

The Dufferin Grove Park
Northwest Corner Revitalization
– A Critical look –



Jutta Mason

About Celos



The **Centre for Local Research into Public Space (CELOS)**: Since 2000, when this little organization began at Dufferin Grove Park, we've been doing what we call "theoretical and practical research" into what makes public spaces – like parks – more hospitable and more lively. We've been researching what works and what doesn't, and we've documented a lot of what we've seen and done, mostly in the park newsletters and on our four websites: dufferinpark.ca, cityrinks.ca, publicbakeovens.ca, and celos.ca.

Table of Contents

1 – A Conflict of interest	1
2 – Social engineering at Dufferin Grove Park	3
3 – Social engineering: experts will decide	7
4 – Social engineering: tools #8 to #11	11
5 – Design, Part 1: “Why it has to be that way”	16
6 – Design, Part 2: No Clubhouse	21
7 – Déjà vu: environmental costs of the Dufferin rink project	24
8 – The councillor’s role in the Dufferin Grove project	30
9 – The staff	35
10 – The big picture	41
11 – Post script	48

1

A conflict of interest



Lots of people have noticed that even though city staff hold many public consultations for new public building projects nowadays, what gets built at the end may not closely resemble what people asked for. When all the questionnaires and stickies on plan boards have been collated, the projects still often look a lot like what Capital Projects staff originally put into the city budget.

Here's one reason why:

Not long after the four different cities that make up the current Corporation of the City of Toronto were first stitched together in 1997, a park supervisor told me something strange. He said that the new City Council had set up an unfortunate arrangement for paying the staff who plan new city projects. Unlike any other city department, most of the payroll for Capital Projects staff would be covered, not by a fixed budget amount, but by a percentage of the cost of any new capital projects being built. The

percentage could vary between 1% and 10% depending on the size of the project. The bigger and more expensive a new project was, the more money there was to pay the city planning staff. In effect, they would work on commission. They were the only city department required to have such an uncertain payroll budget.

It looks like this arrangement – which for good reasons used to be illegal in the old municipal code – has continued to this day. In a recent sample year (2015), 68% of the Parks and Rec Capital Projects staff payroll was covered that way. In other words, City Council has put those staff in a position where they have to try to convince city councillors to spend a lot. The more a project costs, the more they get.

Advising better maintenance, or working on small ingenious changes to improve an existing building, gets Capital Projects planners much less money to cover their payroll. If they do that, they have to start to lay off staff. Who would want to do that? So they have a major conflict of interest.

It seems like building bigger is the only way Capital Projects can afford to go. But that creates another problem: Torontonians often like what they have, and they may get mad at their city councillors and dig in their heels about demolishing good things and replacing them with bigger. So Capital Projects staff have to hire firms whose specialty is shaping the outcomes of community consultations.

2

Social engineering at Dufferin Grove Park



There are building projects all over the city, and design firms are busy, busy. Many of the projects involve holding “community consultation” meetings before construction gets going. So design firms are often hybrids, doing both design and meetings with residents. One example is the Toronto-based **Urban Strategies** “global design and planning consultancy,” which has been shaping open-house information meetings with residents around the Wallace-Emerson rec centre as well as doing high-level planning for the developments there. Now they’re doing the same for the tall towers at the Dufferin Mall.

For the Dufferin Grove “Northwest Corner Revitalization Project,” though, the city asked a specialist firm called **Lura Consulting** to run the show. Lura’s website says that their staff know how to use “*integrated behavioural change principles and social marketing techniques in community planning processes.*” On their behavior-change

web page they say “*Encouraging behaviour change and creating a culture of positive change for a desired behaviour is vital for the successful implementation of many strategies.*”

The leader of the Lura team at Dufferin Grove is Liz McHardy. Her website bio says she’s a “*strategic systems-thinker [who] uses appreciative inquiry methods to establish integrity and trust in process participants,*” and that she’s a trainer in “*guided learning.*”

In other words, Lura was hired to help Parks and Rec do the social engineering that this project needs, to get going. Last year, city council approved an open service contract with Lura. The firm can be deployed wherever they’re needed for Parks and Rec projects up to a cost of \$200,000 a year. So the Lura specialists can be used for difficult project locations. And Dufferin Grove is certainly a difficult location. The first reaction from most park users when they found out in 2016 that a construction project was in the works was “*what’s wrong with the rink and clubhouse it as it is? Don’t change anything!*” It happens, though, that even before Lura got the open service contract in 2018, the firm already had a contract for Dufferin Grove. So in November 2016, Lura went to work.

Engineers need tools, and these were brought out gradually.

On November 24, 2016, **City Councillor Ana Bailao** held an introductory public meeting and introduced Lura Consultants as the people in charge of the meeting. All the meeting participants were seated at separate round tables. This was the FIRST engineering tool: **minimize whole-room discussion**. There was a good supply of pens, both coloured and black, and paper, coloured and white, in the middle of each table – **an invitation to work**: the SECOND tool.

“Do nothing” was one of the three options presented. But right after Lura’s opening remarks, the city Capital Projects staff introduced the idea that actually there were a few things that couldn’t

be postponed. *“The kitchen in the clubhouse needs to be updated to meet the codes of today. There are also accessibility concerns that need to be addressed.”*

City staff **invoking unspecified code violations** was the THIRD tool.

The Lura staff resumed after the city staff’s intervention: while we’re at it, why not do a whole makeover to make a good thing even better? There is as yet no fixed budget, or even a ballpark one, for the project, but could the participants just take a few minutes and write down what they might like to see if there was some extra money? So everybody went to work with the coloured pens and papers at their tables.

At the end of the meeting, names were collected for people willing to be consulted further, and then goodnight.

The next step was for Lura to **put together an official volunteer group** to consider what might be done. This was called a “Community Resource Group” – CRG – the FOURTH tool. It had the heightened cachet of being curated. People who had signed the volunteer list were invited to apply for membership. They were told that a CRG *“is comprised of 12-15 members, representing a balance of interests including: Park and clubhouse users; Local residents; Community and resident organizations; Local businesses and institutions; and Local professionals with skills/training/experience in park design, park planning, or landscape architecture.”* But actually, of the people who filled out the applications, Lura accepted everybody. (A partner at *Urban Strategies*, Ben Hoff, became a volunteer member, filling one of the “local professionals” spots.)

At two CRG meetings that followed, one in February and another in May of 2017, Lura still had no budget information to share. The CRG members, despite being respectfully treated and told that their opinions were vital to the project, were also told that they would not be allowed to read the consultants’ reports com-

missioned for the project by city staff. Nor would they be allowed to participate in the interviews to decide the architecture company that the city would be hiring to design whatever changes were coming.

There were grumblings, and a few people dropped out. This was not working.

So the project team called a time-out, for half a year. My next post will be about what happened when the time-out was done.

3

Social engineering: experts will decide



One of the reasons why things went a bit sour during and after the first two meetings of the Dufferin Grove “community resource group” (CRG) in February and May of 2017 was that the CRG members thought they were supposed to help decide what to change (a lot? or only a little?) at the rink and the clubhouse. After the February meeting, Lura, the community consultation firm, e-mailed the CRG members a correction to this mistaken idea: *“Please be advised a decision of tearing down the clubhouse is first discussed and evaluated by the City staff who are responsible to review and weigh many related policies and regulations such as the mandatory Health and Safety requirements, Building Code, Life Cycle of Assets and Cost evaluation, State of Good Repair and Capital programs.”*

In the social engineering toolbox for community consultations, that’s the FIFTH tool: **instilling self-doubt** in non-designers as to their competence. Who but the experts would understand

those “many related policies and regulations” well enough to make smart decisions?

Only a professional Design Consulting Team would have the expertise needed for “comprehensive...detailed design development, construction documentation, tender and contract administration.”

The designs these experts were to develop was based on a “*scope of work*” list put together by Capital Projects staff: plans for a new “community clubhouse” with a commercial kitchen, multi-purpose community/recreation room(s), public washrooms, admin/recreation office(s), snack bar, storage room(s), janitorial/laundry room(s), ice rink refrigeration/mechanical & electrical rooms, lighting, and fire safety plan, plus a new outdoor rink possibly including a skating trail, new ovens and gardens, and a new zam-boni garage.

That was the “scope of work” sent to the CRG members in February of 2017 (two years ago now). The list was apparently based on studies the city had commissioned, but these had not been shown to the CRG members. And that was the prompt for a mini-revolt. The fifth tool had not instilled enough self-doubt, evidently. Some, maybe most, of the members wanted to see the study reports. They asked – was this list the plan all along? And if so, why was the committee asked to consider a range of alternatives, when the scope of work had been determined in advance?

Asking for the study reports caused some confusion. The city’s project team at first answered that the studies would be posted on the Lura website in mid-March. Then word came that the city’s **Purchasing and Materials Management Division** had said the studies “*cannot be shared with the public and are blacked outso as not to contravene with [sic] the integrity of RFP Call process.*”

RFP stands for the “request for proposals.” The study results were apparently to be made available to the design consultancies

competing for the Dufferin Grove design contract, but to no one else. The language of “*contravene*” and “*integrity*” is an example of the SIXTH tool: **scaring people with the law**. The CRG’s request was asking city staff to disobey the law. The city has an *integrity* commissioner whose job it is to warn people at city hall if they’re about to *contravene* the law.

Even so, our research group CELOS applied to the city’s Freedom of Information (FOI) office, asking to see the studies – just to stir the pot a little. The response from FOI was *no*, but for a different reason. Apparently the Freedom of Information Act says that since the studies would eventually be public anyway, after the design consultant firm had been chosen, the city had no need to make them public earlier. Don’t be impatient, people.

Illegality of publication was not mentioned.

Then there was a surprise. In early June, the 2014 “State-of-Good-Repair” report for the rink and the 2015 “Feasibility Study” for the clubhouse were posted on the Lura website after all. No reason was given for the change of mind.

We can guess, though. Instilling self-doubt, or invoking a worry about breaking the law, are both workable ways to reduce the chance of citizen revolts. But a perception of secrecy is not. Lura has been doing community consultations for a long time, and they earn their fees by giving good advice. Chances are that they may have said to the Capital Projects staff – be careful. You want to be seen to be transparent, otherwise you’ll seem to be hiding something.

And releasing a lot of information – as Lura may have explained to city staff – is less problematic than it seems. Actually, **putting out too much information** is the SEVENTH tool. The two reports that were put up on the website required careful and prolonged attention, and even then, they were hard to understand. The 19-page State-of-Good-Repair (SOGR) rink report is mostly

tables, with many numbers and unexplained terms and abbreviations. The bulk of information, and the technical mysteries of both reports (“*the community room...should be classed as Group A Division 2 Assembly*”) meant that the fifth tool, creating self-doubt, could work its wonders. How could an outsider, not a city planner or design consultant, master all that detail?

A two-hour building tour in plain language from a knowledgeable person could have explained most of the two reports’ conclusions, and might have pointed out some of the errors. For example, the report writers apparently didn’t know the building’s maintenance history, and one of them was unable to inspect the boiler room because they had no key.

But no such tour was available. So the reports got only a skim from most of the community readers, but city staff got the halo of full disclosure.

4

Social engineering: tools #8 to #11



The week after Lura posted the city’s “State of Good Repair” (SOGR) and “Feasibility” studies on its website, big foam-board posters went up all over the park encouraging people walking by to “have your say” about “your vision” for the northwest corner and the clubhouse. The posters invited people to go to the website. But during the five months that followed, there were no new posts on the website. There were also no messages for the Community Resource Group (CRG) members. The group dwindled from 13 to 9. **Silence** is the EIGHTH tool of social engineering. The earlier urgency to choose options had suddenly gone.

Then on November 14, 2017, Lura sent the CRG members a copy of the Request for Proposals (RFP) and an offer to include two CRG members on the panel to evaluate the design applicants, if the two members would sign a non-disclosure agreement and if they had 5-7 days of volunteer time available in January. Two

members signed on. The Request asked design firms for proposals that would consider a new rink, clubhouse, gardens, ovens, everything.

On January 26, 2018, the website said that the RFP call was closed and the two CRG members were undergoing training. City staff's message to everyone else was: "*Everything depends on the work of the [design] consultant. Whether the city has to tear down the building depends on the consultant's opinion of the scope of work.*" Back to social engineering tool number five. Only experts can decide.

Then there was silence for 8 months longer.

During the many months of official silence, there were ongoing conversations down at city hall that didn't involve either park users or the program staff at Dufferin Grove (or the CRG members). How much was being negotiated wasn't clear until park friend Migs Bartula, who takes an interest in city politics, came across a contract item on a council committee agenda, near the end of April. Approval was sought for **a contract for \$694,747** to DTAH Architects Ltd. for "*professional and technical design consulting services for a new community recreation clubhouse and park improvements at northwest corner of Dufferin Grove Park.*" And on page 10 of the city's 2018 capital budget, Migs found a little line item called "**Dufferin Grove New Community Centre,**" allocating another **\$3.14 million** for 2018. Suddenly there was a lot of money. And Lura didn't tell the CRG members for another 5 months.

The third meeting of the CRG was on October 17, 2018, only it was called the first meeting on the timeline that Lura presented. From then on things started to move fast. The timeline called for 9 CRG meetings, interspersed with 4 larger public meetings. The funding was now said to be \$4.5 million. More people joined the CRG as the word got out via the park newsletter, bringing the number up to 24, plus the design team and political staff. Lura had to rent a bigger meeting room.

Clearly the time had passed for any discussion of why this project should happen at all. CELOS proposed to use the sudden budget wealth to fix long-neglected problems all over the park, instead of focusing only on the rink. (E.g. turn the nasty field house washroom building into a theatre lab, build a long-awaited accessible washroom by the playground, new paving for the crumbling paths, and so on.) But that proposal was ignored. Peter Didiano, a city Capital Projects supervisor, told the November 28 CRG meeting that there was new evidence the 25-year-old rink was on its last legs. The evidence he gave was that the rink hadn't opened on time. The evaporator/condenser part of the rink machinery had malfunctioned because of rust.

Mr. Didiano didn't mention that the "Feasibility Study" commissioned by the city in 2015 had warned about the rust on Dufferin Rink's rooftop condenser three years before, but nothing had been done. The worsening of the problem was not discovered during the fall because the city's maintenance contract, for mechanics to check the outdoor rinks in good time before the season began, was only put in place one week before the rinks were scheduled to open. It was not old age that had tripped up the rink opening. It was poor management.

Playing the "old age" card is a variant of invoking unspecified code violations, the third tool of "integrated behavioural change" used in managing community consultations. Most of the CRG members hadn't noticed the rusty condenser warning buried in the Feasibility Study when it was made public in June 2017, and weren't told about the absence of the maintenance contract. So presenting the rink as generally decrepit, despite its excellent reputation as one of the best outdoor rinks in the city, impressed the CRG members.

The project team followed this up with a repeat of the seventh tool: swamping people with information. At the December 11 meeting, the design team presented a 69-page report about possible plans for the rink house. By the time of the public meeting

that followed in February, the report had grown to 96 pages long. One example of how it had been bulked up was by including information such as (p.43):

- Encourage the use of low-emitting and fuel-efficient vehicles, carpooling and carsharing
- Encourage cycling as a clean air alternative
- Encourage walking as a clean air alternative for all ages and abilities.

What this had to do with the decisions about the rinkhouse is anybody's guess.

The length of the reports meant that the presentations and the round-table-time for focusing on all the choices took up most of the meeting, leaving little chance for public discussion. And the presentations **stayed resolutely on message**: the NINTH tool. In the public meeting presentation, the word “improvement” was used 34 times.

At the time of the first run of meetings back in 2017, one of the early CRG members wrote that *“the City’s presentation was obviously skewed in favour of Option 3 (total rebuild), yet the City did not acknowledge this bias. I am pretty sure we all noticed [that] the slide explaining the 3 options used specific graphic design elements that encourage the audience (us) to view Option 3 as more desirable.”* This comment came during an email exchange between the CRG members. But when the meetings resumed after the 17-month gap, Lura wrote to the members: *“We want to discourage the use of email chain conversations.....as we would like to host important discussions in the shared CRG meeting space.”* That was the TENTH tool. The consultancy (and therefore city staff) must **stay in control of the community consultation**.

And in case the community consultation still did not result in agreement with the city’s plan, there was one final tool that trumped the rest. A friend from Etobicoke described a community consultation in his neighbourhood, also run by Lura. A questionnaire found that 80% of the people who were asked said they

wanted better maintenance for their local park, not a new pavilion as the city proposed. Their city councillor said he would respect public opinion and cancel the project. But then park neighbours found they were getting a pavilion anyway. One of them applied to the Freedom of Information office for the city's internal correspondence related to the decision. They found an email to the Etobicoke councillor's office from Daniel McLaughlin, the construction manager of Parks and Rec Capital Projects. Under "Key points" he had written: "*City Council approval is not required for... the Pavilion to proceed as [it is] within the current approved capital budget.*" The ELEVENTH tool of social engineering is **power**. Once city staff get a project included in the massive and confusing city capital budget, it's in. And that's what happened during the long silence in the Dufferin Grove community consultation process. The Capital Projects payroll fund will get its percentage.

5

Design, Part 1: “Why it has to be that way”



At the city’s February 6 public meeting about re-making Dufferin Rink and the clubhouse, the design firm that was hired by the city, DTAH, gave a presentation showing five alternative plans for the people at the meeting to consider. All of the plans called for a complete overhaul of the park’s kitchens. In her presentation to that meeting, DTAH’s lead designer, Megan Torza, said that the clubhouse has a kitchen that’s so below code it isn’t really a kitchen at all. This was acknowledged by nods from the Capital Projects staff sitting at the staff table.

To be clear: the two clubhouse kitchens, although small, really *are* kitchens. They were built with the help of two government community-nutrition grants, one provincial, one municipal. Toronto Public Health staff have been regularly inspecting these kitchens at least once a year, sometimes more often, for the past 14 years. If an inspection found a problem, instructions were given for

what needed to be fixed, and were carried out. Then the two Public Health “Pass” signs were posted, every time.

So Megan Torza’s DTAH presentation at the public meeting raises a question: when Megan said that the clubhouse kitchen urgently needs to be brought “up to code,” does that mean that the city’s Capital Projects staff and the DTAH design staff feel that the city’s Public Health inspectors were mistaken in giving the kitchens a *pass* all these years? That would be a serious problem.

There was another puzzle. Megan showed the meeting a slide with a map indicating that the only “public cooking program” within a 2 km radius of Dufferin Grove is at Christie Pits. She suggested that if Dufferin Grove got a proper commercial kitchen like the one at Christie Pits, Dufferin Grove staff could offer public cooking programs too. But Christie Pits has no commercial kitchen. All that exists nearby is a small kitchen at the Bob Abate Rec Centre south of Christie Pits. It currently offers a one-hour weekly cooking program for ages 6 to 9 (limited to 8 participants), \$74 for nine sessions. That’s all.

At Dufferin Grove, on the other hand, for 23 years, school classes and families have been making pizza at the park oven. Before 2012 there were 15 years of youth helping out in the kitchens and serving at the snack bar. There have been many hundreds of hours of people preparing food together, very often with non-staff helping, sometimes leading. Yet the DTAH presentation seemed not to recognize the park as the site of “public cooking programs.”

Lura, the “community consultation” contractor who runs the project meetings, did acknowledge the next day that there is in fact no commercial kitchen at Christie Pits. But they forwarded a few links from the design team, to show me the kind of kitchen that’s ideal for city-run centres. The photos show institutional kitchens, of the kind you might have in a hospital, a nursing home, a school, or a large high-end restaurant – all gleaming

stainless steel and industrial equipment. The “ideal” photos clear up the puzzle of why the design team feels that the two kitchens at the Dufferin Grove clubhouse are not really kitchens at all.

In Toronto there are over 7,000 restaurant kitchens of all sizes and layouts. All of them are commercial kitchens, but not many look like the photo DTAH sent me. Maybe – for architects and design consultants and the city’s capital projects staff – an institutional-style kitchen with all those shiny stainless steel counters and trolleys and giant dust hoods, is the only kind of “safe” kitchen design that they can accept. But the city’s public health staff, who inspect all those 7,000+ restaurants year in and year out, know that there’s a wide variety of kitchen arrangements where people cook good food for others. If the city’s project team for Dufferin Grove, or the Feasibility Study consultants before them, had talked more to Public Health about the Dufferin Grove kitchens – and had spent more time at the park watching, instead of giving presentations – they could have started thinking about how small improvements could make everything work better without losing the friendly, surprising character of a clubhouse.

The problem is, they didn’t spend the extra time. Maybe DTAH was too busy jumping through bureaucratic hoops. When a significant contract with the city comes up, design firms have to really scramble. In the case of Dufferin Grove, the city put out a 114-page Request for Proposals (RFP) package in late November 2017, followed by five amendments. (All of this – as I recently found out – is publicly posted on the city’s website, under “service contracts.”) There are normally only 3 to 4 weeks allowed, to send in a proposal. There are pages and pages of specifics that the design firm has to include, all the way down to such details as the amount budgeted for courier fees for delivering documents.

Before the RFP deadline, there was a chance for applicants to ask for clarifications. On the website I found this bemused question from a firm applying for the contract:

“[Since] The city does not know whether the project is a new build or a renovation. . . . it is extremely difficult to cost our scope of work. Especially for the architectural and the structural components, but also for some of the other specialties. Would the City consider revising the fee chart to provide fees for each option (reno vs. new build)?”

I couldn't really understand the city staff's answer to this, but hopefully the designers could.

After a month of deliberation, DTAH was chosen as the design firm and awarded a contract of \$694,747. Of this amount, \$50,000 was available to pay a community consultation company. Lura's initial contract with the city was finished when the RFP was released, but the RFP warned that there would be a need for *“identifying and managing the issues and uncertainties that may arise by [sic] the stakeholders and community members throughout the course of this project.”* In other words, there might be protests. So DTAH chose Lura to continue in its previous role.

Next, the contract had to get in the queue for approval from the city's lawyers. Then the project team had to make a work plan. Finally, on October 17, 2018, after a gap of one year and 5 months since the previous Community Resource Group (CRG) meeting, the consultations resumed.

On the evening of that meeting, the designers had scheduled a walkabout around the outside of the clubhouse. But it was a very cold night, so that didn't last long. Once the CRG members were inside the rink house and had warmed up, they were invited to “blue sky” about what they wanted to see. One of the members asked: when all these ideas are put on the table, who makes the decision? Megan Torza of DTAH said that the project team was aiming for a kind of synergy of decision-making. This will be a *“very fluid and iterative process. . . . relying on a kind of consensus to be built.”* Their aim, she said, was about 80% satisfaction. *“None of the options are going to be perfect, i.e. satisfy everybody, but we hope that the people who don't like the end will at least see why it has to be that way.”*

My next posting will be the other half of the design story: looking at the actual details of the plan so far, and the city's reasons "why it has to be that way."

6

Design, Part 2: No Clubhouse



DTAH's alternative design proposals for the rinkhouse – based on the instructions they got from the city planners at Capital Projects – are *not* for a clubhouse. The line item in the city's capital budget is called “**Dufferin Grove New Community Centre.**”

Community Centre is a technical term that the city's Parks, Forestry and Recreation division uses for what they also call “facilities.” In such community centres there are always one or more offices. There's often a front desk with a trained “customer service” staff person, an institutional kitchen, and various “multi-purpose” rooms with (mostly) pre-registered fee-based programs. The common areas tend to be set up like waiting rooms.

All five of DTAH's alternative proposals for Dufferin Grove call for an office with a “*point-of-sale*” window, a long hallway with

lockers for skate changing, an institutional-style kitchen, and one or several multi-purpose rooms that could be used to offer registered summer camps or be rented out for private events. DTAH says that the new building will be “*purpose-built.*”

Both DTAH and the Capital Projects staff have said that one of the city’s problems with the clubhouse is that it was *not* purpose-built for what’s been going on there. They’re quite right. The building is a long unspectacular rectangle that perfectly fits urban thinker Jane Jacobs’ call for buildings that can be made useful for and by the people who use them, and then changed again if different uses develop there.

The rink house was a kind of orphan at the start. It was locked during the 8 months of the year when the ice wasn’t in. The city wasn’t much interested in it during the rink season either. That out-of-the-way-ness gave the building the chance to become a “clubhouse.” It was gradually turned into a staging area for a crazy-quilt of experiments carried out all over the park. There was support for these experiments in the 1990s from the top (Director Mario Zanetti and Mayor Barbara Hall). In the 15 or so years that followed, there was a constantly shifting collaboration of park friends and park staff, with support from the middle (especially, but not only, from recreation supervisor Tino DeCastro). The park friends ranged in age from 5 to 75 (one of the original leaders, Fabio Tavares, was 9 when the whole thing began). The mix included El Salvadorian gangster youth, puppeteers, shiny-playing engineers, newcomers from far-away countries trying to find a foothold, and long-time residents who remembered when Gladstone Avenue still ran through the park and you could drive cars really fast along that stretch.

The clubhouse was a point of intersection. No designers were involved. Early on, the office was turned into a kitchen, and then another kitchen was put into an unused alcove in the garage. The kitchens were used by whoever was cooking, mostly by city staff but also by kids helping to make cookies or by a hockey dad be-

cause he just felt like cooking pancakes for skaters on a Saturday morning. The big room with the wood stove jumbled everybody together in winter – skaters, neighbours catching up on news, card players, troubled youth with attitude, staff, parents and toddlers warming up from tobogganing, farmers on Thursdays. (The stories it could tell!)

Over the past 8 or 9 years, that jumble has gradually been sorted out by Parks and Rec management, and boundaries between staff and “patrons” or “customers” have been clarified. DTAH’s purpose-built designs are needed to firm up those boundaries. That’s why the design alternatives – no matter whether the rink house stays in the same spot or is moved to the east or the north side of the rinks – all look like small versions of the city’s standard community centres. No clubhouse there.

7

Déjà vu: environmental costs of the Dufferin rink project



The official city statement about Dufferin Rink is: the rink and its refrigeration system, rink slab, concrete header trench, dasher boards, fencing, and rink's flood lights are assessed to be in fair condition, but are near the end of their life cycle and require replacement.

Déjà vu: when we read the city's "rink requires replacement" statement, those of us who remember the Dufferin Grove wading pool replacement dustup of 2008/09 thought: *oh no, here we go again.*

In 2007, the Ward 18 city councillor of that time, Adam Giambrone, passed along a message from Capital Projects supervisor Peter Didiano: "*the wading pool needs replacement.*"

A wading pool is really a big concrete bathtub. When wading

pool staff looked at the proposed plans, they were astonished to see that the plan called for the concrete to be broken up and carted away, but not for the creaky, rusty old pool plumbing to be replaced. There would be new concrete poured, though – maybe in a slightly different shape, more stylish.

The staff asked for new plumbing that would actually work. That was added into the plans, somewhat grudgingly. Then a city forester mentioned to someone on the staff that digging up the 3-to-4-foot-deep concrete of the pool (built in the 1950s) would very likely do lots of damage to the big Norway maples whose roots had grown around the pool's underside over the decades. If the trees die, there goes the kids' shade and all the other good things that large trees do.

That message raised an alarm. Word got out, and a struggle began in the neighbourhood. A few people warned that concrete manufacture is an energy hog, so the old pool should be kept. A lot of parents wanted the shade more than the stylish pool. But others said that the Norway maples were near the end of their life cycle anyway, and new trees could be planted. Signs went up on lamp posts and local school bulletin boards saying, ignore the nay-sayers, it's about time that Dufferin Grove Park got a state-of-the-art renovation.

In the end, tree protection won out. The plan was modified to leave the concrete – which had no structural problems – in place. But that decision brought about a different problem. The budget line for the wading pool project was \$250,000. As I wrote in my first post, a percentage of the costs for large building projects goes to the Capital Projects payroll fund. If the most ambitious part of the wading pool project – involving the concrete replacement – was cancelled, the payroll amount would be a lot less.

To compensate (I'm guessing here), two new elements were added to the project. One was excellent. Councillor Giambrone persuaded the planners to use some of the funds to finally pave the

park's dirt-and-gravel central path. CELOS had been lobbying for that for years. It meant that people who use wheels (wheelchairs, strollers, bikes) would find it much easier to get to the wading pool from the street, and to anywhere else in the park as well.

The second element was experimental. To make the pool surface smoother (why?) the city planners decided to coat the pool with a mix called cementitious plastic.

The path and the coating brought the final cost back up to \$227,401, much closer to the original budget. Payroll percentage problem solved.

The pool coating was a light blue colour at the beginning and made the filled pool look lovely, like seawater. But kids started to slip and fall right away. In the years since then, there have been steady complaints from parents and wading pool staff, not to mention the children, about the slippery pool surface. But Capital Projects supervisor Peter Didiano, who came back several times when asked to have a look, has insisted all these years that there's no problem and nothing to fix. (However, the Parks manager and the Tech general supervisor agreed in January to remove the slippery layer before the next wading pool season begins.)

Now Mr. Didiano is back again, supervising the rink capital project, which once again calls for the removal of a lot of concrete and replacement with more concrete.

The biggest, most disruptive, most environmentally damaging element of the rink project is the demolition of the concrete rink surfaces and their subsequent rebuilding, maybe in a slightly different shape, with new concrete.

Concrete is made with water and cement. From *Wikipedia*:

“The cement industry is one of the two largest producers of carbon dioxide (CO₂), creating up to 5% of worldwide man-made emissions.”

- (1) To make concrete, cement first has to be heated to 1500 °C.
- (2) The water needed for global concrete production accounts for almost a tenth of worldwide industrial water use.
- (3) Concrete demolition releases concrete dust into the local atmosphere.

The city's 2014 Dufferin Rink State of Good Repair (SOGR) report – which Mr. Didiano cites as requiring the demolition and rebuilding of the Dufferin Grove rink pads – is public, available for anyone to read. But here's a puzzle: the report says that the concrete of the clubhouse has 76 good years left before it crumbles. The two concrete rink pads, though, poured at the same time, are reported as having only 6 years left.

It's time to give that report a closer reading. The first thing you notice is that a lot of the report is guesswork. The **CCI engineering company** that worked on the audit report was told by city hall staff that almost everything at the rink dates from 1993. That information is wrong. The rink was built in 1993, but things get maintenance. Problems have come up and been fixed in the years since then, sometimes involving big construction, like the stabilizing of the floor under the compressors in 1999 and the replacement of the brine collector pipes in the header trench in 2007. Dasher boards were replaced when they splintered. Floodlights and indoor fluorescents were switched to energy-saving fixtures. The rubber flooring in the clubhouse was replaced twice. And so on. But the audit engineers were not told any of this, because – as we found out a few months ago – **the Parks department keeps no log of its maintenance jobs** (really), so there is no actual record of what work was done over the years. And some of the city's tech services workers have retired, taking their part of the institutional memory with them.

In the absence of actual records, the consultant engineers who do SOGR reports for the Parks department fall back on the assumption that each element of the rink has a predictable length of life from the date of construction, usually 25 years (but 100 years for

concrete). That's just like human beings, who predictably live for the biblical "three-score-and-ten" (70) years, right?

Wrong, of course. Neither people nor buildings are so predictable. The SOGR report assumes 30 years as the point at which any and all rink pads have reached their end. Yet in the case of Dufferin Rink, the city's tech services contractor told me in January that his staff have seen no problems with the two rink slabs, despite their being 26 years old.

There are of course PVC pipes embedded in the concrete, to carry the brine that freezes the rink. Over the years, there have been occasional breaks in a pipe. When this happened, the problem showed up on the ice above the break, and that section of pipe was repaired. If there are too many breaks, then the rink slab needs to be replaced. That will take some construction time – but possibly quite a bit less time than the two years of the current project as proposed. And if the concrete replacement can be postponed for 10 years or even longer, that will be a considerable net gain for the environment.

Instead, the Capital projects staff say that the outdoor rink is at the end of its life and the clubhouse needs major changes or demolition, at a cost they now estimate at about \$4.5 million.

There's a broad economic justification for a big project like this one. It provides paid work for many people, and not only construction workers. The net of professionals who benefit from big municipal projects extends far beyond city planning staff. Thanks to the proliferation of government regulations and policies, there's a long list of specialist consultants mentioned in the city's Request for Proposals (RFP) for Dufferin Rink. Specialists will get a lot of contracts if the Dufferin Rink and clubhouse project goes ahead. The list not only includes architects (building, landscape, and planning), engineers (electrical, civil, structural, mechanical, refrigeration, geotechnical, environmental impact) and a "neutral facilitator" to get the community onside, but also a land

surveyor, an Independent Fairness Consultant (to make sure the companies bidding for the contract are treated fairly), an arborist, an archeologist (although only toilet bowl shards were unearthed during the last excavation), an independent testing and inspection firm, a Supplier Diversity Organization, and a Professional Quantity Surveyor. Also being considered are third party consultants for Kitchen/Laundry/Solid Waste Management, for an updated Designated Substances Audit, for a Building Code/Fire Code/Life Safety report, for an Accessibility report, for Audio Visual Design, including cable TV service; and for Public Address System Design.

And the project gives work to lots of city staff as well. The bi-weekly Steering Committee meetings require staff from five different offices, sometimes more, to attend. Many more city staff are involved in the planning and permitting and drawing up of contracts, and in going to public meetings.

So it's not hard to see that the Dufferin Grove Northwest Corner Project has considerable economic benefits, some of which may be local. Probably few of the carpenters or concrete finishers that will be hired live near the park anymore, but some of the city staff and consultants do, and they, like everyone else, are faced with the ever-rising cost of living in Toronto. The economic activity generated by sub-contracts like the ones from the rink project may have helped them to buy a house in the neighbourhood, maybe through a local realtor, with contract help from a local lawyer, and renovation help from a local builder. It's a win for everyone – except that the bubble grows bigger, and bigger. A vicious circle.

8

The councillor's role in the Dufferin Grove project



Recap: In her Fall 2016 newsletter, Ward 18 city councillor Ana Bailao announced a public meeting about the “Northwest Corner Revitalization Project.” At the meeting’s start, the councillor introduced the team, which included Lura (community consultation specialists), city planners (Parks Capital Projects), and Parks and Recreation management. Many neighbourhood people said they didn’t know what needed to be revitalized – why fix what isn’t broken? Councillor Bailao said there were building-code issues to address, and she suggested that people apply to join the consultation group that Lura was putting together, to give local input. About a dozen people signed up.

At the May 17, 2017 meeting of this new “community resource group” (CRG), Councillor Bailao made a pitch: “*Staff came to me and said there was a list of work to be done on the northwest corner, and maybe it could be rolled in with other improvements....[It could be] an*

opportunity to maybe add a second floor, maybe make some artist space for groups like Clay and Paper...groups like this one know how to run this space...do we want to decide beforehand what we want, or have it all decided for us?"

Suggestions were all over the map. After that meeting, the community resource group was not asked to meet again until well over a year later, on October 17, 2018. During that time-gap a design team was hired and various alternative plans were drawn up. The budget increased from \$250,000 to \$4.5 million. The election came, the ward boundaries were changed, and Councillor Bailao won handily in the new Ward 9 because of a last-minute withdrawal by her main opponent.

In November 2018, after the election, I booked a meeting with the councillor to talk about the proposed plans. I suggested an alternative: since we now knew that there was so much money available, could those funds be used to fix long-term problems all over the park (nasty washrooms, crumbling paths, slippery wading pool, not enough storage), instead of totally redesigning the Northwest Corner? The councillor reacted with enthusiasm, saying that since the park was often called a “community centre without walls,” it made sense to consider all of it. I sent word around the neighbourhood, about the joyful news – “the councillor supports fixing the whole park.” But at the next Community Resource Group meeting, the “fix the whole park” proposal didn’t make it onto the table, and the councillor didn’t make eye contact. I felt like a chump for sending around nonsense.

In January of this year, Councillor Bailao put out an invitation for a second public meeting on February 6, 2019 (more than two years after the first one). This time, she provided a link to a city web page about current construction projects. The link made it clear, although with confusing syntax, that there was going to be a new addition, alteration, or replacement of the following: a new commercial kitchen/baking area, a multi-purpose room, a refrigeration facility for the outdoor ice rink, public washrooms, a

snack bar and a skating rental booth.

Did the councillor notice that her invitation at the first meeting two years before (“do we want to decide beforehand what we want, or have it all decided for us?”) now looked like make-believe? The basic plan was already decided.

The February 6 public meeting was fractious and confusing, with no consensus in evidence. Councillor Bailao sent out a message two days after the meeting, promoting the Northwest Corner project as absolutely necessary: *“The City of Toronto has identified necessary repair and upgrade work at Dufferin Grove Park’s aging clubhouse and skating rink in order to keep these facilities in good condition to serve the community.It is important to note that while the repair and building code upgrade work is necessary to keep the building safe, no decisions about the designs or improvements have been made and the City encourages community members to provide their input.”*

The “repair and building code upgrade” work for this 26-year-old (*aging?*) rink that’s *actually required by law or regulation* is minimal (and has mostly been ongoing). Ordering and installing a new refrigeration plant (probably a good idea) takes three months at most. Beyond that, all of the long-overdue and long-requested improvements to make the rinkhouse just work better (asked for by on-site staff and park friends over the years) could be carried out in a month.

Question: So why would the councillor keep pushing for the whole 2-year project?

Answer: Most likely because city councillors take their cues from the bureaucracy. (The councillors are nominally in charge but in fact the bureaucrats hold all the cards.)

Here’s an example: A friend in Etobicoke recently shared a copy of an internal email that the Parks Capital Projects manager, Daniel McLaughlin sent to a city councillor. The email came via

Freedom of Information. At issue was a plan to build a pavilion in Humber Bay Park. Park users said they wanted repairs to the crumbling boardwalk and better care of the man-made pond instead – they wanted the city to fix the *whole park* instead of adding a rentable building. Sound familiar? A questionnaire, administered by Lura (which has community consultation contracts in other parts of the city as well, not only for Dufferin Grove), found most respondents opposed to the Capital Projects plan.

The internal email obtained by the Etobicoke group was sent by the Capital Projects manager to the assistant of the Etobicoke ward’s city councillor. Mr. McLaughlin explained that the park neighbours had misunderstood the project, and gave the city councillor the language he ought to use in responding: “*The following is the general script for responses to enquiries regarding the project.*” The “*general script*” consisted of four reassuring paragraphs that could just be dropped into the councillor’s community bulletin to his constituents. The “script” ended with: “*The project team understands the importance of public input in a project of this significance, and takes your feedback very seriously.*”

And for good measure, the manager sent a reminder about the limits to the councillor’s power to stop the project: “*City Council approval is not required for the....Pavilion to proceed [since it is] within the current approved capital budget.*” Three years later, the pavilion has been redesigned and approved in a slightly smaller version, and the boardwalk is still crumbling.

The “Dufferin Grove new community centre” and the “State of Good Repair” (SOGR) allocation for replacing the Dufferin Rink pads are both within the current “approved capital budget” too. Sometime during the long silence between the “community consultation” meetings, the two items appeared as a small budget line in the massive and confusing (for councillors too) city budget document. Maybe the message from the Capital Projects manager to councillors and to citizens is **“resistance is futile.”**

As many people know, the same thing happens all over the city. There may be one, or many, community consultations, and yet the sequel often doesn't match what people said. Here's a nearby example, from Christie Pits, where an expensive new outdoor oven was built: *"We never asked for a new oven,"* Jode Roberts, who has organized public events using the Christie Pits oven for years, told me. *"What we wanted was a covered area with harvest/prep table and benches. The project manager decided (without consulting anyone) that we would get a new oven. Then we were told there was no budget for a table or covered area. When the manager was repeatedly asked why we couldn't simply have kept the existing oven and used that money for new elements like the covered table....it was asserted that the oven built in 2000 was 'not to code.'"*

In fact, **no code exists for outdoor bake ovens**, as long as they're more than 10 feet away from other buildings. Most of the codes invoked or hinted at for Dufferin Rink don't apply to the existing building either, and where they do, the necessary repairs can be made quickly.

So: why do city staff say things that are not true? Why do the staff feed the councillors incomplete or misleading information? Why do councillors feel that they must stick to the script? Why are small-scale sensible maintenance projects postponed year after year in favour of the **Big Shiny Plan That Will Fix Everything All At Once?**

9

The Staff



In her most recent defense of the changes proposed for the Dufferin Grove rink house and rink, City Councillor Ana Bailao alluded to “*the incredible neighbourhood involvement and mix of community and cultural programming that is unique to Dufferin Grove Park.*” A lot of people say this was done by volunteers. One consultant’s report said that “*these uses have grown organically over time*” – like a garden that just emerges and flourishes on its own.

Actually, that’s not the way it happened. Most of the things that people like about Dufferin Grove Park were shaped by the part-time Rec staff who worked there, and by the supervisor who formerly supported that shaping – not by volunteers. And much of what these staff built over the years is now cracked and sagging – no matter how pretty the façade still appears at times. This post is about how that disintegration happened, and how it may connect to the Northwest Corner “Revitalization” Project.

To go back: A few women from the neighbourhood began to try things in the playground and the rink in 1993. I was one of them, and I stayed around after the others had moved on. But once things really got lively, and Tino DeCastro (the Ward 18 Rec supervisor) began hiring more part-time staff, it was those staff who made things work, and made them work better and better – the rink, the playground, the market, the suppers, the performances, the gardening, the youth programs, the openings made for other people’s talents. I tried to help out whenever the staff’s efforts were threatened, but after about 2002 my main activity was bearing witness (with the help of the park newsletter) and giving suggestions. Some of my suggestions were good and some were just annoying and impractical. The staff put up with me because everyone understood that this was a kind of laboratory. The research was to find out how a park could become a place where strangers might find friends. The idea was always to build on what was already available (spaces, people), rather than starting from scratch.

As the park got more and more interesting, so did the people who wanted to work there. There are a lot of glitches when you try something new. When glitches are overcome and really good things start to happen, it’s exciting. The staff were paid for the hours they were scheduled to work, but they often worked longer, unpaid, when a task got engrossing.

The experiments at the Dufferin Grove “lab” accomplished a lot. But meantime, down at city hall, something quite different was unfolding. In the aftermath of the city’s forced amalgamation, there were struggles over power and philosophy. At Parks and Rec, the managers who came out on top resolved to “harmonize” the way the parks and the rec centres were run, making them more or less interchangeable in the centrally-mandated “services” they supplied. The “business” of the department came to be called “customer service.” Public space became something to market.

The staff and park friends at Dufferin Grove were of course not invited to be part of the city hall struggles. Nor would there have been much time. Dufferin Grove Park had begun to feel too crowded sometimes, especially in winter. People were coming to the rink from all over the city. The crowding made no sense, since Toronto is the world capital of outdoor artificial ice rinks, and there are such rinks in every neighbourhood. But many outdoor rinks were so unpleasant that people avoided them and came to Dufferin Grove instead.

Eventually the staff took on the problem (of being swamped) as a new challenge. They put together a little pocket-size booklet of suggestions for how to make a rink work well (reliable schedules, flyers for rink opening day, skates, food, storybooks, places to sit, a campfire). Then they began to visit other rinks to give their Rec colleagues copies of the booklet, and talk about what worked and what didn't. They helped me to set up the **cityrinks.ca** website with descriptions of each rink. The staff even briefly had permission to run a rink hotline, so that they could tell callers about the nearest rink to where they lived.

Good, right?

No, bad. Rules were being broken, policy ignored. It seems clear in hindsight that the more that management downtown heard (or read in the news) about what was going on at Dufferin Grove, the more alarmed they became. Part-time staff – the bottom of the ladder – were being allowed to schedule their own shifts according to the budget (even encouraged by their supervisor!) – staff had published a “how to” booklet without permission – they were visiting other rinks without staying on a centrally-approved message – they were promoting hot chocolate and mini-pizzas and skate-lending and campfires, and the leafleting of the neighbourhood, to their colleagues at other rinks. In short, staff were deciding together (with a lot of day-to-day community input) what work needed doing, not waiting for orders from the top.

What would they do next??

Dufferin Grove staff's reputation downtown gradually got worse. During the same time, the general managers of Parks and Rec (and their directors, the next level down) kept changing. Business plans and restructuring plans and visioning plans were made and revised and remade and revised. In the background, Dufferin Grove seems to have turned into a kind of scandal. Finally, in 2011, it was time for management to come and clean house.

The supervisor who helped make the good things happen was removed from Dufferin Grove and reassigned to supervise building-caretakers instead of recreation programs. The on-site staff at the park were warned that they were in a serious conflict of interest, because of their close working relationship with me and their responsiveness to other park users. Over the next eight years, a long series of supervisors were assigned to bring Dufferin Grove staff in line with the rest of the city.

Instead of finding ways to pass the Dufferin Grove staff's experience on to their colleagues at other rinks and parks, city management worked to integrate the staff into their proper places within a tight hierarchy. But of course, once a door has been opened and there's a foot in there, it's not so easy to close it. Cancelling the programs that existed around the rink, oven, and playground would have been impolitic. Instead, the programs got set in cement and the staff were retrained to run them "properly." I've written about that often enough that lots of people know the story. New staff were brought in, many old ones left, staff were told that they must do only the exact tasks they were assigned. "It's not my job" became the standard. The food income went steadily down while the operating costs went way up. (The food income and the costs are a secret – to track them I had to go through the city's Freedom of Information office.)

And now the park has arrived at a crossroads. After eight years of management's attempts to get the Dufferin Grove programs un-

der control, things are still in a mess. The current staff are often unhappy – about a long list of grievances ranging from constant pay errors to erratic staff scheduling to a frustrating lack of support from their much-better-paid off-site supervisors. Nobody wants to work at the adventure playground. Nobody wants to learn how to keep the cob café in good repair. Some staff say *no* to snow shovelling and cleaning the building, leaving their colleagues resentful but with no recourse. So what is to be done?

The Northwest Corner “Revitalization” Project offers a possible solution. If someone can’t get their house in order after eight years, maybe it would be better to pull it down and start over with a clean slate?

During the time that the Dufferin Grove rink and “northwest corner” transformation has been in planning meetings, a new ship has come sailing out of city hall. It’s called “**place-making.**” It docked at Parks and Rec at the end of January, when a city media release announced that there would be four weekend “rink socials” at four different outdoor rinks, brokered by the **Evergreen Foundation** with the help of a Montreal place-making firm called **La Pépinière**. The release said: “*The initiative, made possible with the financial support of the Bombardier Foundation, brings together community leaders, City staff, the public and experts in place-making to bring new life to some of Toronto’s parks and recreation facilities.*”

So that was it. At last, people in Toronto could begin to learn how to use campfires, food, and skate lending to take the sting out of winter.

The four weekends of pop-up “place-making” had recreation staff from various rinks offering colouring books and acrylic yarn to make crafts, and lending out the skates that CELOS (unacknowledged) had donated to the city last year. The Parks and Rec partnership office got Evergreen staff to buy special place-making furniture and play equipment and propane-fuelled air warmers. And then, perhaps because Parks and Rec management

couldn't think of any of their own staff who could set up campfires or food or comfortable places to sit, Evergreen was hired to run each of the place-making pop-ups.

The city manager's office says they can't tell us how much Bombardier donated to fund the project because that's private information. We do know that – until 2011 – campfires, skate lending, and food cooked and served at Dufferin Grove used to make money for the park (over \$90,000 in 2010 after the groceries were paid for), to put back into programming. There was no need for Bombardier or any other giant corporation to fund “place-making,” and no need for book-keeping secrets either.

One of the ironies of this expensive helicopter “place-making” was that no one from city hall asked Dufferin Grove staff for help, or even acknowledged that they might know anything. The 15 years during which the city's own staff had helped to fill three Ward 18 rinks with fun and friendship – and the staff had tried hard to pass it on – have simply been erased as though they never existed.

Really.

10

The Big Picture



In the middle of February 2019 the **West End Phoenix** newspaper published an article by music journalist Michael Barclay, about the February 6th public meeting, with the title “DON’T EFF WITH THE DUFF.” The piece began with a quote from a person who was unhappy about how the city’s Dufferin Grove “revitalization” plan was proceeding. Barclay wrote “*After taking very Canadian pains to not blame anyone officiating the meeting, the frustrated woman went on to describe the process as ‘diabolical.’ This got loud applause.*”

Barclay’s reportage brought some online pushback. A skateboarder wrote that in reality the process was “*robust,*” and run by a “*really good team of consultants.*” A skinny permit-holder asked why anyone could be unhappy about making the rink better and more efficient, and a third responder wrote sarcastically that neighbours were feeling “*OUTRAGE at being consulted over changes to improve*

facilities,” and that Barclay was not doing “proper journalism.” Since then there has been quite a bit of back-and-forth commentary about the Dufferin Grove plans on the [dufferingrovefriends.listserv](#).

Some of these comments seem to reflect the old saying: “don’t sweat the small stuff, look at the big picture.” On the other hand, sometimes the devil really is in the details. I’d like to see if I can attend a bit to both aspects.

The really big (global) picture: Google’s “**Sidewalk Lab**” is an example of *global* landing in Toronto with a thud. We can track another global element, circuitously, right into the park. In 2016, Parks and Rec partnered with two other city departments to hire the Toronto design firm **Public Work**. The city paid the firm **\$600,000** to do a **Public Space, Public Life** study about “revitalizing” the city’s public spaces. To gather their information for the study, Public Work partnered with a Copenhagen/San Francisco/New York company that’s also working with Sidewalk Lab, called **Gehl Institute**. Gehl’s website says their research approach is: “*Use the city as a living laboratory to measure the quality of public life. Acquire new tools to take incremental steps toward meaningful and authentic neighborhood transformations.*” After the city commissioned the Public Work/Gehl “public life” report, the word “*revitalization*” began to pop up everywhere, including on big signboards at Dufferin Grove Park. (Interestingly, the signboards show a google satellite photo of the park.)

Under the banner of “revitalization” a very big game is being played out. Over the next ten years, Parks and Rec plans to spend close to **\$2 billion** on capital projects. The Parks and Rec operating-plus-capital budget for this year alone is well over half a billion. That means a lot of possible contracts for design firms. Many design firms advertise themselves as “global,” and some of them really are. Toronto-based non-profit **Park People** recently worked with a “global innovation” design firm called **Doblin** to research “how to create parks and public spaces with a greater

sense of belonging.” (Apparently some of the working group came to Dufferin Grove to have a look around.) Doblin is actually owned by **Deloitte**, which provides audit, tax, and financial consulting services, employs more than 286,200 people globally, and earned \$43.2 billion last year. Deloitte gets into all the cracks. For example, the City of Toronto has a charitable foundation called **Parks and Trees**. That foundation recently hired a new Executive Director. She has an MBA, and one of her jobs before she came to the city was as a director of *Corporate Responsibility and Community Investment* with Deloitte.

After reading one of my posts a month ago, Jim Jacobs reminded me about his mother’s book “**Systems of Survival**,” in which Jane Jacobs made a distinction between the work of commerce and the work of who she called “guardians,” for example various arms of government charged with protecting public life. When the two get confused, Jacobs wrote, you get “*monstrous hybrids*” which make a mess of both jobs.

The local big picture: The city’s web posting about the Dufferin Rink construction schedule begins with a big picture overview: “*The average community recreation centre is almost 40 years old, and the average arena is 50 years old. Many City facilities are reaching the end of their lifespans and are not keeping pace with public needs and expectations.*”

This raises a lot of questions. How is a rink’s “lifespan” determined? (Dufferin Rink is only 26 years old.) Whose needs and expectations has the rink not been meeting? When did the Dufferin Grove clubhouse turn into a “community recreation centre” or the rink become an “arena”? And how was it decided to look at only the “Northwest Corner,” not the whole park?

The details: Before any of these big picture questions could be addressed, Lura, the community consultation firm that the city hired, invited people to apply for membership in a kind of focus group for a new rink and clubhouse design. This “community resource group” has quite a few members who have a primary

interest in just one element of the park – in skateboarding, or bike polo, or the farmers’ market, or their permit group’s winter hockey game. They have their eye on the details, with not much involvement with the rest of the park. The bike polo reps are lobbying for the hockey rink to be subdivided by a wooden fence, except during the rink season. The skateboarder reps want the pleasure-skating rink to be smoother (new concrete). The men’s Thursday 9 – 11 pm permit group reps want a new hockey rink pad that’s a meter-and-a-half wider, with less-tight corners that are easier to scrape and flood. The farmers’ market reps want a renovation both indoors and out, to have more space for the weekly market.

And yet, the level of detail being presented for discussion stops half-way. There are lots of thrifty ways to address current rink problems – instead of reconfiguring the rink clubhouse, breaking up the rink slab concrete, trucking it to the landfill and building new rink slabs of a different shape. But there’s too much money available. A budget of up to \$4.5 million was specified on the city’s contract awards web page, although the most recent Lura explanation says the real number is \$3.5 million. For either of those amounts, why be thrifty?

Thrifty: Here are some examples. In the skate rental room, if two redundant water heaters were removed, a few more shelves built, and the skate room got a door with a sliding window, presto – a good skate-lending space. If the indoor kitchen had one superfluous wall removed, a new door framed in, some HVAC pipes relocated, more shelves put in, walls painted and floor tiles added, presto – an excellent new prep kitchen. Out on the rink, if the rink got its own ice-edger machine, and staff squeegeed the corners when the zamboni lays on its water, the rink corners would no longer be bumpy. And so on. There could be ingenious fixes all over the place. Even counting new rink refrigeration machinery and market space improvements, it would be really hard to spend over \$1 million.

The remaining funds could fix up the rest of the park – build the long-requested playground washroom/storage room, pave the paths, create a pool and sandpit water-recycling setup, join with an Arts partner to turn the mid-park field house into a theatre workshop space.

Or, instead, the unspent funds could go into the scandalously underfunded “community hub” in the future high-rise development across the street – to put rentable community rooms and gathering spaces where they are sorely needed.

Or, if what I was told recently by a senior parks official is true – that the city has so much development money that they hardly know how to spend it in a timely way – then there’s certainly enough money to do both.

Back to the big picture: Those sensible measures are unlikely to happen. First of all, there are definitely some park users who are excited about new, big-ticket rink items, and they will lobby for them. Second, big-picture construction plans are important for meeting the city’s anomalous staff payroll problem, as I wrote in the first blog of this series, so Capital Projects staff will lobby hard as well.

This means that most likely the northwest corner of the park will have construction for a year or two or maybe three, the rink house will gain some rentable space but lose its clubhouse feel, and Leslie Street Spit will expand its reach with some new rubble and twisted rebar. None of what happens at the park’s northwest corner that will alter the park’s central problem: Parks and Rec management’s suppression of its local staff.

Back to Jane Jacobs: In Blog #9 I wrote, for the many-eth time, about city management’s reinstating its hierarchical structure at Dufferin Grove, starting with the removal of Rec supervisor Tino DeCastro in 2010, and then squashing the local ecology that had developed there. The “ecology” was made possible in the

first place because of the peculiar staffing arrangements that Rec staff in Toronto have had for at least 50 years. Almost all recreation programs are run by what used to be called “casual” staff, now renamed “part-time,” but with fewer benefits and lower wages than full-time staff. These are people of varying ages who are often between other jobs. Many don’t want to make a career with their city job but they are often adventuresome, interested in trying things, maybe brave. Most don’t want to work full-time. (Although there are some who have been working as part-time staff, hoping to get on full-time, for decades. City management has often let these bargain workers languish until hope is almost gone.)

Jane Jacobs wrote in **“The Economy of Cities”** that cities flourish when there is competition between many small and mid-sized companies which are clustered near enough that they can also learn from and teach one another. In an odd way Dufferin Grove was a microcosm of what Jacobs saw. All those casual staff with no careers to lose, and for a time allowed to try things in the park, could riff off each other – making an adventure playground, campfires, supporting musicians in the park, baking bread, starting a snack bar, skate lending, setting up learn-to-play-shinny-hockey classes, ball and bat lending, challenging wannabe gangsters, negotiating with people who hear voices, digging new gardens, cooking dinners, fixing benches, building benches, facing down bullies, supporting picnics, calling parents, chasing thieves, writing grants, sorting receipts, counting money – the list could go on for a few more pages. A lot happened, there were stupid mistakes as well as many small triumphs, but always there were surprises.

Those diverse things kept bubbling up, helped by intermittent support or just benign neglect from further up the line, until about 2010. And then the pattern of lively inventiveness was stopped. Existing programs were set in cement, the staff were micro-managed, and costs went way up. Some staff left and many were, and are, very unhappy.

Bureaucracies are by their nature a monopoly. Jane Jacobs wrote that monopolies are NOT likely to allow cities to flourish. A monopoly often shuts things down from a distance, and it uses fancy language, often with great success, to distract people from what it's doing. Toronto's Parks and Rec monopoly/bureaucracy engages in costly "place-making" and "revitalizing." It partners with other big players to embed a *faux* "sense of belonging" in the citizens, and plays with the idea of electronically monitoring bums on benches.

The troubles of **Sidewalk Lab** are a cautionary tale. Journalist John Lorinc wrote about the space-age features that this Sidewalk hybrid – a self-identified visionary design company owned by Google, with its hands in our city's pocket – intends to bring us, in an article titled "*A Mess on the Sidewalk*" in the March 2019 issue of **Baffler**. Lorinc wrote: "*Imagine a city street or a public park that can "know" something about who was moving along it, together with subsidiary information about where and how these urbanites were using the space (e.g., was a particular set of sensor-equipped park benches especially popular during early evenings?).*"

Benches, although they seem small and local, are part of the big picture when they become electronic. No need for park staff who talk to people in the park and slowly get to know them, because the data the benches collect can be used to construct algorithms about park usage and bench placement. The important task is constant measurement to see how it's going.

Last fall, Gehl/Sidewalk Lab worked with Park People, training some Thorncliffe Park high-rise residents to sit in their park and electronically log what people were doing there. The residents wanted more benches for family picnics, but instead, they got apps on specially adapted cell phones.

11

Post Script



The Request for Proposals (RFP) for the Dufferin Rink project says that the City of Toronto has an **Environmentally Responsible Procurement Policy** which requires it to “conserve resources, mitigate pollution and waste, and promote a healthy economy.” The demolition of the rink pads and its replacement with new concrete, and perhaps the demolition of the concrete-block rink building and its replacement with another concrete-block or poured-concrete building, can’t possibly be made to fit this policy.

About concrete: In an interview in the *Globe* on April 26 of this year, two people – a well-known architect and a wealthy developer -- were talking about the problems of concrete. They spoke of the need to reduce the use of “*highly unsustainable concrete [which is] responsible for an estimated 8 per cent of all carbon emission worldwide.*” But the architect sounded pessimistic: “*Generally speak-*

ing developers are conservative people. They are playing with tens of millions of dollars. They have a bank backstopping them. They are not going to go out on a limb. They are going to do what they know, and they are going to do it again and again, because they made money last time.”

The developer said, “I’ve realized we [developers] are bad people. The developers are a big part of the problem... We have got to change.” He went on to say that almost 40 per cent of annual carbon emissions come from construction and what he called “operations.” This figure seems hard to believe – but perhaps it at least gives some idea of the scale of the problem.

Maybe the city’s capital projects staff, and the designers, and the politicians, and quite a few people who use the park, also participate in the problem. They want the city to keep doing what they know – in this case, to demolish the rink pads and bring in the cement trucks to pour new rink pads. As for the waste and the carbon emissions: there’s a popular song that begins, “*I want to do right, but not right now...*” And right now, there are many specific choices to make, to use up the \$4 million allocated to this project. The point is not *whether*, but *what*.

None of the public meetings, or the community resource group meetings held so far, can be called public discussions. If there had been real discussion, the basic question “do you want this project?” would have been on the table. But it never was. Discussion time was always short because there were so many options to present. The city’s project team is sticking to the script, and the script is – basically – a call for *public shopping*. What kind of kitchen do you want for the rink building? Should there be an outdoor projection surface for movies? How about raised garden beds for seniors? Better signage? A rentable party room? A non-gendered washroom?

The money for all this shopping comes from taxes and development fees, and with so much new construction in the area, it seems like there’s plenty to spend. But it must be spent now –

otherwise (it's said) it will be gone – the rabbit will disappear back into the hat.

Making choices from a list of what to buy is one thing most of us know how to do – we get daily training and encouragement in it.

CELOS advocates instead a kind of degrowth, by declining most of the services on offer. That would conserve resources and reduce pollution. But then many of that long list of consultants (see post #7), possibly our friends and our neighbours, would lose their contracts. Can we imagine the kind of “healthy economy” that could interrupt this vicious cycle?

Last September there was a packed “*shall we run the park with a conservancy?*” meeting at the rink clubhouse, producing a 140-name email list. I think it's pretty obvious by now that there's no conservancy waiting in the wings. The neighbourhood has changed. Tall towers are coming to swamp out the now-unaffordable houses: daunting. People are distracted.

But it ain't over 'til it's over. There are grumblings, and there may be more. The city bureaucracy owns the park and they can do what they choose (see post #8). But who knows when the next wave will come, of people willing to try things and be surprised, willing to work hard and not exaggerate and stay in the same place long enough to follow through?

Let's see.

12

Update



Freedom of Information (FOI) response about the Dufferin Rink project, May 26, 2019

Parks and Rec Capital Projects, through Lura, wrote to CELOS on April 10, 2019, that “the ice surface and equipment require imminent replacement” to avoid “risk of equipment failure.” That same day, CELOS asked, through FOI, for the engineering report showing that the concrete rink slabs (which hold the cooling pipes) are at risk of failing and need to be demolished now.

The response came on May 29. **Neither the DTAH engineering report of 2018 nor the 2014 state of good repair report give evidence of any such risk.** The only reason given by the DTAH engineering consultant, for demolishing the rink slabs, is in case of “*any proposed changes in size or shape*” of the rinks.

The FOI response also included an internal staff email chain (p.22). The reasons given there for rink slab demolition are (1) the shape of the rink's corners and (2) the city standards for dimensions of **new** rinks (many existing rinks including indoor arenas do not have the standard measurements). But the Parks supervisor for west Toronto, Nadia Blackburn, writes to her colleagues that giving the public the "tight corners" as a reason for rink replacement is not a good idea. *"I'm just concerned that this will be a sticking point that they will cling to and find a reason to oppose this. City Standards should be enough of a reason even if they don't like it."*

Our FOI request also asked for the specific bylaws and building codes that are not being adhered to at the current rink and clubhouse – *"this should include information about which of those specific elements pose a risk to occupational health and safety, or where there is a concern about a future legal claim against the city."*

The FOI response was that the Buildings Department can find no relevant information, and that if CELOS wants that information from Parks and Rec it would require *"a more extensive search... but that would come with significant charges."* In other words, to find out which city bylaws and codes apply specifically to the city's Dufferin Grove rink replacement project, it would cost CELOS, or anyone, a lot of money.

