

# Dufferin Grove Park Newsletter

## June 2024

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# Dufferin Grove Park newsletter, June 2024



*This newsletter is put out by CELOS, the Centre for Local Research into Public Space. 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 documented a lot of what we've seen and done, in this newsletter and on our four websites. The newsletter paused in February 2020 and resumes now.*

**Tents in the park: "The Dufferin Grove Park Approach":** At the May 29 Economic and Community Development committee meeting, the city councillors considered Item "EC13.8 - The City's Encampment Approach and Strategy." City staff presented a **"Findings report from Dufferin Grove Park"**: *Key elements of this new approach were relationship building with people in encampments and expediting access to housing and other supports, without the use of enforcement. Dufferin Grove Park was identified as a priority site for this approach in August 2021 due to the encampment's scale, its rapid growth, its proximity to community supports, and opportunities for relationship building between local residents and the City.*

City office-based staff set up at park picnic tables to give direct support to the campers. In the city report, the pilot project was mostly declared a success, with some problems left to work out: the shortage of housing on offer, the fact that when word got out about priority housing for campers in this park, more people tried to set up their tents (security guards were hired to prevent that), the reluctance of some campers to leave even with housing ("honorariums" seemed to help), and the *"targeted harassment, both in person and online"* of onsite city staff by *"neighbours and other stakeholders"* – presumably people who disliked this approach. And some neighbours did build relationships with the campers, and continue to do so. It's complicated.

**Food in the Park:** Dufferin Grove park and *food* have gone together for quite a while. From community letters:

**Maggie Anderson:** *We moved into the neighbourhood right before my now 10-year-old daughters birth. There were so many firsts and milestones passed that I'll cherish forever that happened in that park. We played, volunteered, ate pizza and fresh bread at the pizza oven....*

**Johanne Pulker:** *I am a longtime friend and participant in the grove of ancient trees that is Dufferin Grove Park... Friday Suppers!-standing in a long line of hungry people, meeting new friends at the same time...The Market, a cob kitchen built by park people, the Cob Snack Shop, skating, theatre, the brick oven, freshly baked bread....*

The lockdowns stopped all that, and then the construction shut down the clubhouse kitchen for several more years. After some lobbying with the Parks and Rec general manager, the smaller oven was put back into use from September 2022 with some pizza-making days, and these are scheduled again for this summer. The bigger oven is still waiting for repairs.

But now there's a big industrial-style kitchen in the former clubhouse. It's not very active yet. It may be used by summer day camps for kids to learn a few simple cooking skills. It may be used by a few vendors on Thursdays and Fridays. But who else will use it? Here's an idea:

**Kitchen use by encampment residents:** From the city's 2022 Dufferin Grove encampment strategy report: *P.8: To address the food insecurity of encamped individuals over 375 meals were provided weekly over 15 weeks.*

But there was a lot of food-and-container waste. Then last summer, right into early winter, a new group of campers started cooking over a fire. They borrowed pots from park neighbours, found scrap wood set out at the construction site, and went to the mall to buy groceries. Many delicious meals were eaten around that fire, with little waste. Now that there's a well-equipped park kitchen, can it be used by encampment dwellers to make their own meals, as the next step in the city's "Dufferin Grove approach"?



**Georgie Donais and the cob kitchen:** There's a saying that every cloud has a silver lining, and that was borne out at Dufferin Grove in 2005, with the cob kitchen building project, one of the biggest gifts-in-kind the park ever got. It was led by Georgie Donais. By the time the cob kitchen/café was finished, Georgie had counted more than 500 people who had given an hour or a day or the whole summer to help with building.

**The history:** In 1997, City Council approved \$1300 for the construction of a park food cart for Dufferin Grove, to be used at the playground in spring/summer/fall. This food cart served coffee, tea, juices, and some healthy snacks prepared at the rink clubhouse kitchen. It operated under the "special events" food rules, but it proved so popular that it became almost a daily event in summer. **Toronto Public Health** inspectors were supportive, but late in the summer of 2004, they sent word to Recreation management that proper sinks, refrigeration, and a counter for food preparation must be installed by the wading pool by summer 2005 in place of the playground food cart.

A crisis. Park friend **Georgie Donais** said – *"if we have to carry out this order, we can back it with a community-built cob courtyard and make something beautiful."* With the help of a \$2500 grant from the **Toronto Parks and Trees Foundation**, she set about working with many park friends to build a little courtyard around the sinks, and continuing on from there, to create an outdoor kitchen and gathering-place. The walls are made with a sand-clay-straw mix known as "cob" or "monolithic adobe", which was mixed by foot and applied by hand. As the project proceeded (over the course of three months), hundreds of people of all ages helped to build with this material. Two skilled carpenters who lived just up the street, **Silvie Varone** and **Simon Evans**, made barn-board-and-mosaic counters for sinks. **Erella Ganon** (who has been running the local listserv for many years) got people to donate broken china, and spent one whole weekend turning the bits into the colourful mosaics that decorate the walls.



The Parks and Recreation Division's contribution to this project was major. **Recreation staff** supported the volunteers, especially the many children who came to help. The plumbing for the sinks was installed by the **City plumbers**. The electricity for the water heater required by Public Health, as well as for the snack bar cooking and cooling facilities, was put in by the City electricians. Parks and Recreation supervisor **Tino DeCastro** and manager **James Dann** said they would help Georgie make it happen, and they were as good as their word.

From 2006, the cob kitchen was used as a popular playground café for 4-6 hours a day, during the months when school was out. Until 2011, it was operated jointly by CELOS and city part-time staff. From 2011 until 2019, city part-time rec staff operated it solely. During the time when the income information was still available to CELOS (until 2014), the snack bar daily income on four sample days in July ranged from \$450 to \$1200 (depending on the weather). So the café paid its way.

But now the cob kitchen has fallen on hard times. The shingles and the plaster are crumbling. Two months ago, thieves came and stripped out all the copper plumbing. On May 7, Peter White, the citywide Parks manager, came by for a site meeting, to take a look. The issue was – should the cob kitchen be demolished?

Afterwards I wrote to him: *“This rather humble “cob cafe” has provided many hundreds of hours of work and skills training to young people and also to people returning to employment. Would its destruction be an example of unbuilding a success? Or could a partnership be created that would allow a thorough repair, so that the cob kitchen could be useful to the park for another ten years?”*

As of the middle of June, there's been no reply from city staff. Everybody's too busy, and the broken cob counter doors are flapping the wind. But – (turn to page 5): there's a hopeful proposal from the little group of recent architecture-school graduates who have been exploring the “natural building” elements at the park.



**The cob kitchen repair proposal:** Elizabeth Antczak and Julia Morrissey are recent Masters of Architecture graduates. Izzy Mink has just finished her Masters of Landscape Architecture. All three are more interested in fixing the cob kitchen and the bake oven in Dufferin Grove than in making condos.

On May 31, after some weeks of researching the materials and methods used in building the cob kitchen, and assessing the structure's condition now, Elizabeth and Izzy sent a detailed 21-page proposal to Parks manager Peter White, asking for a service contract (the main pages are posted on the nearby park bulletin board). The Parks department often hires people to do service contracts, to fix or build something the city's own tech services staff can't or don't have time to do. In this case the staff can fix some things (like the plumbing) but need help to fix others.



City staff collaborated with many community people to help build the cob kitchen in 2005. Can staff now join forces with the next wave of young people who want to do useful, hands-on work as they expand their skills?

Maybe this is a good moment. For over a year now, city staff from four city divisions have been working on a report called **“A Framework to Advance Inclusive Economic Development in Toronto.”** *Inclusive Economic development (IED)* is used here to mean, how can City government create or support work that leads to more people making a decent living?

CELOS has sent a request to the people working on this IED report, asking them to let us tell them about economic activity in parks like Dufferin Grove (and other parks too). The cob kitchen, and the bake ovens too, have been sites of economic activity for years. Our inspiration is the work of our friend **Jane Jacobs**, writing about “import replacement.” She wrote that local economies are stimulated in hundreds of small ways. (Example: when park visitors’ visits to the mall to buy a Big Mac were replaced by the purchase of a tortilla with beans made at Dufferin Grove by a friendly Mayan refugee from Guatemala – the park’s first cook, **Isabel Perez**).

So far there’s been no staff acknowledgment of receipt of the proposal, but maybe soon?

**Playground changes are coming:** Dufferin Grove has one of the last surviving playgrounds of the 1980's wooden and metal-climber playground era. Most of those wooden and metal-climber playgrounds in parks and schoolyards – including larger and more thrilling ones in other parts of the city – were demolished during a nationwide panic about playground safety in the year 2000. Playgrounds were destroyed without much of a budget for replacing them. So the replacement structures were cheap plastic-coated things, what child care workers call “stairs and hallways,” and many kids stayed away.



After a few years had passed, child safety advocates were a bit shocked to find out that playground injuries didn't decrease and in fact, often increased.

So another round of playground replacements started up, no longer cheap, and more recently involving a philosophy called “risky play.” And something else happened: Big Business discovered that playgrounds could be lucrative. Playground companies were sold to ever bigger investment companies, some of them headquartered in New York, London, or Dubai. Playgrounds hit the big time, and competition was fierce.

Meantime, a few Toronto playgrounds dodged the bullet. The much-loved (risky play) metal “spider” climber that's still at Dufferin Grove was manufactured by the *Paris Playground Equipment Company* (originating as a welding company in **Paris, Ontario**). The main wooden structure (not the little playhouses), was from the Peterborough *Children's Playgrounds Company*, installed in 1984. These structures were built to last.

The Dufferin Grove playground was on the list to be replaced by “stairs and hallways” in 2003 and again in 2007. Parents let it be known that they liked the playground as it was, so the Dufferin Grove playground was postponed into the future on the to-do list. But now its number has come up. An online survey is meant to start the ball rolling (available on the project's web page from **June 22 to July 7**). Then there will be meetings, with round tables, stickies and coloured markers. And colourful catalogue images from the big companies.

Construction is scheduled to start in the fall of 2025.

**The St. Anne's Church fire:** It seemed like this church, on Gladstone down the road from the park, built in 1908, would be part of the neighbourhood forever. But at 9.15 on Sunday morning, June 9, **Erella Ganon** posted a photo on her listserv, taken from her porch, of huge flames coming out of the church roof. She wrote *"St. Anne's church is GONE!... The meeting with the realtor about selling the rectory hall was planned for tomorrow."*



In four hours, the church was a burned-out shell.

**Some history:** In 2022 the church had applied to sever the rectory hall from the church property, so they could sell it and raise some funds. The application, reported in **Urban Toronto** and forwarded to us by **Ann Ball**, said they needed the funds *"for the necessary capital repairs of the church building and other investments geared toward securing the long-term viability of the Parish's core mission which includes interfaith initiatives, social justice issues, environmental stewardship, and a commitment to truth and reconciliation with the indigenous communities."*

**A thank you to St. Anne's:** From Dufferin Grove farmers' market manager Nicole Jacobs: "St Anne's was an important refuge for the market - during the pandemic (and beyond.) From early 2020 until 2022, St Anne's allowed us a space to run our online store, and pack customer orders. St Anne's then continued to host us, even after we resumed (to being in-person), during the winter seasons of 2022 and 2023, as we waited so long for the park construction to be over." Without St. Anne's, the market would have folded.



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