



## A bit of Eden, east of Dufferin

### Dufferin Grove Park really works -- and plays

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After peddling through car fumes, hot air blasting from air conditioners and heat shimmering up from College Street, I steer my bike north, just east of Dufferin Street, into an oasis of green and cool: Dufferin Grove Park. Here, under a soaring canopy of maples, is Eden. Little boys dressed in nothing but shorts and wielding real, kid-sized shovels dig noisily in the city's best sandbox, a huge pile of sand surrounded by big logs. A running tap spurts in the middle, and children carve channels in the sand, using poles to build bridges across them.



CREDIT: Glenn Lowson, National Post

The sandpit at Dufferin Grove Park -- a huge hit with the area's children -- cost only \$3,000 to set up.

"We all need to go in the water to rinse off!" yells one, and several kids run shrieking into the crowded splash pad. Nearby, others play on one of the city's last surviving wooden play structures, a glorious collection of rope ladders, slides and swings, shaded and surrounded by a split-rail fence. At a food cart, park staffers cook up veggie burgers and sell them for \$2.50.

"It's a fantastic park," says Michele Billung-Meyer, watching her children, aged 10 and 3, at play. "It's the best. I don't know anywhere else you can go to that feels so community-based and welcoming."

Too true. Because while Dufferin Grove has thrived, other city parks have been on a steady decline since amalgamation in 1998.

Last week, the Parks and Recreation department released Our Common Grounds, a \$200,000 report card on the state of our 7,365 hectares of parks and natural areas: "Our parks succumbed to weeds, costly shrubs and trees died, exotic species invaded our natural areas. There was litter everywhere and everybody noticed." Owing to budget cuts, forestry staffers have four times the work load they had in 1998; parks staff today plant half the flowers they did in the early 1990s.

In May, the grass in Trinity Bellwoods Park grew almost to my knees. Brenda Librecz, acting general manager of Parks and Rec, blames the neglect of park greenery on ageing, fragile mowers. "Every single one of my wide-area mowers in the downtown core broke," she says. "We had four. We ended up borrowing and leasing. When the grass gets high, you gotta do a walkabout, you don't want someone or an animal sleeping in the grass."

Add to these troubles some major back-office turmoil. Last fall, Parks planned a reorganization, which critics called a centralization, but in November the new city council swiftly pulled the plug on the move. By Christmastime, Claire Tucker-Reid, the general manager, had retired. Librecz now says the department's error last fall was in designing the shuffle to pinch pennies, not to improve parks. Her strategic plan, she says, aims to make the parks better. Though she's a bit

heavy on the buzzwords, Librecz, with her broad smile and radiant energy, seems well-placed to make it happen.

As part of this "Parks renaissance," as she terms it, starting in November all Parks staff will get new uniforms; Librecz favours bright green. The city is also looking at restoring the office of Parks commissioner, a position that existed before 1998. And the Parks report, which draws on meetings with 700 people in neighbourhood sessions, promises the department will tackle a \$200-million backlog of repairs.

"That comes through screaming loud," Librecz says. "Our parks need a lot of loving. It's a 'we' situation: the public, ourselves, the unions, the community organizations. Look at the remarkable volunteerism that makes a park come alive. Being dollar-driven has a paralyzing effect."

Damn straight. Just look at Dufferin Grove, an emblem for community involvement. Who changed Dufferin Grove? Jutta Mason. Mason, a writer and mother of three, is a kind of patron saint of the park who has helped prepare the ground for a thousand ideas to flourish. At her prodding, volunteers ripped out walls and punched holes for windows in the grim cinderblock skate house, turning it into a mini community centre. On Thursdays, an organic farmers' market thrives in the space, and there are gourmet community suppers on Friday and Saturday evenings.

"It's total chaos and really fun," says Billung-Meyer, who has lived near the park for 12 years. "There's a woman here, Jutta, who has single-handedly made this park amazing -- kind of transformed it."

I e-mail Mason and she calls back from her island retreat in Muskoka. Parks' main problem, she says, has been its attempt to make parks uniform across the city. "What happened was a disaster," she says. "We're looking at it from a local point of view. We're just working locally. The work climate is, if you have something unusual to add, then go for it." It's also inexpensive; the sandpit, a huge hit with kids, cost \$3,000 to set up. Dufferin Grove volunteers rescued locker-room benches slated for the trash and placed them around the play area.

"The basic sign of a healthy park is family picnics," Mason says. "So you need water fountains working and washrooms open. When you pay attention to these details, the rest will follow."

Still, there are battles. During the heat wave of June, 2003, Dufferin Grove had the staff to open its splash pad but the city said no, because other parks weren't ready. For three days, Mason fought the Parks bureaucrats. Finally they relented, the park filled its pool and the neighbourhood waded in.

Librecz has paid visits to Dufferin Grove and holds it up as an example of her report's "Flexible and Nimble at Warp Speed" approach. "What I'd love to do is put Jutta Mason on a little road tour," she says. Mason welcomes that chance.

Dufferin Grove works because people here take the initiative. The report calls for preventive maintenance, so staff in Dufferin Grove this week began their own inventory of broken picnic tables and benches.

"If you work for the city you've got eyes," Mason reasons, "so you can see what needs fixing."

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