



News

Finding their Grove

Thorncliffe goes Dufferin Grove — can the city handle a local-control epidemic?

|By Andrew Cash

Some marketing taglines would be laughable if they weren't so insulting: "You're richer than you think" comes to mind.

But here's one that's spot on: "Today's Thorncliffe Is Tomorrow's Canada." The slogan is used by community activists to describe the horseshoe of postwar utilitarian low- and high-rise buildings backing on to the Don Valley in East York.

Thorncliffe Park isn't really a place you stumble upon – you have to intend to get there, and these days people really do. Originally built for 10,000, the area is a magnet for immigrants, mostly from India and Pakistan, and latterly Afghanistan, and that has swelled the numbers in this 1-kilometre square to about 30,000 people.

Literally smack dab in the middle of all these buildings is the 'hood's sole easily accessible green space: R.V. Burgess Park. To many it's just a scrubby little patch of earth, another neglected park in a low-rent neighbourhood. To a group of plucky women, however, it's their chance to pull off a Dufferin Grove.

Indeed, as the city and the Friends of Dufferin Grove duke it out over local control, the thirst for community engagement is growing across the city. Parks and Rec bureaucrats can no longer pretend that the Dufferin hub, with its own bake shop, group dinners and oddball programming, is just a downtown hipster project.

As way of ending the stalemate with Dufferin Grove and other Groves to come, the city has set up a working group aimed at arriving at guidelines around residents' participation. Its conclusions will either usher in a new era of local innovation – or, as some activists fear, nix the experiment in spontaneity that made Dufferin Grove the envy of community-builders.

I'm here in the middle of R.V. Burgess beside a rickety swing set with four members of the Thorncliffe women's committee. They're telling me how neglected the park was before they started to press for improvements. "Lights weren't working, there was garbage everywhere," says Sabina Ali, who's been in Canada a year and a half.

"Most families here are on low incomes, so access to paid recreation is very limited. There can be a lot of isolation," says Tabassum Dana, who arrived from Bangladesh two years ago. "We want these immigrant women to feel included. We'd like to draw them out of their apartments."

The group started small. Says committee member Amy Sutherland, "We called 311 [T.O.'s info line] and gradually we were successful." The park is a work in progress. Though some playground equipment remains broken, city staff have planted saplings, fixed the lights and added park furniture and walkways.

But while the group is happy with the improvements – the city is even ponying up \$8 million to revamp the community centre – what they really want to talk about is Dufferin Grove-style local engagement.

"We were very excited to see what they are doing," says Dana. "I loved the pizza oven. Much community-building can be done over food."

The committee established a close mentorship with CELOS (Centre for Local Research into Public Space), the non-profit org run by members of Friends of Dufferin Grove, and with their help started a website and held bazaars where women could sell textiles and food items. They've held arts and crafts programs for 100 children at a time and put on a winter carnival, serving up fire-roasted potatoes and lentil soup to 400 people.

In other words, their experiment was a huge hit. New plans include partnering with FoodShare to bring in a

farmers' market. Having just bagged a Trillium grant for \$150,000, they plan to reno the kitchen at the nearby Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office in order to expand their park community meal program.

"We have done a lot with very little," says Sutherland. "We're hoping to develop a closer partnership with the city. We don't necessarily need the city's money and staff; we just need permission."

And this is the key point. Says Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office exec director Jehad Aliweiwi, "There is a lack of utility for most of our public places. The regime of complicated bureaucratic permitting is part of the problem." R.V. Burgess, he says, is the heartbeat of the community.

"Whoever designed this was a genius. It is surrounded by apartments with balconies, so parents can watch as their children walk through the park to the school."

Local councillor John Parker says the city "should be looking at ways to say yes." And that's the challenge.

"Many people want to have a say in the development of programs," says Malcolm Bromley of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Rec. "We need to describe how to do that."

It won't be easy. Councillor Gord Perks, whose Parkdale ward has local participation hubs percolating in places like Sorauren Park, says the city's always been good at partnerships, but there are some wrinkles. While things like farmers' markets are intuitively right in parks, and private advertising wrong, "the hard work is getting intuition into written policy" – exactly what Thorncliffe park enthusiasts have in mind.

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