven built across town at Riverdale Farm, a demonstration farm run by the Parks Department. Elizabeth had been involved with the farm for years, and the oven project had been on her mind for a while.

Around the same time, some leftover building supplies and pizza day money from Dufferin Grove became available to help build another bake oven at Christie Pits Park.

Riverdale Farm's oven was a high-profile project. Christie Pits was not.

Elizabeth and her friends had raised enough funds for the Riverdale oven to employ Nigel Dean, our first oven-builder/contractor at Dufferin Grove. He made them a state-of-the-art oven, right beside the park's historic farmhouse, backing on the white picket fence that separates the farmhouse from the street. The oven was built of mellow old bricks. It had a cedar-shake roof, copper trim, and a beautiful reclaimed ironwork oven door that Elizabeth had been saving for years. The baking was meant to complement the Riverdale Farmers' market (the first farmers' market in a city park, also started by Elizabeth).

In contrast to the Riverdale project, the people who built the Christie Pits oven were amateurs – a handful of part-time recreation staff with some limited home-improvement experience,

including laying bricks and framing a roof. I was the project's errand girl and lunch truck. Construction took place during a cool, foggy week in October. The park was mostly empty except for some dog walkers. Even they were invisible when the fog was thick. We used the "Bread Builders" book that Alan Scott had brought along when he was working on the smaller Dufferin Grove oven with us in 2000. The builders went step-by-step while I read aloud from the book as needed.

The recreation supervisor for that area, Tino DeCastro, came by Christie Pits from time to time, bringing supplies – more plywood from the City stores, or boxes of nails. A couple of times he brought along the contractor brother-in-law of one of his staff, to help with the tricky bits like building the chimney. What Tino *didn't* bring was compliance inspectors or policy checkers. And so the Christie Pits oven was built by amateurs in a week or so. It had plain board siding instead of a brick face, and a makeshift plywood door, with a small padlock to keep people from burning unscheduled fires. The following spring, Tino began assigning some of his staff to bake pizza with the kids in the park's after-school program. By summertime, pizza-making in the old style had become a regular treat for the park's day camps, and the oven was used two or three times a week.

Both ovens work equally well. Counting those two new ones, there was then a total of four ovens in city parks

(the other two at Dufferin Grove), all of them well used.

In 2001 I wrote here that the Dufferin Grove ovens were a story magnet. In the decade that followed, they slid into being a *brand*, an internet presence, a screen icon to click on – for reporters looking for a “success story,” for conferences of academic urbanists, for term paper topics in high schools, and for young university graduates who were new arrivals on the job market (with a Masters in urban planning and no job, but a lot of analytical insights for sale). Some of these new players came to the park and asked questions, but most didn’t need to – they already “knew” everything. They knew, for example, how “a crime-ridden park had been transformed into a warm-hearted community hub.” A pleasingly simple recipe was born: if you want to get rid of gangs and drugs, maybe also runaway dogs and homeless people, add a bake oven with pizza, and presto!

But the original idea for making changes to the park was not based on any recipe. Our leitmotif, our main idea, was “removing blocks.” There was no settled plan at the outset, but a

readiness to take our luck, to be open to the ideas and gifts that people might want to bring into play. We wanted to make settings for strangers to become at least a little familiar with one another, maybe even to find friends.

The new approach didn’t begin with the ovens or the campfires. It began with the building of a giant sandpit beside the original wooden playground, a sand play area stocked with full-size metal shovels and wooden poles for building. Later on, we added a tap for a supply of running water, so the children could make rivers and dams.

The children who came to play there in the early days insisted that the adventure playground, as we began calling it, needed food, and in their opinion, the food ought to be cooked over campfires.

The campfires led to the idea of the bake oven, and the oven in turn led to the public “make your own pizza” days, the planting of a kitchen garden (growing herbs, tomatoes, and peppers for pizza toppings), then other gardens, a second oven, the rink café, the setting up of a weekly farmers’ market, and community dinners cooked in the ovens.

## The park staff

As new programs developed and new ideas were proposed, it became clear that only paid city staff could keep up with the amount of work required to make it all happen. At that time most city parks had some part-time recreation staff assigned to them, but at Dufferin

Grove those staff were not seen as having any connection to the new programs. Most of them weren’t interested, either. I went to Tino DeCastro, the recreation supervisor of the neighbourhood that included the park (the same person who helped the Christie Pits oven to



get built), and said – we need the work of your staff, and better staff, if we're going to make this work.

The city's longstanding system of hiring new recreation staff turned out to be providential. In Toronto, most municipal recreation staff – called “casual” staff – work irregular hours at pretty low wages, with few benefits. This arrangement, when it was first set up, was meant to be a way of saving money for the city, by hiring mostly high school students who wanted pocket money, until they grew up and moved into their real jobs. But in fact about a quarter of the City's approximately 10,000 part-time “casual” recreation staff are adults, for example mothers with young children, or new immigrants who can't find full-time work yet. Because the younger “casual staff” are often moving on, and new staff are constantly being hired, it was possible right from the beginning to offer flexible paying work to the people who became interested in what was going on at Dufferin Grove. The staffing could be built on the talents of people who showed up. Tino, the recreation supervisor, supported this approach.

The list of interested candidates wanting to work at the park was long: bohemian artists and musicians whose art didn't pay the rent, bakers and cooks between restaurants, post-secondary students needing rent money (or a thesis subject), displaced skilled immigrants finding their feet, recent college graduates unsure of where to begin, and always some smart, thoughtful mothers (sometimes fathers) of growing-

up children. The list also included a few “graduates” of court-ordered community hours who bonded with the park while doing their mandated work, and even a few ambitious young gang members (*ex-gang* as they grew up) who developed a taste for good work while on a temporary youth grant at Dufferin Grove.

Tino was fair-minded, willing to nudge up the longer-term casual-staff wages to half the hourly wage of full-time city workers. That amount was tolerable for the people working at Dufferin Grove despite their considerable abilities and relative maturity. Why? Because working at the park – at the ovens, or with the “rink rats,” or with youthful gangsters, or with musicians, or with Sri Lankan immigrant “overball” players, or with anyone else – had one highly unusual element: the staff were given considerable freedom to try out new ways of building up the park. They were not treated as standard hourly-wage workers needing a daily task list from a superior. Curiosity and willingness to experiment with new ideas were welcomed, including many of the ideas proposed to the staff by park users. So the park's liveliness continually increased. Tino tolerated surprise well, and he admired hard work.

There was a lot of hard work for the staff to do, as the number and variety of programs expanded. The staff worked out ways of collaborating that fit the situation. Their varying levels of influence in setting the programs were based on their degree of experience and inspiration, humour

and boldness (including the willingness to fix their mistakes). They often went out to the bar together after work, fell in and out of love, learned to bear each other's weaknesses as well as admiring each other's ingenuity. The park was so absorbing that they had to remind one another to stop talking about it everywhere, not just at work but also at parties or the bar. To different degrees, almost all the new kind of staff – first five, then fifteen, then thirty or more part-time staff – were engrossed in building something. Trying new things had a fascination. And for a few years their activities got very little resistance from City Hall. The managers downtown were too distracted, working out the organizational puzzle of the new megacity. The provincial government had just mandated the unification of Toronto's five boroughs, and this involved a new bureaucracy, new power relations and new turf struggles.

Many of the staff slid in to the work rather informally, because there was some cash to pay people who wanted to try this kind of work. The park took in money from the cookies and pizzas and suppers and, in winter, the skate-lending programs at the rink. Taking a hint from some art galleries,

we didn't sell anything, we only took in donations – pay what you choose. Most people were so well pleased that they followed the “suggested donation” amounts or even exceeded them. After the groceries and the skates were paid for, there was a bit left over to pay new people. If they liked the work, and were good at it, they would be recommended to the recreation supervisor, and would then be hired as regular “casual” city staff. Both the pay for cash work and the pay for city work were set collaboratively by the park's workers within the frame of the city's pay scales. Barter played an important part too, a steady flow of mini-pizzas and cookies for kids who picked litter, or park bread in exchange for farm produce for the dinners from the farmers at the market, or park cinnamon buns for accounting help.

In other words, at this particular park, park users and staff together made a place for experimentation with food, gardens, play, performance, and a complicated quilt of social relations. Park users supplied some extra cash for certain parts of the experiment that they liked. The staff then pooled these additional moneys to sustain and grow the activities. Thus the park became a real *commons* in a number of ways.

## Unpaid Work

Oddly, despite the range and inventiveness of what the Dufferin Grove staff were doing, there was a persistent myth that most of the work was done by unpaid volunteers like me.

But in my long-term, daily involvement I was the exception. The sustained work was done by park staff. And that was exactly as it should be. Why shouldn't people be paid for their hard work when

there's a civil service? In my case, being on staff would have been impractical. The growth of Dufferin Grove Park as a commons was irregular, so that I sometimes had to be outspoken and defend it when there was trouble. Bureaucracies have a very small tolerance for even a loyal opposition. Had I been on staff, the City Hall managers would have had to fire me. Why be hired only to be fired? But in the case of the park staff, they were doing the work that taxes are meant to pay for – and then some.

But how to bring this understanding into neighbourhood awareness was a puzzle.

In 2000, we set up a non-profit group called **CELOS** (pronounced see-loss), the [Ce]ntre for [Lo]cal Research into Public [S]pace, which became a government-approved charitable organization in 2005.

*CELOS* was a rather awkward acronym, but dear to us because it sounded a bit like **CIDOC** (Centre for Intercultural Documentation), established by my friend Ivan Illich in Mexico in the 1960's. Illich had inspired our motto of "research by people." *CELOS* gave a (slightly) formal expression to the experimentation – we called it "practical research" – that had developed over the years. I wrote stories about the day-to-day building up of the park in the monthly park newsletters. Still, these stories didn't seem to correct the common impression: that the liveliness of the park was mainly because of the efforts of a large group of unseen volunteers, operating like secret elves.

Why were so few people in the park interested in the practical reality of what made the park flourish around them? Maybe one of the main reasons was that the park's surroundings were changing. The media didn't call the neighbourhood the "troubled west end" any more. Over a period of about 15 years, houses doubled in price and doubled again. The new people who bought these overpriced houses had to have two well-paid jobs per household, to keep up with their mortgage and pay for the renovations that seemed to accompany each new sale. Many of these new home-owners had very little extra time to get involved in the details of the park – especially if they had young children as well, and maybe a dog that had to be walked. For them, the park became more like an accessory. Conversation among strangers diminished, replaced by cell phone calls, and by retrievals of texts. People walking by the ovens on baking day were more likely to get out their phone and take a photo than to tell the bakers a story about their grandmother. That was just as well, anyway, since the bakers were increasingly trying to improve their output for the park farmers' market, to earn more donations for the rest of the park programs. Rambling stories by passersby could be a hindrance.

There was not a standing army of unpaid helpers in the park, but there were many people who offered their help at particular times. These offers were of various kinds. There were the optimists, to begin with. Someone would e-mail or run into a staff person in the park,

and ask how they could get involved. Should they adopt a tree? Organize a fundraiser? Cook their family's supper in the wood ovens? Share their expertise on the better organization of websites?

But like A.A.Milne's shipwrecked sailor who had so many possible plans that he couldn't get started on any one of them, these would-be volunteers found it hard to fix on any specific

possibility, and they mostly subsided without doing much of anything.

And then there were, over the years, many other people who were good at carpentry or gardens or websites or making music, and who gave their time and their capacities in smaller or larger amounts. One of the most spectacular of these was a young woman named Georgie Donais.

## Georgie and the cob

Georgie had been coming to the park for years. She heard that a Public Health inspector had directed park staff to install four sinks and a fridge down by the wading pool beside the playground. The park staff had been operating a little food cart, with park bread and cookies and salads and organic hot dogs, at the playground every day during the summers. After a few years of this, the inspector – rightly – said that this was a regular food operation, not an occasional special event, and therefore would need a regular water source and cooling facilities.

Georgie told us that she had been researching and working with an old building technique called *cob* – constructing a building with oval hand-shaped building blocks made by mixing clay, sand, straw, and water. (“Cob” is an old English word for an oval bread loaf.) Georgie asked: “How about building a cob shelter for the new sinks and fridge?” She was confident that she could find enough materials and enlist enough volunteers to help her build.

I thought she was dreaming, about

the volunteers. But I couldn't talk her out of the project, so it got underway. To avoid the need for a building permit – which a cob structure wouldn't likely be able to get – Georgie changed the plan to a sink-and-food counter backed by a long cob wall that twisted around at both ends, allowing her to demonstrate a stub of a green roof at one loop and to put in a diaper-changing counter at the other. Walls didn't seem to need a building permit. We asked the city plumbers and electricians if we could let them know when the counter was ready, to install the sinks and wiring – and they agreed. After all, sinks and wiring were an order from Public Health. That was a bit of luck for us, an order getting us free help from the City's trades staff.

Georgie's friends and family started the project off, digging the serpentine trench for the wall's foundation. They were soon joined by curious parents whose kids were busy playing in the park, also by some people from other countries to whom this kind of construction was second nature. Georgie had found a source of old

broken-up concrete sidewalk chunks, and a friend with a truck brought them to the park. Donation money from the sale of bake-oven bread paid for trench liner and weeping tile, to lay down first. Then the trench was layered with gravel and topped with the chunk foundation. Georgie and her friends assembled the piles of clay and sand and bales of straw, for volunteers to work with.

The walls began to rise. All summer long, they rose, with ever more people helping to shape the cob “loaves” that took the place of bricks. A Greek man who had come to the wading pool with his little grandchildren turned out to be very capable at making window molds. He spent a month of the summer helping dozens of volunteer builders to structure the top half of the wall, with places to insert shelves and “stained glass” light wells made with wine bottles. Two theatre-set builders, who lived up the street from the park, undertook to make all the sink-and-food-prep counters and cupboards themselves. They did it with skill and also whimsy, using barn board, banging out old cutlery to make door handles for the cupboards, breaking up old tiles for mosaic countertops. And the city plumbers and electricians, when we called them, were not put off by this highly unusual job site. They worked alongside the cob builders to embed the wiring and PVC pipe for five sinks.

As the summer wore on, Georgie, whose two children were still very young then, was often exhausted despite the daily help of her husband Alan. But she kept on, and toward the end of August she told me that, by her

calculations, over five hundred volunteer had helped to build the cob wall so far. Among these five hundred were many children. Georgie said that’s what she had wanted most – for children to understand with their hands that they could build a playground café – or a house, or a cob bake-oven – if ever they needed one later in life, and if the usual building materials were not at hand.

When the “cob courtyard” was finished – the walls glittering with tile mosaics, five sinks in working order, a bar fridge tucked into an alcove and another one under the counter – there was a party in the park. The park staff strung Christmas lights in the trees and brought down hotel pans of casseroles from the bake-ovens. The food lineups were so long and slow that we had to cut up several basketfuls of oven bread and go up and down the lines handing out free slices to take the edge off people’s hunger. In the end, there was enough food for everyone, another miracle that didn’t really make sense. Georgie performed with her band (she’s also a musician). There were candles glowing in every little shelf and crevice of the cob café-courtyard, and children danced and played around the edges of the party until late into the night.

After this outrageous feat of construction, it seemed that maybe nothing was impossible. Georgie proposed building a public composting “bio-toilet” for the playground, as the next project. She drew a sketch of a little cob tower with pretty windows and a green roof, to house the toilet. A visitor from Arizona came across the cob café and was so impressed

that (hearing about Georgie's other interest) he donated an \$8000 high-tech composting-toilet unit. The city's Arts Council voted Georgie a \$10,000 grant for the cob tower to enclose the toilet. Pictures and plans filled the pages of the newsletter.

But it slowly became clear that this plan had enemies. Some of the park neighbours said there would be a bad smell, and that the composting feces would get into the water table and poison the neighbourhood around the park. Other grievances began to surface – about the farmers' market, the ovens, the gardens, the new trees, the cob café, the taking over of the park by newer residents, the “mudhole” (sand pit) in the playground, the lack of due process in making park decisions, the too-close relations between park program staff and park users.

A new park maintenance supervisor was assigned to the area that included Dufferin Grove. As opposition mounted against the composting toilet, the opponents let it be known that they were having special meetings in camera with this new supervisor, who (they hinted) was scandalized by much of what was going on at the park. The supervisor brought in building inspectors, and eventually it was determined that it would cost \$147,000 to build a composting toilet that would comply with the city bylaws. So that ended it.

If Georgie's composting toilet project had been carried out under the radar, like the cob café, chances are it

would still have been tricky. A public composting toilet is not so simple, and the cob tower surrounding the toilet would have had to be much taller than the cob café – structurally difficult. But the main idea of these Dufferin Grove building projects was to *experiment in public*. “Research by people” involves participatory science, public trial-and-error – as had happened with the ovens, the adventure playground, the campfires, and many other programs. Lots of the experiments had involved disagreements, and sometimes even angry exchanges among those testing them out. But there was room for failure, and enough good will for the failures to be eventually seen as comical – as reality checks that one could learn from. The same thing might have happened with the difficult bio-toilet project if the enthusiasm to experiment had continued. Georgie might have ended up with egg on her face, but the responsibility for failure would have been shared among many do-it-yourself believers. *Live and learn*.

Instead, the humour was gone and so was the lightness. Several public meetings were marked by screaming and rough accusations. There were eruptions of mean, libelous gossip on the neighbourhood email lists. “Compliance” became the watchword, and people began looking over their shoulders a good deal. The time of public experimentation at the park was winding down. The decade for thinking that “anything is possible” was followed by the decade for eating humble pie.

## The fading of the commons

### *From a park newsletter at that time:*

*This past year, the Friday Night Suppers at the park grew bigger than the cooks and the park friends had expected when they started the suppers the year before last. The cooking was often fun for the staff, but sometimes it seemed that new people thought the suppers were more like a conveniently-cheap kid-friendly restaurant than a chance to meet their neighbours. The winter suppers inside the rink house presented particular problems. We tried to make some changes - replace chairs with benches, put the tables into long rows - to encourage people to squash closer together and talk to strangers. It worked at first but not for long. People soon resumed "saving" big parts of the tables for only their friends, and if strangers sat next to them, there was often no effort to include them in the talk. The*

*good will that's needed for a rink supper to be fun was in short supply with some groups, replaced by complaints about the service (!) and the crowding. But the supper was never intended to be a service! In addition, people who just came to skate and play hockey were squeezed out into the cold to change, not only during the supper but also after (the dinner people lingered longer and longer at their tables, unaware of the skaters). Between the Thursday farmers' market and the Friday supper with kids playing indoor tag and scattering toys to trip over, the skaters began to wonder out loud if they were going to be displaced from inside the rink house completely. So the cooks and some of the park friends concluded that they'd better call a halt to the community suppers for now, and rethink the idea.*

The campfires were next to get in trouble. The new park maintenance supervisor came from a different part of the city, where campfires were not encouraged. He didn't see the point of the campfires at Dufferin Grove, so he cancelled them. Despite the predictable flurry of angry emails and phone calls to the city councillor, it took more than two months to get the campfires reinstated. Everything became a struggle against obstacles. In winter, some of the zamboni drivers wouldn't talk to the rink's recreation staff, and were mean to them. Almost all the zamboni drivers are men and they make twice as much

money as the rink's recreation staff (the majority of whom were women). Two of the zamboni staff threatened to walk off the job and file a union grievance if the lower-income, lower-status program staff didn't stop arguing with them about how the rinks should be run. The other zamboni drivers didn't agree with these two, but they didn't speak out either. Neither did management. The threats were funny, at least in a black-humour way, but the acrimony wore people down.

On the principle that the best defence is an offence, our newly-minted CELOS charitable organization applied

for its first “research by people” grant, from the provincial government’s lottery foundation. The grant proposal was called “Taking the Show on the Road,” and the money was approved. So the Dufferin Grove “practical researchers” spread out to other parks in the city, helping to build cob benches and putting up temporary park bake ovens with bricks and angle iron in neighbourhoods that asked us. Community campfires were tried out at ten other parks. The researchers brought pots of soup, and skewers for marshmallows. Odd, exotic events like these made new friends at other city parks – and new enemies as well, at City Hall.

The problem was that programs like these were becoming identified

as a bothersome anomaly, set against a new Parks and Recreation ideology then developing among the City’s top managers. After the initial bureaucratic turf struggles at City Hall were settled, these managers, with the support of many city councillors, had begun the task of commodifying the parks and the recreation centres – which had previously been, at least downtown, fully tax-supported elements of the *commons*. At City Hall, freely accessible commons came to be seen as lost income, and steps were taken to begin “recovery” of that income. All activities and spaces, indoors and outdoors, were inventoried and attached to a price list, which was steadily revised upwards to the extent that was politically tolerable.

## Conflict of Interest

The Dufferin Grove Park-style campfires and the temporary bake ovens were not well adapted to this price list. The price list had a category called “social gathering permit,” but the Dufferin Grove-style programs were working in a different direction. When the CELOS group went around to other parks doing their show-and-tell – “*see how simple it is to make a campfire with your neighbours?*” – “*see how a pile of bricks can be stacked and roofed with a few pieces of angle iron, and turned into a pizza oven during your farmers’ market?*” – the group was seen as directly undermining the city’s new revenue policy. And since the crew working on the CELOS grant were largely the same bunch who at other times worked as part-time city staff at

Dufferin Grove Park, a new objection began to make the rounds. Dufferin Grove recreation staff, it began to be said at City Hall, were “in conflict of interest.”

And so, with this one phrase, the activities of the Dufferin Grove experimenters were put in the same bag as the plots of financial district embezzlers and crooked politicians.

That certainly raised the profile of the staff’s actions. When is a free campfire an act of political disloyalty to the city government? Is the free transformation of loose bricks and angle iron into a bake oven a step into non-compliance with city policy, for which a person can be fired if they work for the city?



The idea of “conflict of interest” in the context of cooking with fires became a topic of neighbourhood discussion. One of the anti-bio-toilet people on the neighbourhood email lists enthusiastically expanded the concept to suggest that I was probably embezzling “six figure” amounts of money from the park. The implication was that Dufferin Grove staff were in a conspiracy to funnel all the food donations to me. The new Park maintenance supervisor even mentioned this possibility to the local police superintendent.

But for the most part, the public reaction to the accusation was incredulity. The “conflict of interest” label made sense inside City Hall, where the phrase meant “whatever is not congruent with management’s current plan.” But outside of that world, it was not a formula that stuck. The City Councillor got calls and emails supporting the integrity and good work at Dufferin Grove, and she said she was displeased with management’s approach.

Despite the councillor’s support, though, displeasure at City Hall was growing. New policies came out every few months. Simple experiments that used to be fun were buried in paperwork. In 2010, Tino DeCastro, the long-time recreation supervisor whose motto at Dufferin Grove had been “let’s make it work,” was moved to a new job,

away from contact with the public, to supervising the city’s recreation centre cleaners. He was replaced by a succession of new supervisors tasked with taming Dufferin Grove-style experimentation.

For the City managers, the simplest way to wall off the experimentation would have been to stop all city staff involvement and put the anomalies under the management of an external group. Feelers were put out to CELOS – would we like enter a business contract with the city, to take over the running of the food and skate lending programs?

The answer was, no, we wouldn’t. CELOS is a charitable organization with a mandate for research. We said to Recreation management, we’re not in the business of running a food operation. We did a lot of what we call “practical research,” to find out whether with the help of city staff, bread could be baked, fires could be lit, musicians and actors could be drawn in, children could be attracted to an adventure playground. Could new tools like these enliven a park? We found out the answers – yes, yes, and yes. We said, “the city staff who know the ins and outs of building a lively park already exist. They’re ready now to run Dufferin Grove completely, without any more day-to-day help from CELOS. Please use the talents that you have available!”

## **Management for compliance**

But the managers did not agree. Instead, they told the part-time staff that it was not their job to run anything – they were to return to

being regular wage-labourers, limited to following direction from full-time staff further up the hierarchy. A series of new, previously uninvolved full-time “community recreation programmers,” called CRP’s, were put in direct charge of supervising all programs at Dufferin Grove Park. Their additional wage added about \$73,000 a year to the cost of running the park. The new CRP-supervisors’ attendance at the park was very occasional. Mostly they were in their offices at their computer, or at meetings, or at training sessions. The part-time program staff were directed to describe in minute detail exactly what they needed to do to run the customary programs. Then they were instructed to wait until their CPR-supervisors ordered them to do those things.

Sometimes a new CRP-supervisor felt – on the basis of insights gained from reading her computer spreadsheets – that she could rearrange the park work in a simpler, more sensible way. Revised directions to the program staff resulted. But forcing computer-screen simplicity onto real-world complexity caused weekly, or daily, or sometimes hourly tangles that then had to be unravelled again. Meetings of management, downtown, would follow, to solve all the new problems, without the participation

of the underling “casual” program staff. The increase in the park program costs – as a result of these high-level, high-salary, cross-departmental meetings – is so far undocumented.

Every aspect of the program staff’s accustomed work was first rendered frustrating, and then, after more meetings, incorporated into the hierarchical mold of “receiving direction.” Part-time staff had to provide a detailed explanation if they got their work done an hour early or had to stay an hour longer. Top-down scheduling meant that on good weather days or public holidays, there might not be enough staff to open the café. On bad weather days, there were often too many staff. Under these conditions, income went down. And although costs went up, with the multiple new layers of supervision, it became clear that cost was not the big issue. Neither was the loss of the former frugal park housekeeping of funds and programs that part-time staff had worked out collaboratively. What mattered most was bringing the park into compliance with the city’s centrally devised rules.

The new experiment was a kind of downward alchemy of turning the gold of ‘trying things’ into the base metal of ‘compliance.’

## **The bake oven policy**

At the beginning of this Afterword, I told the story of the building of two bake ovens, one at Riverdale Farm and one at Christie Pits. One was expertly built with the finest materials, the other

was done cheaply by amateurs following steps in a book. Each oven took about a week to build and each was well used as soon as it was ready for baking. Today, eleven years later, it’s impossible

to imagine such a straightforward building process in a city park. By 2004, after one more small oven had been added in Alexandra Park (built by a city-hired contractor), Parks management staff began to worry that their department might be swamped by a wave of new oven projects all over the city. They discussed the need for a uniform, citywide *bake oven policy*. All potential new ovens (three were waiting in the queue) were put on hold, while a policy officer was assigned to research the question. He wrote periodic memos over the next three years.

The first version of the new bake oven policy was finally unveiled in 2007, but it was judged to have some problems and was not approved. One of the problems, which the managers realized too late, was that no one who actually used bake ovens had been consulted.

The second draft came out in 2009. This was followed by some conversations between the policy writers and park staff who were actually baking in the ovens. Even I was asked for my thoughts. The city's Parks director invited Anna Bekerman, at that time the main oven-baking staff at Dufferin Grove, to help with the third draft, and she worked on that for some weeks. Anna was certainly the right person for the job. She had begun baking in the park ovens years earlier, first as a volunteer. Then she was hired by Tino, and helped to teach other part-time staff. Anna and some of the part-time staff got so good at baking that they managed, by baking bread for the farmers' market, to add thousands of dollars to the Dufferin Grove

“market donations.” Those funds were used to improve other programs at the park. Anna was also studying Spanish-to-English translation. She took a break to study in Spain, and while she was there, she studied how they bake too, and brought back some new baking lore. Then she and her family lived for a time in Brooklyn, where she got involved with the Prospect Park bake-oven program (partly inspired by Dufferin Grove). When she got back to Toronto, Anna set up a CELOS “public ovens” web site, which has an encyclopaedic amount of information on it about all the Toronto ovens, including some on Toronto Community Housing land.

The Parks director met with Anna a few times to go over her draft and said he was pleased with it. But one morning we heard that he had suddenly been fired. He was escorted out of his office by City Hall security officers – a corporate-style firing not seen before at PFR. Insider opinion was that the new general manager wanted to send a strong-woman message to her management staff, about the consequences of failure to get with the program. The director's exact transgressions along those lines were never made public.

So Anna's draft policy version never saw the light – it was scuttled along with the director. Two new policy-officers, under the supervision of a new manager who was not very interested in what bake oven users had to say, wrote a fourth, centrally-generated version. In another unexpected plot twist, the new manager was also fired, again for reasons unknown to us, again by being escorted out by Security. But the disgraced

manager's version of the bake-oven policy stood, and in November 2011 it was presented to the Parks Committee, at City Hall.

The committee is made up of five

city councillors, who have the final say on any new policy.. The policy called for community bakers to pay for a permit and insurance every single time they used an oven in any city park.

***From a park newsletter at that time:***

*In the committee rooms of City Hall, Robert's Rules of Order reign. The chair of the meeting, in this case Councillor Norm Kelly, from Scarborough, is treated with elaborate respect. Members of the public may sit and watch quietly. If they feel they know something that the councillors should hear, they may depute for five minutes (sometimes less). Committee members might ask a few questions afterwards. But after the deputants are dismissed by the chair, they have to keep quiet, even if the subsequent committee discussion is full of mistakes. Most people find the process so frustrating that they don't come back, and so the committee deliberations are often held without much (or any) audience: a poor forum for democracy.*

*But since the friends of bake ovens had tried without any luck to talk to the committee members outside of this forum, we were stuck trying to make our points there, as deputants.*

*Of course, most people can't take off a whole morning from work to go and depute at City Hall. So we had asked one of the CELOS researchers to film short interviews with as many park oven bakers as he could get. He asked them all the same question: "are you willing to pay permit fees to run community programs at the bake ovens?"*

*There are only four parks that have bake ovens, and two more that have been*

*trying for 5-6 years to get permission to build one. Our researcher was able to put together a lively 4-minute video of everybody's comments, and he played the video for the Parks Committee.*

*When the video had been played for them, two councillors said they wanted to ask our researcher some questions about ovens. But he is a videographer, not a baker. He had never been at a committee meeting before, and he was clearly taken aback when the councillors asked him to stay in the deputants' chair. So park baker Anna Bekerman slid in beside him and said she was willing to help out if the councillors had questions based on the video.*

*Then something remarkable happened. Brenda Patterson, the former general manager of Parks, Forestry, and Recreation, who had been promoted to deputy city manager in the summer (and was therefore sitting at the left hand of the committee chair), leaned over and said something to Councillor Kelly. He listened, and then interrupted Anna. "Do you work for the Parks Department?" he asked. She said yes. "Then I will have to ask you to step down immediately. You are in conflict of interest. You should have declared your conflict at the outset. There are management staff here to answer any questions."*

*It turns out that city policy prohibits staff from speaking at a committee meeting*

*if they have any direct connection with the work that's being discussed. The reason: deep down, they must only be trying to get more paid work hours for themselves.*

*So Anna withdrew. The person who*

*knew most about bake ovens in that room, who had given countless hours to the programs at Dufferin Grove and also to working with new bake oven users all over the city, had been publicly silenced as a cheater.*

The Parks Committee members voted to approve the new policy, over the objections of people using existing bake ovens and the handful of people

wanting to build new ones. It wasn't a workable policy, neither for building nor for baking.

## Connections

The writer Jane Jacobs, toward the end of her life, said over and over again, with urgent insistence – in relation to the well-being of large cities – “everything is connected to everything else, don't you see?” Back in 2001 I put a copy of the first “Cooking with Fire” booklet in her mailbox, with a slightly apologetic note saying I hoped she would have a chance to “have a quick look at it.” She hardly knew me, but she called me a few days later to say she'd read it through from beginning to end. She said she was so glad those stories of very ordinary city people were being told.

I think she hoped they would inspire people to connect in some related way. And of course, that lively park did create serendipitous moments when lasting friendships took root. We used to scrounge for old locker room benches forgotten in the community centre storage rooms. We would bring them over to the park and wash the dust off and paint them and then set them, unanchored, around the park.

Two people who might have met in the park before but had never taken the time to really talk before, noticing a handy bench, could then sit down and begin a conversation, and maybe they would realize after two hours had passed that they had barely touched on the subjects they still wanted to talk about...

So the benches might connect the people. And the farmers' market makes connections between growers of food and eaters. Most of the eaters come for the sunny-day ambience and do the rest of their shopping at supermarkets. But some are curious for more involvement. The sandpit in the playground connects children to water and logs and shovels, to their own hands, digging, and to one another, negotiating how to work together to let the water flow. The campfires connect the people around the fire to the darkness in the park, and the people walking by or cycling through the park's darkness are connected to the light of the fire – a surprise.

## What's left now: straight talk

The connections emerging out of curiosity and surprise are very fine. But their significance and any longer-term effects are probably pretty small. This neighbourhood, like most urban neighbourhoods, is largely composed of strangers, and will stay that way. I want to honour the connections that have grown around these fires and perhaps will grow some more. But it's good to talk truthfully about the way cooking

with fire has played out at Dufferin Grove. The fires can't be commodified as a brand that delivers little doses of "community." Such a formula distorts the political and social realities of this particular city, as they're reflected in our small story of the cooking fires. My hope is that instead, this story will – at least occasionally – prompt an outbreak of discussions touching on broader issues. Here are some talking points:

### ***1. Local "piecemeal" works better than central planning:***

Our story shows that the ovens, the campfires, and the many other programs that provide their context came about piecemeal, not as a result of planning or professional design centrally imposed. Our story is about small-scale public experimentation, including sometimes failing in public, done mostly by amateurs, and on a very cheap scale. As urban writer Jane Jacobs said (often!), central planning is a spoiler. Planning and design by professionals too often create obstacles to the commons. The two park ovens built using city-commissioned designs both have major flaws which obstruct bakers. They're also

too small for any scale of community use. Builders collaborating directly with bakers leads to the most workable and by far the cheapest ovens. Park staff baking and cooking with fire in public – no walls – can help to create gathering spaces where there were empty parks before. Toronto's new bake-oven policy blocks the approach that works best and mandates the approach that has the most flaws. This fact is unacknowledged at City Hall. The problems arising from central planning need to be understood, though, by people who live in the city and want to take part in shaping what goes on there.

### ***2. Unpaid work by volunteers is not sustainable:***

Our story shows that public bake ovens and park campfires provide popular gathering places. When such places attract a lot of people, there will be a lot of work – setup, operating, take-down, clean-up. To imagine that these simple gathering places can be well-used if run by unpaid volunteers is a fantasy. Ivan Illich, our inspiration

for CELOS, wrote an essay called *Shadow Work* that was helpful to us. By this term he meant, the large amount of unpaid work needed to smooth the painful ridges of modern life, making the haste, the anxiety, the dislocation, more bearable. Shadow work is a hidden requirement of a consumption-based society; without it, the industrial

system would collapse. The unpaid work of accommodation to our consumer goods keeps us very busy in the day-to-day. People who add to those unpaid labours by doing extra shadow work in public spaces as well, soon run out of patience. Bake ovens relegated to unpaid volunteers fall into disuse – a pity.

The municipal civil service is paid for by communal funds (taxes). These funds can pay good people to care for the gathering places created through cooking with fire. Our story shows that such places can even attract plentiful donations. But Jim Hart, the

general manager of Parks, Forestry and Recreation, has been telling anyone who asks that the staffing at Dufferin Grove costs too much, the City can't afford it. City Council, persuaded that payment for park program workers is an extravagance, in 2011 voted to stop publicly-funded staff support for park cooking fires, citywide. This is a false economy. The people who like to work hard every day in their neighbourhood park but don't like money to pay their rent are like imaginary friends. They don't exist. So when parks have no staff, that just means unused resources and empty gathering places.

### ***3. Public sector unions are failing to adapt to the commons:***

Parks are not automotive-parts factories. People who work in parks have a complicated situation – the parks are not only their workplaces but they are also the public commons, belonging not to a factory owner but to the inhabitants of a city.

Local 79 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) gained the right to represent all of the City of Toronto's part-time recreation workers in 1998. That means Local 79 gets union dues for about 10,000 part-time city workers. In exchange, the part-time workers are assigned only one unit officer to address all the members' problems. The Local 79 union staff took no interest in the collaborative work of Dufferin Grove part-time staff, nor did their president respond to several requests for a conversation that would include park users as well as local staff.

Meantime, city management used the collective agreement as a tool,

unopposed by the union, to hobble worker ingenuity and collaboration, saying that the collective agreement requires a strict hierarchy, mechanically applied. The union basically left the entire territory to management instead of taking the experiments at Dufferin Grove as the chance to enlarge the work possibilities of its members.

CUPE has so far missed this chance to capture the interest – now lukewarm at best – of its part-time members. CUPE Local 79 (primarily female) is already a weak local. The power of Local 416, the other main park-related Local (primarily male) appears to be waning as well. The circulation of fresh ideas and direct engagement with the problematic management theories at City Hall might have helped invigorate a union that's on the road to becoming irrelevant. But that hasn't happened.

A related dilemma is the minimal interest by park users in the details of

how city part-time staff have built up and continue to run the ovens, the campfires, and the other parts of the commons – and how city hall now

diminished the local staff’s capacities to work with park users. The citizens pay the bills, but they’re mostly too distracted to follow up.

#### ***4. “Whole cost accounting” is long overdue:***

Our story shows that the assignment of a “community recreation programmer” (CRP) to micro-supervise the part-time staff from off-site added about \$73,000 to the cost of running the park, including the ovens and campfire programs. This cost is not captured in the “Dufferin Grove” category of the city’s financial reporting system (called SAP). The costs of the extra high-level problem-solving meetings downtown, relating to problems created by the managerial interventions at Dufferin Grove Park, are not captured either. Even the cost of groceries needed for cooking and baking in the ovens is not reliably entered in the system – a Freedom of Information request is pending, since the Finance staff have not come up with those numbers. The donation income in the first half of 2013 was down by about 25% from the previous year, when part-time staff still ran the programs.

That’s just the local story. Cost comparisons with other parks are also missing. The two city-built ovens in Alexandra Park and Edithvale Park appear to have cost a great deal more and given less than those that were built with bakers’ plans; but such costs are not public. Did the concrete aprons and stone benches for the new designed

campfire sites cost \$1000 each or \$6000 each? Who knows? And there is the question of usage: the Christie Pits oven was used only 3 times in 2012. But there’s no accounting of the waste of a perfectly good oven.

Cash handling by part-time workers at Dufferin Grove has been a huge stumbling block for city management. Before the hierarchy was put back, part-time staff used the almost universal Quickbooks accounting program, showing every penny of donation money and every receipt for baking supplies and “practical research” payments. Although the accounts were always available for inspection, the part-time staff were warned that they had left themselves open at any moment to possible findings of fraud by the city’s auditor.

But in fact, open books using the Dufferin Grove example should be the desideratum for all public spending. Full-cost accounting, with open books for the public – if applied in good faith – is one direct way to bring trust into a mistrustful atmosphere. Numbers tell a story, and sometimes they can even provide a way to help with decisions about good programs. The city’s central Finance Department has itself been calling for such full accounting for at least ten years. But it’s “not yet in place.”



## *5. Parks have no walls.*

### *People can talk to each other directly, if they choose:*

One of the distressing parts of this story is the accusation of the staff of “conflict of interest.” This seems to mean two things:

(1) being in conflict with central orders coming from managers downtown and

(2) local staff working too closely with non-staff, outside the city’s mandated “community consultation” format.

The first reason needs no additional comment. The second reason raises the question of official “community consultation” versus everyday collaboration between local staff and park users.

This is how the official consultation policy goes: non-staff, usually called “the community,” have a mandated format for giving their “input.” Signs go up in a neighbourhood, preferably under the banner of the local city councillor, inviting neighbours to a public meeting. At the meeting, a committee of volunteers may be set up, to be “friends of the park.” This committee is tasked to identify some proposals for the park. If a neighbour wants a bake oven or a campfire area, that gets on the agenda. If another neighbour doesn’t want those things, that gets on the agenda too. Then another meeting is scheduled, with a previously published (somewhere) agenda of the proposals. Whoever is interested or specifically opposed to some item on the agenda can then come

to get their point of view incorporated into the discussion, under the careful guidance of city staff. Subcommittees can be struck to talk about various plans. City planners or designers or park supervisors can be invited to answer questions at yet another meeting. And so on.

The format is attractive to city councillors because they can grow their constituent lists for future elections. Beyond that, the format is often a recipe for frustration, and most of such groups dwindle quickly. Strangers who may have never met before shout at one another or make wobbly alliances that don’t last long. Then they back away.

Our story showed an alternative: parks have no walls, so public discussion can grow slowly among the people who congregate in a hospitable park, and who fall into conversation.. People can debate without pressure and as opportunity arises. Park staff can pass along news or suggestions, and introduce people to one another if they become aware of an overlapping interest. Trust can build, as can the pleasure of trying out ideas that might (or might not) work in the park.

There’s no law of Moses that says the official “community consultation” format is smarter or better than the “hospitable park” format. But there is such a law at City Hall. The real question is, how can the commons – the city’s parks – become places for foster patient, trustful public discussion?

## *6. Making vs. talking:*

Over the years, one of the recurrent media myths about the bake ovens has been that people in the neighbourhood walk across the park from home with their uncooked casseroles and everybody convivially cooks their dinner together in the bake oven. This doesn't happen. The bake ovens have been mainly a social gathering place, not a community cookout centre. People do often inquire about using the ovens – trying them out – but once they realize that it takes hours of practice and smoke and burned fingers to get it right, they usually back out. Very few people want to use the oven themselves – turning on the stove at home is much more direct.

In August 2004 during the two-day power blackout across eastern North America, fires were made in both of the Dufferin Grove ovens so that park neighbours could cook their dinners if they wanted. But there was a heat wave at the time, and buying prepared food at neighbourhood restaurants was

so much easier (restaurants brought in gas barbeques or rented generators and had plenty of food for sale). Nobody bothered to use the park ovens. The park staff, however, made an extra large Friday Night Supper while the power was still out, and the hillside was covered with people eating and talking about the blackout.

People generally seem to prefer talking to making, where the park ovens are concerned. Rather than increasing people's capacities to prepare food "off the grid," the ovens are an amenity that drifts in the direction of being a cheap, kid-friendly restaurant. If there were to be a further drift, maybe even along the lines of the hospitable, family-oriented beer gardens that began in nineteenth-century Europe, with playgrounds nearby, a band, pretty gardens, weak beer, and cheap food, surely that wouldn't be a bad thing. But in the municipal hierarchy described in our story, it can't happen.

## *September 2013:*

On the surface, everything still looks pretty good. In summertime, so many people come to eat Friday Night Supper that all the park's picnic tables have to be brought up near the ovens on that day, and the grass is covered with diners sitting on blankets as well. The campfires have increased again, so that there are sociable groups gathered around a fire almost every night of the week, not only during warm weather but even during the winter rink season. At intervals, various

newspaper polls still declare Dufferin Grove "best park" in their "best of" contests. The park continues to be a favoured location for political demonstrations, and also for dog, cat and rabbit "adoptathons," for school reunions, for large open-air yoga classes, for experimental music. There is still "cheap-art" – ambitious outdoor theatre productions on shoestring budgets. In winter, there are so many skaters at the outdoor ice rink that the rink clubhouse often feels like a busy

train station.

Park friends and the local program staff have learned to make creative uses of some of the same laws and regulations that were being used against them – using them as policy reasons to keep the programs going. City management allows this, for now.

No one, not staff nor park users,

is charged with oven maintenance, and so the ovens are slowly biodegrading, with a brick coming away from the oven wall from time to time, the hearth pockmarked from being washed, smoke leaking into the roof insulation (which is slowly blackened but doesn't burn – the insulation is fireproof). Even so, the ovens still work just fine, for now.

