

How sustainability and healthy communities are two sides of the same coin: Two Toronto case studies

When we think about transforming our cities into resilient and sustainable cities, it's not enough to think about infrastructure and buildings. That's definitely a great place to start but we can never forget that – ultimately – we build our cities for people. You, me, all of us. The aim should be to build places where people can thrive, be happy and healthy, and connect with each other.

The efforts we invest in making our buildings and communities more sustainable can very often also be leveraged to make our communities healthier. It's just a matter of looking at it through both lenses at the same time. There are two great examples right here in downtown Toronto that illustrate at very different scales what that might look like.

Regent Park

What stands out when you talk to people at Regent Park is that nobody really talks about the buildings. Sure, they're all LEED Gold and Toronto Green Standard Tier 2 – which is a great achievement. But that is not what has been driving the success of this revitalization project. What people talk about is the tight knit and strong community. This community was already there before the renovation works began. If Daniels and TCH would have gone about this project business as usual, there was a good chance that that sense of community would have been wiped out. However, they started the project specifically with this community spirit in mind. Their driver was social infrastructure and social cohesion & wellbeing. So they did a number of things to safe guard it and make it even better. They focused on empowering local arts & culture, sports and recreation, and build local economic resilience. The new park and free aquatic center provide a great opportunity for all inhabitants to be physically active and get some outdoor time when the weather permits.

What really stood out for me is the approach to local economic development and the urban gardens you see everywhere. Let's take a closer look at those two.

Local Economic Development

There is strong a focus on buying local and hiring local.

- All events are catered by local catering businesses and there is even a catering kitchen they can use.
- All the art in the buildings, the interior design and even the welcome gifts for new homeowners are all sourced from local artists.
- Every retail space that gets leased has a specific clause in their lease that outlines the needed effort to hire local people.
- Summer job and pre-apprentice programs have helped to train youth for local jobs and jumpstart their careers.
- The local Employment Office is at the center of it all and connects employers with people looking for a job
- OUTCOME: Over 1300 people have already found a job in their neighborhood through this approach.

This fostering of the small scale local economy makes a neighborhood much more financially sustainable. It helps to lower unemployment rates but it also provides the opportunity for people to live and work in the same neighborhood. This has a significant

impact on our wellbeing as we eliminate the stress and pollution that go with daily commutes. But we also tend to know our neighbors and feel safer in a neighborhood where we spend most of our day.

Urban Gardens

At the start of the project, Daniels noticed there were a lot of urban gardens and they were very intensely used. So they decided to build on this opportunity. They have incorporated urban farming in many different ways. From planters on balconies to garden plots for lease to full scale communal gardens. On regular occasions there is an external consultant on urban farming that gives workshops and teaches people how to successfully manage and grow an urban garden. The gardening has been so popular in the neighborhood that there is a waiting list for plots. The community also organizes a yearly harvest festival and a food festival called "Taste of Regent Park".

Not only is it great for the environment to have more green space and water infiltration areas. It is also great for our physical health. Gardening for even just one hour a week has shown to lower blood pressure and heart rate thus lowering the risk of stroke and heart disease. But it is also great for our mental wellbeing. Communal gardens help to connect with others and create a stronger network which helps to battle our soaring loneliness and depression crisis. A last interesting side effect the developer noticed is that this type of qualitative shared space has influenced how people treat their building. It seems to create a sense of pride and ownership that reflects in better care and maintenance of the buildings.

Regent Park is a world class example of how we can marry sustainability (in all of its aspects) and wellbeing to create vibrant neighborhoods. However, it can seem like a massive undertaking with a lot of challenge to overcome and time, money, and effort to invest. So maybe we won't all embark on an adventure of that scale just yet. So let's take a look at a very different example and scale. Even with one building you can contribute to a more sustainable and healthy community.

Cooper Koo Family building – YMCA

The second example in downtown Toronto where sustainability and healthy community design come together is the Cooper Koo YMCA in the Distillery District. This fairly new YMCA building is a LEED Gold building. However, the most interesting feature of this building is its roof. It shares a 30,000 sq. ft. publicly accessible green roof with the building next door. We all know the environmental benefits of green roofs:

- Manages stormwater
- Decreases noise pollution
- Supports biodiversity
- Reduces carbon footprint

When designed right, accessible green roofs can also generate significant health benefits:

- building community and social interaction – combat the rising loneliness crisis.
- A place for gardening, connecting with nature – reduces stress levels, risk of stroke, lowers risk of depression, ...
- Improves heart-rate and blood-pressure
- Reduces stress
- Improves air quality

The way this particular green roof came to be is quite interesting. The YMCA organized a public consultation where over 400 community members provided exciting ideas. These

ranged from beehives and preferred fauna to proper bench setup. Even prevailing wind patterns in that section of the city were taken into account in this collective design approach.

Once the input was summarized, the community voted on the final design of the roof. And when it was time to build it, the YMCA recruited more than 200 volunteers who donated their time to help build it. They were guided by a team of specialists in green roofs but the actual built was done entirely by the community volunteers. This is a great example of how one building can actually have a positive impact by bringing the community together and by providing a qualitative communal space.

And the YMCA is looking to expand the impact of this building even further. They're currently working on a project for district energy in the neighborhood. Part of the infrastructure for this network was already built for the PanAm games but it was never completed. So now the YMCA is working with the city and local stakeholders to finish the network and provide power and shelter during blackouts. It will also allow other buildings in the area to free up valuable rooftop space as they won't be needing any large scale HVAC equipment up there anymore.

But we're not there yet. The concept of district energy fed by a combined heat and power (CHP) generator is still an innovative concept in the Toronto region. So it is met with some amount of red tape that needs to be dealt with first and there is still a lot of awareness raising needed before all the relevant partners will be on board. That is why the YMCA in collaboration with their consultant Mantle 314 are launching an awareness campaign around district energy. Their website will go live later this year.

Both the Cooper Koo building with its unique green roof and the revitalization of Regent Park illustrate that sustainability and health & wellbeing can go hand in hand. No matter the scale of a project, we should always ask ourselves: "How will this approach or measure improve quality of life for the people living, working, or playing here?"

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