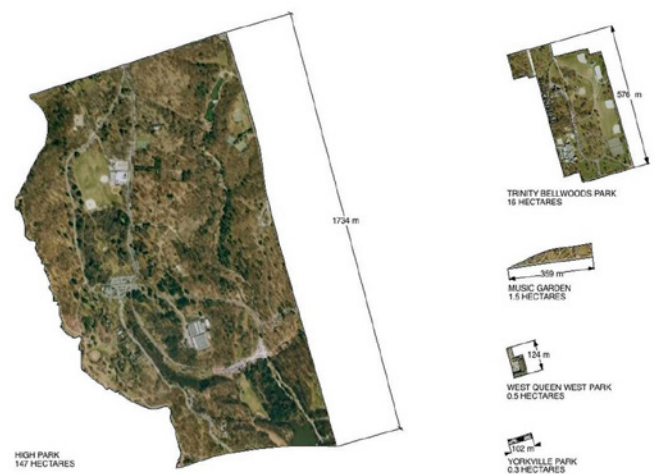


The taxonomies of park: defining public spaces



Parks, squares, greens, plazas, town centres, playgrounds, commons, parkettes, pocket parks, gardens – terms that we use to speak about and conceptualize our precious commodity – public space. What’s in a label though? While piazza evokes a well-used meeting place, a linear green elicits a connective pathway; a skate-park speaks of youth activities, and so on. Classifications such as these seem to communicate design intentions. Does terminology shift our understanding of public spaces? Why might we care?



top: Lisgar square with plantings. Photo Michelle Gay.
diagram: Public space comparison, by Netami Stuart for Active 18 Public Space charrette.

NEW PUBLIC SPACE

In increasingly dense urban precincts, development pressure leaves less space for this public good - non-privatized civic space. These are democratic and inclusive spaces for individuals and communities to engage with one another, exchanging ideas and things – to be social, private, and public. Places for conversation and inspiration: to experience community, weather, events; to recharge and relax; to gather, organize and communicate.

Intensification also means that these urban public spaces need to serve multiple communities, accommodate many layers of daily use, and function all four seasons.

CASE STUDY

Public space classification has been a simmering question for me as a community participant engaged in conceptualizing and design for a new commons for a Toronto neighbourhood undergoing severe private development pressure.

Ten years ago neighbours, local organizations, city planners, elected officials, architects, and private developers came together to discuss saving space for a public commons in this overly dense regeneration area. Residents asserted that public space be demarcated, even organizing an open-to-all Public Space charrette to brainstorm, dream and share ideas. Through tough negotiations amongst City Planning departments, City Councillors, multiple private developers, the OMB, and a group of persistent neighbours – a .4 hectare parcel of land was conveyed to the City. The community then embarked upon a lengthy public design process for Triangle Square - our working title, as the area is colloquially known as West Queen West triangle.

Thousands of volunteer hours were poured into this project – making sure that the overbuilt neighbourhood would have some 'breathing room' or open space. The neighbourhood, known as the Art & Design district, is where many creative individuals have lived and worked – making it lively, interesting, and a desirable place to live. An existing warehouse that abutted the square, home & studio to hundreds of artists over the past 40 years, was to be knocked down as part of the condo boom. The collectively agreed upon final design of the new public square was to incorporate heavy wooden beams saved from the beloved 48 Abell warehouse.



Public space charrette organized by community group Active 18. Active 18 in space claimed for Lisgar Square. Photos Michelle Gay.



2016: art beams as creative infrastructure (electricity, tie down hooks, lamps, remnants of 48 Abell. Photo Michelle Gay.

the creativity of people would be stirred by this opportunity. An urban-canvas stacked with a creative tool-kit-as-infrastructure: art beams, electricity portals, street lamps, hooks, oversized seating, 107-planted trees and a textured backstory.

People like stories. Historical details, the community participation, and vibrant vision for the new space reveal a uniqueness of this site and its dynamic neighbourhood. Why not share this narrative with everyone? The build-out of Lisgar square has spanned years. Here's where terminology and communication could have been used to signal, to new and existing neighbours, what was coming, when it was coming, and how and where to engage.

A public sign was installed: 'Lisgar Park'. Questions surfaced - 'so, where's the grass' - somewhat reductively focusing on ground cover. Though the final designs professionally considered future and full year uses, the huge population influx (5-6000+ new residents), and importantly, the potential for really inventive and exciting programming to emerge from this space - these rich conversations seemed to be dampened by lack of information and terminology. The potential and vision of Lisgar square wasn't broadcast and therefore under-appreciated.

My proposition for 21st Century parks involves communicating with communities early and often. Publish a park blog, grab social media handles for every new and existing public space, post graphically friendly signage at the site: then share context and histories, invitations to engage, show collective decisions, timelines, contacts and images outlining the framework for what the place can become.

Now installed as a grid in the square, the forest of beams form a kind of ghost structure echoing the dismantled warehouse - creating a visual and conceptual link to an important part of Toronto's history. Not simply an architectural archive though, the beams form multi-use infrastructure for potential users of the square. Serving electricity to projects by artists, designers, farmers, kids camps, pop up shops, and so on. Beams are also strapped with heavy gauge hooks to install temporary gazeboes, projection screens and other inventive uses. The central design gesture was to suggest 'urban stage' - hoping that



2016: Close up of art beam. Photo Michelle Gay.



2016. Large benches and decking surround the planting bed. Photo Michelle Gay.

Communicating design intentions through a more precise classification, say a **'theatre square'** or **'urban room'** for this case study, along with a considered context-sensitive design may be a simple step toward turning a generic public space into unique neighbourhood place. An act of placemaking.

Lastly, if we consider public space as a palimpsest, multiple communities will continue to layer new stories through new uses on a given site. I would also like to propose that all our public spaces acknowledge the traditional Indigenous territories they are sitting on.



past: the back of 48 Abell warehouse. Photo Sam Bietenholz



present: two random hacks to the park by residents, pop up kid sandbox and pop up library. Photo Michelle Gay

future: lo-fi design model of Lisgar Square prepared by Inclusive Design students to contemplate public space activities. Photo Michelle Gay





Night and winter view of Lisgar square. Photo Michelle Gay.

Early summer view of Lisgar square. Photo Michelle Gay.





two views of lisgar square prior to build out. Photo Michelle Gay.