

PLANNING PARKS FOR A MULTICULTURAL POPULATION

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ABSTRACT

As Toronto's population continues to grow increasingly diverse, park planners will be faced with the challenge of implementing changes to the existing parks and recreational facilities in order to accommodate the leisure needs of these new emerging demographics. This is due to the fact that the existing infrastructure does not meet the needs of these emerging groups. However, further research is needed to understand how emerging multicultural communities use park space and how they manipulate the use of existing infrastructure to accommodate their favoured activities. The research in this study is collected through conducting three focus groups, key informant interviews, and secondary research in regards to prevalent literature and municipal plans, policies, and staff reports regarding park planning. This study will have the capacity to assist planners in developing an understanding of how the changing urban population is using park spaces, as well as their recreational preferences and requirements, in order to adequately provide facilities that accommodate space for their specific needs.

Key words: Multiculturalism; Ethnicity; Park Planning; Parks; Assessing Community Needs

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1.0 Introduction

Current demographic trends indicate that the Non-European immigrant growth rate in Toronto is increasing almost faster than that of the entire municipal population (Stats Canada, 2006). According to Statistics Canada, the nation's foreign-born population is growing approximately four times faster than the rest of the population (Stats Canada, 2006).

Future projections suggests that in 2031 whites will become minorities in Toronto, as South Asians, including Indians, Pakistanis, and Sri Lankans, are expected to comprise the largest visible minority group (Stats Canada, 2006). During the 20th century the influx of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe made extensive efforts to become "Canadianized" (Agrawal, 2008). However, this mentality has been out grown and society has now become increasingly more accepting towards the notion of ethnic pluralism. Today, the affirmation of different ethnicities is encouraged, and Toronto is believed to be a 'mosaic of cultures' as opposed to a 'melting pot' (Agrawal, 2008).

As Toronto's population continues to grow increasingly more diverse, park planners are challenged with designing and adapting parks to accommodate the leisure needs of these new emerging demographics, as the existing recreational infrastructures do not meet their needs. Park planners will be faced with the task of creating adequate park space to facilitate the wide array of varying recreational preferences. A task that will prove difficult as the current spaces and infrastructure—originally designed for the dominant group—are often unable to accommodate these increasingly diverse needs. Currently in order to make due, these emerging cultural groups are faced with the task of manipulating the use of the existing infrastructure to

accommodate their favoured activities. Hence, it is the responsibility of the Planners to conduct further research to understand the recreational preferences of these emerging multicultural communities. Therefore, this study will have the capacity to assist planners, municipal officials, and councillors in developing an understanding of how the changing urban multicultural populations are using park spaces, as it will describe their preferences, recreational needs, and recommendations so that future planners might adequately provide facilities that satisfy their specific needs.

2.0 Research Rationale

Toronto's multicultural population has outnumbered the traditional Anglophone majority and as a result characterizes an emergent user segment of urban parks (Lister, 2009). Seta Low, Dana Taplin, and Suzanne Scheld state, parks that initially served relatively homogeneous Anglophone middle-class or working-class neighbourhoods must now be modified to provide recreational, educational, and social programs, as well as relaxation spaces for a growing multicultural population (Low, Taplin, Scheld, 2005). They continue by arguing that mayors, city council members, and planners are forced to mediate the conflicts that occur as park resources are becoming increasingly stretched thin and neighbourhoods are beginning to deteriorate as a result of the local government's inability to accommodate and provide sufficient services for a multicultural population (Low, Taplin and Scheld, 2005). An example of this is addressed in lectures conducted by Professor Nina-Marie Lister. According to Lister, as Toronto's multicultural population continues to increase, South Asian users that choose to participate in the game of cricket are forced to manipulate the existing park space provided for the game of soccer, to accommodate their 'foreign' sport (Lister, 2009). Thus, as all the above scholars point out, the current set-up of park space is not only inadequate, its failure to support our multicultural population is contributing to larger social unrest.

The purpose of this project is to examine the reasoning behind the widely mistaken perception made by park planners, who continually plan and design parks according to traditional specifications that no longer satisfy the recreational needs of a growing multicultural population. Planners continue to plan and design parks based on a community's forecasted

population size and do not take into consideration the concept of ethno-cultural diversity (Ho, 2005). However, this methodology is outdated as not only Toronto, but the majority of Ontario's population, are becoming increasingly culturally diverse. Therefore, planning parks according to forecasted population sizes is not a successful and sustainable tool in providing planners with any insight regarding the specific recreational preferences of the community, as existing planned spaces are frequently being manipulated to suit the different recreational needs of our 'mosaic of cultures'. It is becoming more prevalent, as the population transforms and diversifies that planners must engage in an open dialogue regarding implementing changes in the park planning process in order to provide recreational spaces that can both accommodate and have the capacity to be used by an array of cultural groups.

As municipalities, such as Toronto, become progressively more culturally diverse, park spaces inclusive to all will act as an integration tool, bringing together individuals, families, or communities of different ethnic demographics. However, if planners continue to design parks according to their traditional methods, parks will continue to be exclusive spaces that only cater to certain demographics. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the major challenges of existing parks, such as how they are underutilized by certain groups and how they become a source of contention, by assessing the functionality and inflexibility of programmed space.

This study will be based on an in-depth case-study analysis on Rexdale Neighbourhood Park, located in the Islington Avenue and Rexdale Boulevard neighbourhood of Toronto. Rexdale Park is a neighbourhood park that was originally planned and designed to meet the leisure needs of a homogenous user group. However, today, the park is bounded by an array of

neighbourhoods comprised of diverse cultural groups. The objective of this study is to discover whether Toronto's parks facilitate the diverse leisure and recreational needs of its divergent cultural demographics. Information collected will determine the primary park users, how the space is used or manipulated, and how changes can be implemented to provide a more culturally sensitive space.

Researching this issue is extremely important, because with the City of Toronto's increasingly multicultural population, planners will be required to develop strategies to empower local parks to be interactive and reflective of the needs of the entire community. The information provided through this study will benefit society by expanding planners and the general public's understanding of the relationship between Toronto's ethnic and cultural groups and their community parks. Furthermore, this research will establish and provide recommendations for park planners to consider when faced with designing and planning future parks. This study will provide planners with guidelines to evaluate the cultural and ethnic needs, as well as demands of the communities they plan for, rather than continuing to develop exclusive parks for homogeneous cultures.

Essentially, the information produced through this study will have a profound effect on how future parks will be designed and will promote more culturally sustainable changes to park environments that will create more inclusive settings. Ultimately, the research question will set out to answer: to what extent do Toronto's parks satisfy the recreational/leisure needs of its multicultural population? Furthermore, what improvements and solutions can planners implement in order to accommodate these spaces to suit the needs of a diverse population?

3.0 Literature Review

The *Toronto Official Plan*, Section 3.2.3 Parks and Open Spaces, outlines and addresses the need for city parks to expand because of the increasingly diverse users of these spaces. However, it only specifies the concept of expansion, while failing to address what modifications or modernization needs to occur in order for the space to represent the needs of its growing diverse users (Toronto Official Plan, 2002). Therefore there is a niche for this study, to research and analyze how Toronto park spaces are used and manipulated to meet certain ethnic recreational demands as well as establish guidelines and design principles that embed the plurality of future parks.

3.1 Urban Parks: Inclusive or Exclusive Spaces?

At the City of Toronto's Media Advisory, which is an open discussion pertaining to issues regarding the future of Toronto Parks, participant Uzma Shakir, from the Atkinson Economic Justice Fellow at the Atkinson Foundation, states that there are two distinctive words that represent the ways in which the City of Toronto both understands and comprehends the concept of diversity (Shakir, 2010). The first is intuitive, where the municipal administration fails to acknowledge the lack of homogeneity and continues to force diverse communities to adapt to exclusive processes and procedures (Shakir, 2010). The second is structural or political, which consists of defining the "other" and describing how they differ from the norm (Shakir, 2010). Shakir claims that her theories regarding the concept of diversity are evident in City of Toronto's current planning practices and policies.

There is a lack of awareness in regards to the concept of cultural diversity, as the majority of plans insinuate that a standard park design is preferred by all. Planners fail to acknowledge the

existence of a heterogeneous population and attempt to plan according to a standardized 'one design satisfies all' protocol. As a result, public participation is often disregarded, especially when planning for communities that are comprised of an array of cultural identities. Jo Beall, an influential multiculturalism theorist, emphasizes that planners should be creating spaces that are inclusive to all. This is indicated when he asserts, "Creating inclusive urban spaces, such as parks that welcome diversity and meet the contrasting needs of different cultural groups is central to the goal of building 'A City for All'" (Beall, 1997, 3).

Setha Low, Dana Taplin, and Suzanne Scheld (2005) state that we are currently facing a threat to public space, not a threat of disuse, but one of pattern and design that excludes some individuals and reduces the presence of cultural diversity. This exclusion is the direct result of intentional space programming practices that attempt to lessen the number of 'others,' and promote and encourage the use of the dominant group. These practices generally lead to the reduction in the vitality and vibrancy of the space. Setha Low and Neil Smith's work in *Politics of Public Space* draws on parallels to Low, Taplin, and Scheld's findings in regards to North American parks becoming exclusive and disused spaces because of the initial programming practices of the space:

[P]ublic space at all scales is an integral result of new political deep freeze. Today's neoliberalism may not divide the populace as bluntly as in the days of high liberal principle when slavery was legal, African Americans were counted as three-fifths of a person, and neither women nor the property-less possessed a vote, but it makes its own discriminations (Low and Smith, 2006, 15).

Planning parks according to traditional specifications that strictly cater to a homogenous group can no longer occur, as it is alienating to and discriminating against certain members.

Ching-hua Ho (2005) draws parallels to Low, Taplin, and Scheld's (2005) work by claiming that parks that have been originally planned for the use of homogeneous Anglophone neighbourhoods should be scheduled for revitalization, and that it is the role of the local government and planners to address the conflicts that arise from shared scarce park amenities between the marginal ethnic and dominant Anglophone cultures by providing adequate services for all residents. Ho insists that planners need to recognize cultural distinctions and effectively implement changes that encourage ethnicity within urban park landscapes (Ho, 2005). As North American cities are becoming progressively multicultural, sports and recreational games that are popular in other countries are going to become more apparent in urban parks. However, Chieh-Lu Li and James D Absher (2008) state that, since functional spaces in typical North American parks are programmed for traditional recreational and sport purposes immigrants are often faced with the challenges of manipulating these spaces to facilitate their homeland activities.

Walter J. Hood Jr. (2003) and J.F. Dwyer (1994) suggest that park planning and designs should reflect and respond according to the cultural milieu that both use and reside within close proximity to the space. Hood Jr. argues that urban park designs are often driven by a park nomenclature which fails to reflect any significance or representation of the current community's needs (Hood, 2003). Urban parks at best provide playfields, playgrounds, and open areas composed of grass and trees, offering definable landscapes and programs. However, many of the existing archetypes fail to deliver inclusive and multifunctional spaces that emulate the cultural diversity in today's existing communities (Hood, 2003)

According to Heather Goodall, Stephen Wearing, Denis Byrne and Johanna Kijas (2007), parks are supposed to be places that promote togetherness and foster a strong relationship of community and place. Parks are supposed to represent nodal points of intra- and inter-cultural group solidarity, whereby the affective bonding with the people and the place can enrich social and inter-cultural communication (Goodall et al., 2007). However, Paul Gobster (2002) argues that urban parks can also be places where certain individuals are made to feel intimidated, scrutinized and excluded, as opposed to being welcomed into a wider society. As some cultural groups are often excluded from these spaces, their chances of forming specific bonds with the environment, as well as the greater community, will ultimately fail. In a similar vein, Low et al. builds upon Gobster's argument by stating that urban parks in large cities should provide vital public spaces whereby citizens of all cultures, races, religions, and classes have the opportunity to mingle while enjoying a variety of recreations (Low, Taplin and Scheld, 2005). By coming together in these relaxed settings, different cultural groups become comfortable interacting with one another, thereby strengthening the community and the democratic fabric of the society (Low, Taplin and Scheld, 2005). Yet, the complete opposite occurs when parks are planned or designed by ignorance, and space is made inhospitable to certain groups of people (Low, Taplin and Scheld, 2005).

Similarly, M.F. Floyd (1998) claims that regardless of dimensions, urban parks are considered suitable places to provide recreational infrastructure, solve social and cultural conflicts, and support environmental equity. It is both environmentally equitable and ethically to provide community park spaces that integrate and facilitate multicultural preferences, identities,

and favoured activities (Floyd, 1998). Planners must break through the standard nomenclature surrounding the issue of parks to plan more responsive and representative spaces that are specific to the neighbouring urban cultural context (Floyd, 1998). According to Hood Jr. (2003), parks of the future are “hybrid landscapes,” a collage of diverse cultural landscapes connecting the natural, social, and cultural ecologies of the modern metropolis. However, Geoffrey Godbey, Alan Graefe, and Steven James (1992) state that research concerning the extent to which citizens acknowledge and subscribe to these positives is relatively low. Some scholars suggest that some members of different ethnicities may not appreciate the positive effects of parks, as they rarely experience the space because it is not culturally appealing. Currently there is a wide variety of literature pertaining to the exclusivity of parks and how different ethnic and cultural groups prefer to use park space for different activities.

Gill Valentine refers to parks as “soft urban landscapes” and describes them as the important “in-between” spaces of the city (Valentine, 2001). Urban parks are highly valued landscapes for the majority of urbanites, representing a source of pleasure, leisure, and an opportunity to reconnect with nature and one’s own spirituality (Valentine, 2001). Open spaces, such as neighbourhood parks are not only appreciated for their ‘natural’ qualities, but also as a medium to establish social relations and community bonds (Valentine, 2001). However not all urban parks are appreciated spaces; some are regarded as monotonous or exclusive spaces. In a number of parks certain community members are excluded from participating because the space does not coincide with their perceptions of what a park ought to entail (Valentine, 2001).

3.2 Ethno-cultural Differences in Recreational Preferences

Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris (1995) and Garret Devier (2005) investigated ethnic variations, preferences, and recreational activities through observing white, African-Americans, Hispanic, and Chinese groups within a Los Angeles park. According to their observations, Whites enjoyed more active and mobile activities such as hiking, running, and cycling, in comparison to African-Americans who take advantage of the provided programmed facilities such as, soccer, football, and basketball. Hispanic groups engaged in more stationary activities that revolve around family events and barbeques; while Chinese tend to recreate spaces to meet their particular needs in such activities as Tai Chi and other meditating interests (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995). While analyzing the Chinese demographic, Devier discovered that this group's perception of parks were not described as "an expanse of green space for recreation and sport, but rather as an aesthetic element of gorgeous design," valuing visual form over function (Devier, 2005). Currently, there is a wide variety of literature pertaining to the exclusivity of parks and how different ethnic and cultural groups prefer to use park space for different activities. However, there is no existing literature that relates to Toronto's unique cultural and ethnic dynamics and how its multicultural population uses or manipulates park space to meet the needs of their favoured activities.

The first immigrants to arrive to both Canada and Toronto brought with them their own mental images and perceived notions of the aesthetic appearances and functions of parks. It was believed that this was a shared image that reflected their deep connection and pride with the open, pastoral landscapes left behind in England (Graves Lanfer, and Taylor, 2008). According to the research conducted by Ashley Graves Lanfer and Madeleine Taylor in Cochituate State

Park outside of Boston, preferences do exist in terms of how different cultural identities use park spaces (Graves Lanfer, and Taylor, 2008). In observing Cocituate State Park, it became apparent that Latinos have a tendency to congregate along the water's edge, while Muslims used their prayer mats in the afternoons. In turn, Russians opted to gather in the wooded areas of the park, far from the crowds and are prolific park users during the winter months (Graves Lanfer, and Taylor, 2008).

This study was not limited to park preferences, but also researched barriers to park use. One such example pertains to how dog parks--which are largely enjoyed by a mainly white population--present a barrier to Muslims participating in park settings because of issues of sanitation and safety (Graves Lanfer, and Taylor, 2008). Obstacles that prevent different ethnicities from partaking in park recreation warrant proper research. Thus, by understanding the significant barriers posed by the traditional design of the parks, planning professionals can benefit by identifying patterns that may have been unintentionally overlooked, and furthermore provide a basis that may stimulate park facility changes and improvements (Sasidharan 2000, Tierney et al 1998).

3.3 The Importance of Raising Cultural Sensitivity in Park Planning

Prior to the 1990's, only a few scholars studied ethnic differences relating to leisure preferences in urban parks (Ho, 2005). It has only gained research popularity in the last 20 years, as concerns regarding inequalities surrounding park use participation patterns between the dominant cohort and the emerging ethnic groups have grasped the attention of scholars.

Leonie Sandercock (2003), a prominent urban thinker, addresses planning concerns surrounding the issues of multiculturalism within a Canadian context. Sandercock is a strong believer in participatory planning and engaging the local population within the planning process. Regardless of an individual's level of traditional education, Sandercock claims that an open and transparent planning process allows individuals from different cultural, professional, and educational backgrounds to become 'expert knowers' by sharing their experiences and opinions (Sandercock, 2003).

Garrett Devier, author of *Use of Open Space*, states that the different ways in which ethnic minorities and cultural groups use park settings is increasingly more evident in North American urban neighbourhood parks (Devier, 2005). Collaboratively, park planners and designers need to understand and take into consideration the various cultural uses and preferences when designing parks.

Recently, in the last decade, planning academics have approached this topic with interest and have conducted an array of survey studies to delve deeper into this untouched planning issue (Devier, 2005). The data collected through the studies offer both park planners and designers a way to identify the overlooked preferences and standard barriers when designing and programming park spaces for different cultures (Devier, 2005). Devier asserts that parks are vital neighbourhood spaces, and if successfully planned and designed these spaces hold the capacity of creating a socially and physically inclusive community (Devier, 2005). Therefore, in order for parks to become multifaceted spaces and treat people fairly, it is important that park designs and infrastructure respond to the current cultural milieu and the diverse leisure needs of

the serving community (Devier, 2005). If park spaces do not accommodate or address the needs and issues of the ethno-cultural demographics they will nevertheless become underutilized and hostile spaces, thereby dividing the community (Devier, 2005).

A study conducted in three different American parks stated that similar to the earlier generations of immigrants, today's new immigrants make use of park spaces in way that is culturally familiar (Newall, 1997). New immigrants, especially in the urban environment, have a strong tendency to transfer core cultural patterns from their homeland landscapes onto the parks that they presently use (Newall, 1997). Christopher Alexander, an architectural and environmental theorist, claims that new park designs should embed elements of a broad cross-cultural appeal, allowing the design to resonate across cultural boundaries, to lessen the degree of exclusivity (Alexander, 1977).

3.4 Assessing User Needs

Creating a park or recreational space that integrates the leisure needs of all demographics is a rather difficult task. In Mark Francis's *Urban Open Space: designing for user needs*, it was determined that in order to create a successful public park or recreational space it is a prerequisite for planners to address the issue of user needs (Francis, 2003). A successful park space is one that integrates the needs of all, while at the same time is lively and well-used by the entire community (Francis, 2003).

The current methodologies by which Toronto's parks are planned do not properly assess the user needs of the city's newly emerging ethnically diverse communities. As such, many of the existing urban parks that once catered to the leisure needs of a homogenous user group fail to

prompt the attention of the newer user groups. Occasionally, the ethnically diverse user groups adapt to the space by re-programming the existing infrastructure, such as reconfiguring baseball diamonds to create a cricket pitches (Lister, 2009). As a result of the lack of attention given to user needs, user conflicts arise and parks become a source of contention. Other conflicts stem from the way different cultural groups use open space (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995). Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris's groundbreaking study unveiled the mystery that certain specific ethno-cultural populations have different user needs and demands, a topic that had been ignored and untouched by the planning profession. However on some occasions, conflicts arise over both the scarcity, manipulation, and the passive exclusivity of parks (Loukaitous-Sideris, 1995). According to Stephen Carr, these conflicts that exist between different user groups can at most times be effectively managed through good programming, design, and management (Carr and Lynch, 1981).

According to Francis, various studies have indicated that the concept of design in itself is not sufficient to create a successful park (Francis, 2003). Examples of existing, seemingly well-designed spaces, such as Bryant Park in New York City, ignore the basic principles of user needs and fail in becoming successful park spaces (Francis, 2003). Regardless of the park size, the need to address user needs is a critical factor in effectively designing a functional space. If a space fails to understand and ignores human needs, then it is essentially not well designed (Hester, 1990). Based on the work of the leading park planning academics, although user needs will differ according to the context of the space, there are some basic principles that are common to most types of park spaces.

- Design and management should accurately address user needs for any park space (Francis, 2003).
- The programming of the space is critical to addressing user needs (Francis, 2003).
- Community members' right to access, appropriation, and use must be protected through the design and programming of the space (Francis, 2003).
- Participatory communication is needed to allow users to be directly involved in the design process, and the participation should be real, not token (Hester, 1990; Hart 1997).
- Adaptability and flexibility are key ingredients that should be incorporated into the design (Gehl and Gemoze, 1996).
- Cities and neighbourhoods are never static; ongoing evaluation and redesign are critical to the life and vitality of park space (Cooper Marcus et al., 1998).

All these basic principles can emerge from community participation; engaging and establishing an open dialogue with residents about their recreational preferences and user needs, forms a better connection to both their communities and park space itself (Francis, 2003). William Whyte indicates that, regardless of how prestigious the stakeholders involved in the design and development of parks, the ingredient of public participation is often overlooked and generally results in unsuccessful park spaces; he wrote "It is hard to design a space that will not attract people. What is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished", a result of the contemporary design practices that fail to design according to the user needs of the people that use the space (Whyte, 1979). There is an urgent and compulsory need for planners and designers to identify and understand the user needs of their communities.

3.5 Loose Space

Karen A. Franck and Quentin Steven (2007) claim that parks and other public spaces are becoming 'loose spaces'. As the demographics of the urban environment are changing, people are pursuing a rich variety of activities in urban parks which differ from the originally planned intentions. In order for space to become 'loose', people must acknowledge the possibilities

inherent in the space and “make use of those possibilities for their own ends” (Franck and Steve, 2007, 2) It is the essence of loose spaces that sparks vitality and life within the city environment. Regardless of the parks being planned spaces, every space has the physical and social ability of becoming ‘loose’ through the ways and initiatives of the people that use it.

As Toronto’s population continues to grow more ethnically diverse, its existing park infrastructure that once serviced the Anglophone middle- and working-class neighbourhoods needs to be revamped in order to accommodate the city’s new demographics. Due to this inadequate infrastructure, new ethnic and cultural groups are not able to value or have the ability to establish any sense of attachment to these existing parks. Toronto’s existing urban parks need to be revised and modified with new strategic plans to ensure that the parklands are valued and pleasantly used by all members of the diverse population among its surrounding multicultural communities. At present, some cultural groups are faced with the challenge of manipulating existing park space to accommodate their leisurely activities. According to Lister (2009), the game of cricket has drastically taken over our park spaces; however, appropriate playing fields are not provided, and instead players manipulate the use of both soccer fields and baseball diamonds to accommodate the game (Lister, 2009). Planners need to identify and understand the needs of these growing cultural groups and provide adequate park infrastructure accordingly, as well as foster positive uses and interactions between all groups.

4.0 Methodology

The methodological approaches executed for this study are three-fold including focus groups, key informant interviews, and secondary research all of which proved to be insightful. Through the combination of the three unique methods, a variety of evident themes and needs became apparent, as well as avenues for further exploration. The objective behind choosing these three methods was to collect qualitative data from both the community and professional planners that would provide in-depth data in regards to this study.

4.1 Focus Groups

The first approach utilized was community based ethno-cultural focus groups. Through the guidance and outreach of the Rexdale Community Health Centre (RCHC), three culturally diverse and age-sensitive focus groups were facilitated. The RCHC's health and social promoters offer a variety of social programs to assist new immigrants within the community. Some of these programs provide support in dealing with social, legal, financial, and health related issues. With the assistance of the social coordinator, the opportunity to use sixty minutes of the youth, adult, and senior social programs' time to conduct a focus group in each program and ask questions regarding their interpretation of Rexdale Park was granted. The ethnicity of each participant was noted, and the focus group discussions were recorded to ensure validity of the discussion and comments shared. With the assistance of social and community health promoters at each focus group, language barriers did not become an issue.

The original intent was to conduct community focus groups through the assistance of the predominant culturally specific community associations within Rexdale; however, due to such a

high refusal rate this was not possible. Similarly, in terms of conducting children-centred focus groups, the initial intention was focused on facilitating one focus group with the students of a nearby community elementary school. Due to the unwillingness of these schools, reliance was placed on the RCHC to facilitate and gain insight into a youth focus group.

During the sixty minute focus groups, participants were asked questions regarding their interpretation of Rexdale Park's space. These questions included whether the space satisfies their needs and, if not, what solutions/suggestions they could contribute in order to design a more inclusive space (Refer to Appendix A for focus group questions). In other words, they were asked what elements--feature or component--they would add to the space. Each individual was also asked to describe their best park experience, which would act as a descriptive guideline as to what the focus group desired. Participants in the focus group sessions were completely anonymous and were provided with an understanding of what the study is related to, how their input is relevant, and how this research will affect the planning of future parks. During the sessions the participants were divided into groups based on their ethnic backgrounds. The opportunity to participate in the focus groups was not limited to anyone. Through this, the focus groups acted as a powerful method of evaluating how the park is currently being used, underutilized or manipulated, as well as a way of developing new ideas and strategies towards designing and building more culturally inclusive parks.

4.2 Key Informant Interviews

The second methodological approach was based on key informant interviews. To complement the focus groups, four key informant interviews with both practitioner and academic planners were conducted (Refer to Appendix B for key informant interview questions). Those interviewed included two City of Toronto Park Planners, as well as Professor Nina-Marie Lister and Professor Sandeep Kumar Agrawal from Ryerson University's Urban and Regional Planning faculty. Through these interviews sufficient information was gathered to frame conclusions and recommendations about park planning in a multicultural context. The key informant interviews were essential to this study; they generated discussion, suggestions, and recommendations in relation to the potential changes that planners have the ability to implement to current park spaces, as well as future park designs that take into consideration the recreational needs of the increasingly diverse population.

Planning Practitioners

When interviewing the municipal Park Planners, questions relating to the current practices of developing parks throughout the city were addressed. Inquiries pertained to: how the concept of multiculturalism fits into the practices and policies and whether any supporting documents exist in regards to this issue; how future issues relating to ethnic exclusion within Toronto parks are going to be dealt with; whether future parks are going to be designed to include the notion of multiculturalism; what challenges they have experienced planning parks that cater to diverse groups; and how existing park infrastructure will be changed to the needs of the growing multicultural, were addressed. In asking these questions, the objective was to determine whether ethnic or cultural park preferences are or will be acknowledged within the

municipal planning realm and to establish the parameters of this topic within both existing and future planning policies and practices.

Academic Planners

Professor Nina-Marie Lister is very knowledgeable regarding the topic of creating sustainable urban parks. Throughout her lectures, in both landscape urbanism and urban design, she specifically comments on the inadequacies of Toronto parks, and how planners fail to compose parks that fully encapsulate the needs of Toronto's multicultural composition. During this interview, questions were asked in regards to the following: the importance of parks; the historical practices of designing and developing parks within the urban environment; the current practices and procedures in designing and implementing neighbourhood parks; how Toronto's parks fail to satisfy the recreational needs of its ethnic population; how these spaces are being manipulated by different cultural groups to accommodate their native sports; and what planners can do in order to create parks for a multicultural population.

Professor Sandeep Kumar Agrawal is an expert in the field of multiculturalism. During our interview, questions regarding how different cultures interpret park spaces, and how parks can act as spaces of integration rather than exclusivity, were addressed. These interviews were a vital component of the study and assisted in establishing the academic, policy, and procedural aspects of this topic. All of the interviews were not structured, as the conversations were led by open-ended questions. This resulted in the opportunity to explore and probe new ideas and issues that may not have been anticipated in the initial planning of both the interviews and this study.

4.3 Secondary Research

The third approach was managed by examining and analyzing the City of Toronto's current park planning process and policies, such as the recent City of Toronto's Park, Forestry and Recreation department's new development of a City-Wide Parks Plan Staff Report, as well as the 2004 Common Grounds Report, all of which are key parts of the City's current park planning policies. This work was complemented by conducting secondary research of literature pertaining to park designs and multiculturalism, community development, participatory planning, and traditional means of park planning.

4.4 Limitations

It is important to note the study's limitations; limitations that do not necessarily tamper with the validity of the study but rather should be viewed as fruitful avenues for future research. The first limitation deals with time constraints. The study was conducted over a three-month period, and the field observations were completed during the winter months and as a result were limited. A large portion of the three-month study period was allocated to gain ethics approval.

Also, this research pertains to an emerging discussion in the planning realm, and there is a limited amount of both scholarly literature and municipal policy regarding this particular issue. The case study approach that was taken in this project focused solely on one park, resulting in what some might deem a limited and narrow scope because it does not take into consideration other neighbourhood parks.

As well, the focus groups did not accurately depict the desires of all residents of the area. Although the participants were from an array of cultural backgrounds, this study does not

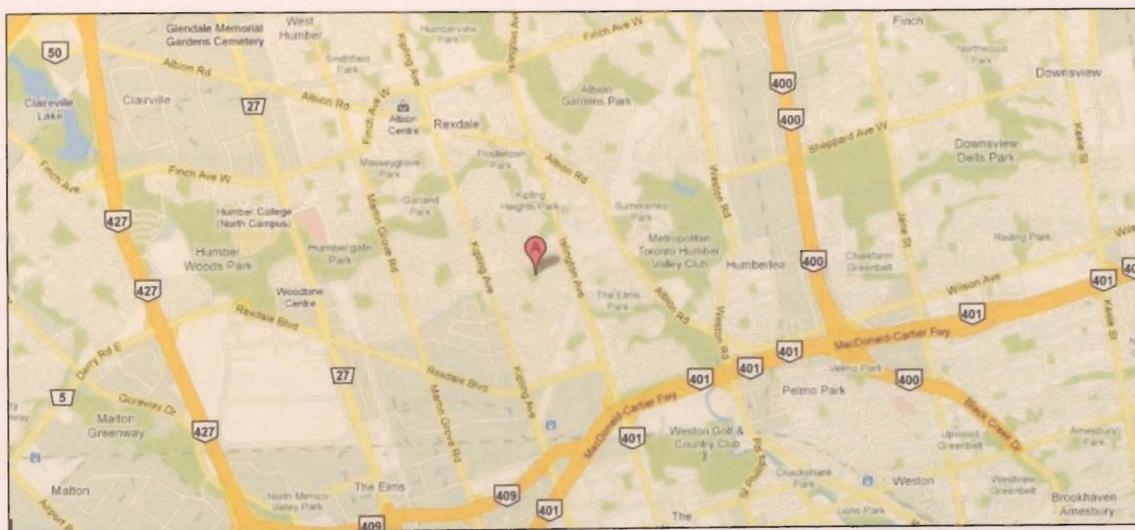
necessarily touch upon the desires of all the ethnicities of the community. Although these limitations are minor they may become avenues for further research and exploration.

The purpose of this research is to enhance the awareness of both planners and the planning realm of the changing recreational patterns in multicultural cities and communities. As such, this study can be used to plan and design suitable park settings that cater to the specific needs of the adjacent community. However, the recommendations provided in the study are not only limited to the use and application of planners but can be distributed throughout many different municipal departments to seek out methods to accommodate diverse communities.

5.0 Case Study of Rexdale Park

The Rexdale Community is located in the north-west corner of Toronto. Originally named Rexdale-Thistletown, it is currently most often referred to as Rexdale, or as Etobicoke North (Refer to the A symbol in Figure 1 for the park location) (Planner 1, Personal Communication). The City of Etobicoke was formerly one of the six boroughs (Toronto, York, North York, Etobicoke, Scarborough, and East York) that comprised the Metro Region prior to amalgamation in 1998. Rexdale was named after local developer Rex Heslop, who initially developed the original suburb north of Highway 401 and east of Kipling Avenue (Planner 1, Personal Communication).

Figure 1



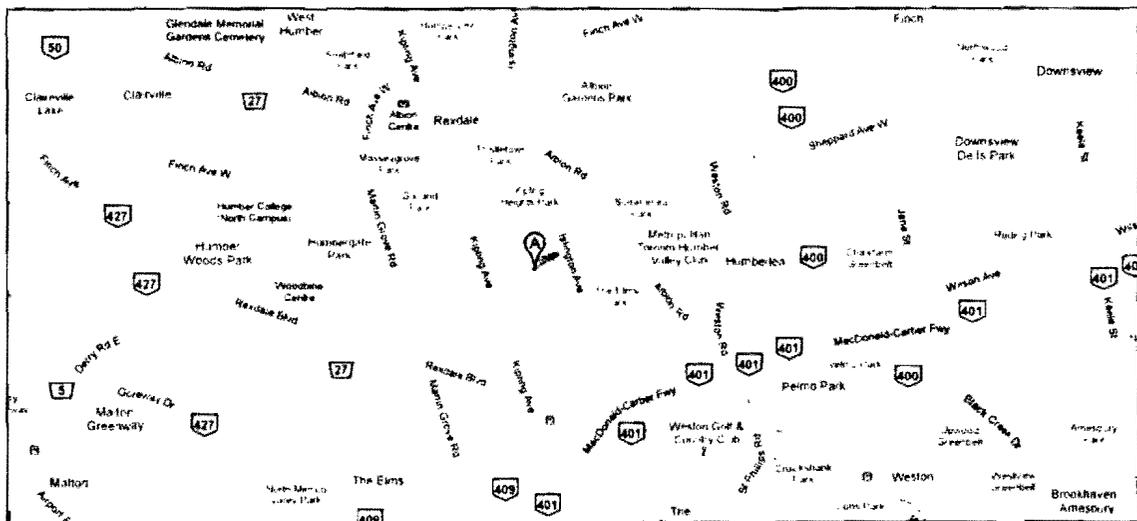
(Google Maps, 2010)

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develop in the late 1950's, it was evident that space needed to be preserved in the neighbourhood for recreational purposes. During the 1960's the Borough of Etobicoke planned and designed Rexdale Park to satisfy the leisure needs of the community (Planner 1, Personal Communication). At that time the Rexdale Community was comprised of a large English and Scottish population, which reflected the overall demographic norm of Toronto at that time (Planner 1, Personal Communication). The design and space programming of Rexdale Park reflected the user needs of the homogenous Anglophone user group (Planner 1, Personal Communication). As the City's demographics and immigration patterns changed, Rexdale became one of Toronto's most ethnically diverse neighbourhoods, with a large number of South Asians, West Indians, Spanish, and Black residents (Refer to Figure 2) (Stats Canada, 2006). However the design and programming of the park has yet to be revitalized to accommodate the leisure needs of the new emerging demographic, and as a result the current park space is rather underutilized.

Figure 2 – Rexdale neighbourhood's demographic composition

Visible Minority Population Characteristics	Rexdale Neighbourhood (CT 0244.02)
Total Population	5,915
Total Visible Minority Population	4,325
Black	2,110
Chinese	115
South Asian	640
Filipino	315
Latin American	475
South Asian	130

(Stats Canada, 2006)

The current park space is of a relatively good size (Refer to Figure 3). However there seems to be a lack of gathering spaces, benches, and adaptable space. Presently, there is a jungle gym, swings, a path, a baseball diamond, and a rather small area devoted to the preservation of the natural landscape. According to a *City of Toronto's Staff Report Action Required: Development of a City-wide Parks Plan*, Rexdale Park is considered to be a neighbourhood park, described as "a small park offering a range of features and recreational amenities oriented to local users" (City of Toronto, 2010). This description provided by the City of Toronto's General Manager of Parks, Forestry, and Recreation, does not accurately represent Rexdale Park, for it does not provide a range of features and recreational amenities. In fact, the infrastructure that exists fails to respond to the palette of uses appropriate to the location and the community's diversity. Figures 4-9 depict how the space is designed and the lack of adequate seating and gathering facilitates, as well as how the space is underutilized. Although the pictures were taken during the winter months, focus group participants stated that the park is usually empty. Rexdale Park is only one of Toronto's many parks that fail to satisfy the needs of its surrounding multicultural community.

Figure 3 – Rexdale Park



(Google Maps, Edited by Author, 2010)

Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



6.0 Current Park Planning Policies and Practices

Toronto's current system of parks is comprised of approximately 8,000 hectares of public parkland representing 1,500 parks and over 225 trails (City of Toronto, 2010). The municipality is home to an array of cultural groups, and its rich multicultural diversity is expressed by more than approximately 200 distinct ethnic origins (City of Toronto, 2010). In the 2006 census, it was calculated that over thirty percent of the City's residents indicted another home language than English or French, while forty-seven percent of Toronto's population reported themselves as part of a visible minority (Stats Canada, 2006). This clearly indicates that there is a need to respond to and celebrate the diversity of needs in such a multicultural city.

Currently, the City of Toronto does not abide by any form of park planning policy regarding the issue of multiculturalism. As per a discussion with a City of Toronto park planner, the municipality has not yet implemented a policy or planning framework to guide planners in creating more culturally sensitive and inclusive parks, because multiculturalism is only one of the numerous issues that are involved with developing neighbourhood parks. Presently, new park development in Toronto is development driven. A sizable percentage of funding for the development of new parks is raised through the use of Development Charges, the *Planning Act's Section 37: Density Bonusing* and *Section 32 subsection 4.6: Parkland Dedication* (Planner 1, 2010). Park projects that are implemented through the use of Development Charges and/or Section 37 monies are overseen and designed by landscape architect consultants that only communicate with a selected group of community stakeholders, rather than the community itself.

In 2004, the City of Toronto approved a strategic plan for park planning called *Our Common Ground*. It established a direction for the future course for planning parks. *Our Common Ground* was one of the initial park plans that incorporated the issue of planning for diversity, although the plan failed to delve deeper into the subject, it still brought attention to the issue. As highlighted by a City of Toronto's park planner, multiculturalism was only one of the many different ingredients that are called for in the receipt for successful park planning; therefore, it is hard to single this particular element out.

Subsequently, in January 2010, a staff report was issued throughout the City of Toronto in regards to the City of Toronto's Parks, Forestry and Recreation Department's new Development of a City-Wide Parks Plan. The intention of the plan was to seek Council's approval for a multi-year park plan, which was based on a set of identified Guiding Principles. It is evident that the "Our Common Grounds" Plan was used as a stepping stone for the new city-wide park plan, as it builds upon and develops a greater understanding of the issues involved in developing, revitalizing, sustaining, and designing parks in today's Toronto.

According to the staff report the new plan identifies the need to articulate the diverse needs for park-related services and programs in many of its multicultural communities; however, it fails to acknowledge the necessity to revamp existing park design and infrastructure to satisfy the leisure needs of the multicultural residents (City of Toronto, 2010). In light of this, the plan also fails to provide suggestions and guidelines for planners to work with while planning and designing parks for culturally diverse neighbourhoods. To ensure both that the community's voice is integrated into the planning process and that the final result is to successfully create a

culturally inclusive park. Under the section that pertains to planning for a diverse population, it only briefly touches upon the matter by stating:

Celebrating the city's diverse, multicultural city population:

- Recognize the needs and cultural customs of the city's diverse, multicultural population with specific neighbourhoods across the city through an inclusive planning and designing process.
- Ensure that programming and events reflect the diverse population (City of Toronto, 2010, 6).

Although the specifications *do* briefly acknowledge the need to provide more culturally inclusive park spaces, the plan fails to delve deeper by providing certain policy provisions that enable planners to ensure that the aforementioned does in fact occur. The City of Toronto must acknowledge the need to create policies and planning frameworks that deal with the issue of multiculturalism within the context of park planning. If these are devised correctly, Toronto has the capacity to plan and design truly culturally inclusive pluralist parks where everyone is able to participate equally.

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7.0 Results

The three methodological approaches to this study proved to be insightful, as each brought a fresh perspective that strengthened the study. The use of focus groups allowed participants to express their concerns and desires freely, while also welcoming the opportunity for individuals to discuss and interact among others and build upon each other's input. Since this subject is an emerging issue in the planning realm, key informant interviews acted as a strategic method of gathering important information from trained professionals that have access to the most recent literature and examples regarding the topic. The results of both the focus groups and key informant interviews were then supplemented with the secondary literature and policy research conducted.

7.1 Focus Groups Results

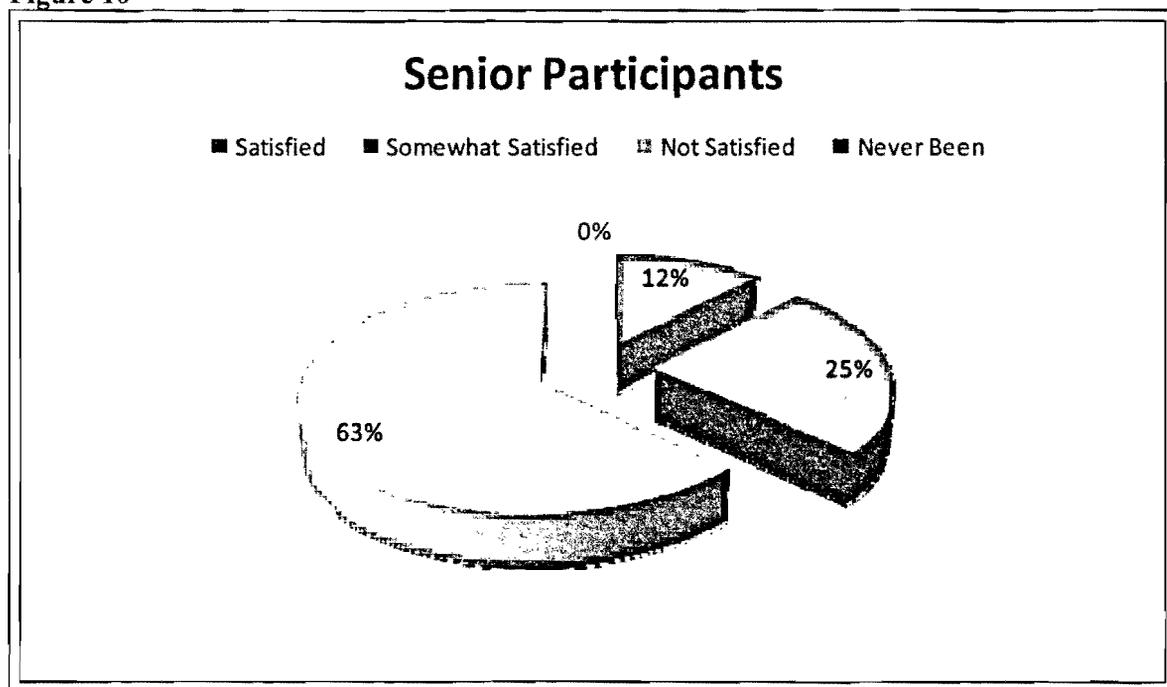
Facilitating the focus groups in the three different cohorts also provided insightful perspectives in regards to how different ethnicities use park spaces. The senior focus group was comprised of sixteen participants from an array of cultural backgrounds such as Peru, Ecuador, Argentina, Somalia, Cuba, Chile, Ghana, Columbia, and India. Similarly, the adult focus group was composed of ten participants from India, Somalia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Chile, and Jamaica. The final focus group conducted consisted of seven youth participants from a variety of cultural backgrounds which included Argentina, India, Somalia, Trinidad, Poland, and Paraguay.

When asked to provide thoughts regarding their general impressions of Rexdale Park, the majority of participants were unimpressed with the space and the recreational infrastructure it offered. Regardless of age, the majority of participants found the space to be uninviting. Many stated that the park contained inadequacies such as an insufficient amount of gathering spaces

that includes benches and tables. The youth and adult participants condemned the park for not being more adaptable, commenting on the lack of programmed space. As well, the youth participants simultaneously found flaws in the way the park was designed because it fails to provide the opportunity to manipulate the space to accommodate other sporting programs, such as basketball and tennis.

In terms of understanding how satisfied the participants are with the existing park's current physical structure, programming, and design, the results were common. Figures 10-12 breakdown the numbers of participants of each focus group to whom are satisfied, somewhat satisfied, not satisfied, and non-participants.

Figure 10



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Figure 10

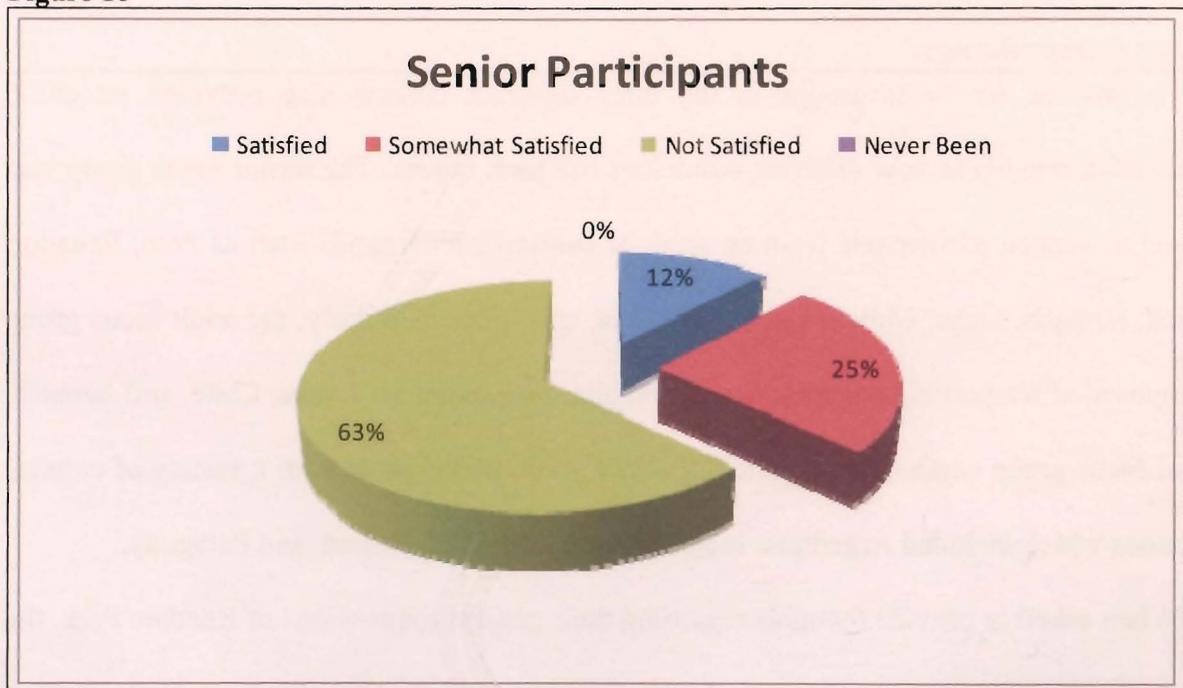


Figure 11

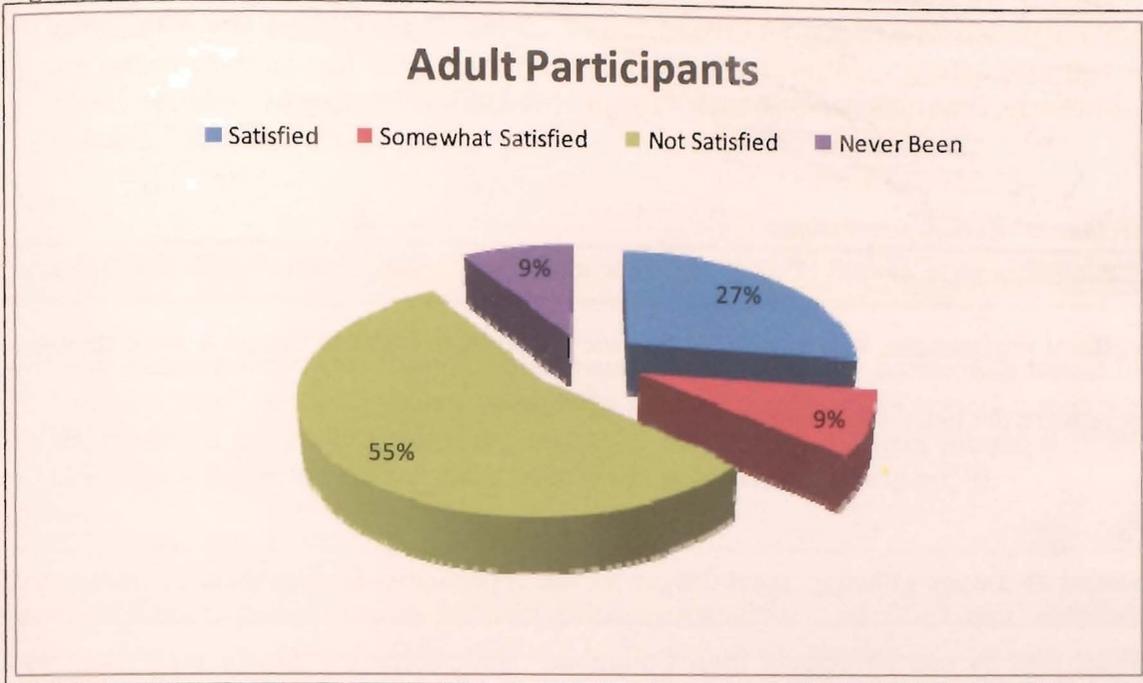
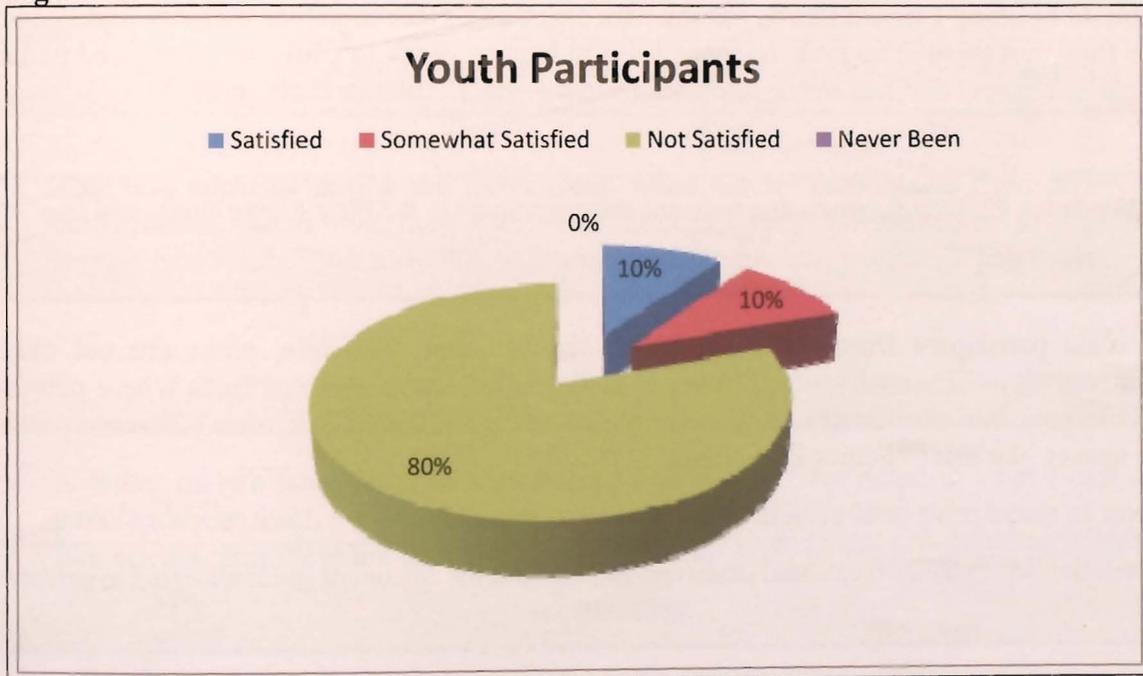


Figure 12



These figures clearly indicate that Rexdale Park fails to satisfy the recreational needs of its community members. The majority of senior and adult participants claimed that they rarely use the park. Similarly, the youth participants hardly made use of the space.

7.2 Participants' Recommendations

Participants were candid in their recommendations and stated suggestions that pertained to their cultural preferences. When asked to provide solutions in order to design a more inclusive space, these were the listed suggestions:

Seniors

Recommendation #1: Design gathering spaces that can provide opportunities for families and friends to gather

- As illustrated by one participant from Columbia, “Back home my family used parks as a celebration space. On holidays, birthdays, or special events we would have big family parties and picnics in the park. We no longer think of the party in that way.” (Senior Participant, 13). While also touched upon by another participant from Chile who stated, “I live in an apartment building I would like to use the park space as a place to gather with my family and share food, but there is no table or space for it to happen. Back in Chile we often used parks as a gathering spot and had many celebrations in the space” (Senior Participant, 5).

Recommendation #2: Design spaces that welcome the opportunity to facilitate festive events and live performances.

- One male participant from Chile alluded to the fact that “in Chile, parks are not only considered as recreational space, but are also viewed as social places. Places where people gather to socialize over a table game and not just a baseball game. Why don’t Toronto parks have spaces like this?”(Senior Participant, 11).

Recommendation #3: Enhance the natural landscape and increase the amount of space allocated to gardens and nature

- A Punjabi focus group participant indicated, “I like to go for walks and reflect in the nature and rest in the gardens. In India there are a lot of beautiful parks that have wonderful flowers everywhere and there I am able to relax and reflect on my life. The gardens in our local parks are not as exciting and tempting to visit and spend time within. I really miss that about my home country. Maybe we should bring in flowers and natural elements from different cultures.” (Senior Participant, 5).

Recommendation #4: Allocate and designate certain areas of the park as “women only” spaces

- The female participants from Somalia stated on more than one occasion “I would like to see “women only” spaces. I cannot go to parks and completely enjoy myself if men are sharing the space. In our culture, when we are out in public women cannot mingle with other men. Often back home, we are separated from the men.” (Senior Participant, 9).

Recommendation #5: Design elements that bring people together (cafes, gathering spaces, beautiful gardens, etc.)

Adults

Recommendation #1: Provide more space dedicated to a variety of sporting activities

- This was apparent during the focus group when several participants from different ethnic backgrounds stated that they wanted different sporting infrastructure to facilitate their recreational needs, such as basket ball courts, cricket pitches, and bocce ball courts.

Recommendation #2: Design a flexible space that permits for adaptability

- A father of two from India indicated that “I always feel restricted in what I can do in the park. I want to teach my children how to play sports that have long been a part of my culture, like cricket. But there are no fields available in the park, so we just make do with the open space.” (Adult Participant, 6).

Recommendation #3: Increase the amount of seating and gathering spaces within the park

- A participant from Argentina encouraged an increase in spaces that bring people together. He asserted, “Where I come from parks are spaces that allow friends and family to come together. But parks in Toronto don’t really have these spaces available so it limits my time within the space. I would like to see spaces where people can interact with each other. Spaces like game tables or tables to sit and have a coffee. That is one thing I miss about parks in Argentina” (Adult Participant, 8).

Recommendation #4: Enhance the natural landscape and increase the amount of space allocated to gardens and nature

- Provide the opportunity and allocation of space for community gardens, as highlighted by one participant from Jamaica. She stated, “I don’t have a backyard, but I love to garden and grow my own vegetables as I did back in home. Maybe the City could spare space for community gardens, I could use the space more often because right now I don’t.” (Adult Participant, 6).

Recommendation #5: Incorporate the element of public art to commemorate cultural heritage

- One respondent insisted on parks becoming educational and social spaces by stating, “I think we should have some form of public art that displays the heritage of different cultures, that way we can learn about and interact with people from different backgrounds.” (Adult Participant, 7).

Recommendation 6#: Allocate and designate certain areas of the park as “women only” spaces

Youth

Recommendation #1: Design spaces that can be manipulated to facilitate a number of sports

- One youth from Paraguay stated, “I wish we could design a space that could be turned into different sporting fields. When I am at the park with my family we usually play soccer. But when I am at the park with my friends we usually play cricket, soccer, or basket ball.” (Youth Participant, 3).

7.3 Results from Key Informant Interviews

Both the practicing and academic planner interviews alluded to the idea of changing the methodology in which parks are planned and designed by within the City of Toronto. The planning process needs to be responsive to the actual needs of the multicultural community, perhaps by instituting a forum for discussion that can act as a framework for implementation and to understand what it means to serve a multicultural population. However, planners must first acknowledge the fact that the traditional methods of planning and designing parks have in the past inherently excluded some individuals from participating in the space. Thus, by integrating the community in an extensive two-way communicative engagement process, both planners and the community can engage in meaningful conversations regarding how they envision the space, identify their user needs, and attempt to resolve conflicts that surrounds the landscape, all of which can prove to be a more effective method for planning and designing a successful and sustainable inclusive park.

There seems to be an agreement among all the planners that a shift needs to occur from the traditional design framework into a more democratic design movement, which is embedded in the belief of “loose space.” The “loose space” school of thought believes that unstructured park space allows individuals with differing recreational preferences the ability to adapt to the space. In our interview Lister stated “loose space” welcomes those who have different recreational needs (Lister, 2010). Similarly, the children who participated in the youth focus

groups stated that they would like to see parks designed in a way that would allow the space to be manipulated to facilitate a number of sports.

Layering of programs was expressed as another possible solution to planning and designing parks for ethnically diverse communities. It provides an opportunity for a park space to facilitate various sports because the materials and boards that different sporting infrastructure is built out of is interchangeable, allowing different groups to play their favoured activities. Lister said, rather than programming solely for specific sports in parks, layering of programs grants both the municipality and residents an opportunity to engage in the park life. The youth participants requested for park spaces to have the ability to be manipulated into multiple recreational uses, and thus the layering of programs allows parks to provide a combination of a variety of active and passive activities.

8.0 Discussion and Recommendations

Neighbourhood parks are planned and designed to provide a useful function in the residential areas of the city. However, attaining an understanding of the community's perception and needs of local parks has rarely been contributed to the actual planning process of these spaces. Presumably, if planners were to plan and design according to a communal understanding, perhaps they may have the capacity to formulate a more successful concept of planning and therefore design parks better tailored to the cultural needs of the community.

As Toronto's urban core continues to grow denser and the city begins to intensify itself, neighbourhood parks will become critical amenities serving the same purpose as the backyard. Therefore, there exists a strong need to determine how to create a space that is pluralist and satisfies the leisure needs of the city's multicultural population. Planners need to discover a method of establishing a meaningful dialogue with the different cultures of the urban environment and in turn conjure an idea of what kind of parks and open spaces they would prefer to have in their residential milieu.

As discussed in the literature review, the planning of neighbourhood parks has been designed to suit the recreational needs of the dominant Anglophone demographic. With a complete shift in both immigration patterns and demographics, Anglophones are no longer the dominant cohort. It became evident through the focus group participants' perceptions of Rexdale Park that planners have failed to answer the question regarding how different cultures perceive existing neighbourhood parks and the relative importance of the different functions of the area.

Joardar Sourodyudti (1975) recognizes the need to understand the cultural user needs of the community, stating:

Planners' attempt to provide these spaces, no matter how noble, may be appreciated only when their value judgements on the importance of these roles reconcile with the actual environmental and recreational preferences of the community. The contention here is that there has been little attempt, in our present approach to planning and designing of neighbourhood parks, to understand cultural recreational preferences (Sourodyudti, 1975, 5).

Low, Taplin, and Scheld draw parallels to Sourodyudti by claiming that planners can no longer provide park spaces that do not reflect the cultural milieu that it serves, in order to plan spaces that are more responsive planners must plan according to culturally sensitive guidelines (Low, Taplin, and Scheld, 2005). In order to minimize the contention referred to by Sourodyudti planners must:

In order to make decisions that sustains cultural and social diversity, planners need to accommodate the differences in the ways social and ethnic groups use and value parks. Contemporary historic preservation should not solely concentrate on restoring the scenic features without also planning facilitates and diversions that attract people of different ethnicities. It is important that planners identify symbolic ways of communicating cultural meanings to foster place attachment and promote cultural diversity (Low, Taplin, and Scheld, 2005, 4).

For decades, the ideology of park planning has been entrenched with the cultural values of the white middle-to-upper-middle class, without consideration of what could possibly be relevant to the other cultural groups of the community (Low, 2005). The idea of rational comprehensive planning that employs a 'top-down' approach has been the favoured methodology of planning in the past, where the elites and professionals dictate what ought to happen to an urban space, regardless as to whether or not their image of an ideal urban park landscape and design

corresponded to the needs and desires of the local community members. In *Rethinking Urban Parks: Public Space and Cultural Diversity* Low, Taplin, and Scheld address this issue, arguing:

[L]ocal cultural values do not necessarily match the values of the professionals who are planning and making decisions about renovations and financial investment in the park's future. Relying on professional expertise rather than taking seriously cultural values about park resources reinforces the traditional inequality of power relations and exacerbates race and cultural conflicts already in evidence (Low, Taplin, and Scheld, 2005, 16).

Historically, planners have been acutely unaware of how to service ethnically diverse communities. There is a pressing concern in the urban planning field to plan parks that represent and satisfy the leisure needs of the city's multicultural facet. Planners must establish a planning framework that allows them to understand the needs and desires of the culturally diverse community.

8.1 Creating an Inclusive Process

Existing parks are failing to satisfy the leisure needs of Toronto's diverse communities, this is especially evident through the data collected in all three of the focus groups. A sizable percentage of participants indicated that Rexdale Park failed to fulfil their recreational needs, due to a lack of key factors such as: gathering spaces, cultural sensitive spaces, adaptability, and garden spaces. But through new strategic means of facilitating community engagement, planners hold the ability to actively engage and harness the participation of different cultures by granting them the opportunity to attain stewardship of their own park designs. Similar to Sandercock, Shakir argues that, according to the planning process, refugees and immigrants are often regarded as victims in need of assistance, rather than knowledge producers (Shakir, 2010).

Refugees and immigrants are vital sources of untapped knowledge and inherent skills, many of whom have an education and expertise from their home countries, and can hold the potential of exposing planners to the recreational and park preferences of culturally diverse communities. By providing immigrants and refugees with meaningful avenues to express their views and needs, planners have the opportunity to reflect upon the current planning methods and to acknowledge where cultural and social biases exist. In a similar vein Sandercock argues that, individuals from different and distinct backgrounds are knowledge producers in the planning process, whether that is the planning professional or the newly landed refugee (Sandercock, 2003). Sandercock's point was evident during the focus groups, because regardless of the participants' difficulties with speaking English many of their suggestions, concerns, and ideas pertaining to the park space were insightful and brought forth fruitful avenues for further research and consideration. If culturally diverse communities continue to be excluded from both the planning process and the space itself, there is no doubt that it will ultimately lead to environmental and social unrest.

As previously discussed in the literature review and readdressed by interviewee Lister, the traditional means of planning parks is failing to satisfy the needs of Toronto's multicultural community. According to Lister, the two fastest growing sports in Toronto are soccer and cricket; however, there are only 38 cricket pitches in the urban boundaries while there are over 100 baseball diamonds that are comparatively nowhere near as in demand as the cricket pitches (City of Toronto, 2002). It is evident through the interviews with City of Toronto planners and through the shortfall of pertinent planning policy that there is a lack of awareness in light of planning parks for diverse interests. Through the interviews with the two City of Toronto

planners, it was evident that the City of Toronto Planning Department planners are inclined to discourage the element of public communication and input. One planner in particular stated that planners only collaborate with community stakeholders in term of gathering input for park designs. As well, engaging with the community itself is frowned upon because it is believed that the community only provides the staff with unrealistic wishes, which was not evident throughout the focus groups. Unfortunately planners are forced to uphold a neutral position whereby only planning for the 'public's interest'. Yet, as the urban demographics shift there is no longer such thing as one 'public interest'. Planners' neutral mantra is no longer a sustainable framework in planning parks, as their neutrality completely excludes individuals from the park spaces. The entire planning process and ideology needs to be transformed--with special consideration given to the notion of planning for diverse groups and needs, otherwise the City will not be suitable for these groups to live.

The most contemporary issue regarding park development and design concerns the idea of forming a democratic movement within the planning process that would provide and welcome those who have different recreational needs with a platform to voice their ideas and desires. Extensive and continuous community participation is vital to the success of creating a park that is both successful at satisfying the recreational needs of a multicultural population and at establishing an inclusive space that forms a community identity and togetherness. Courtney Knapp from Project for Public Space (PPS) argues that community-based planning is one method for "tackling issues of underrepresentation and sub cultural groups" (Knapp, 2007, 2). Knapp continues by stating that "community-based communication has the ability to seek and

readdress the monolithic and often top-down approach to planning by bringing those historically excluded voices into the decision-making process” (Knapp, 2007, 2).

Participatory planning can act as a mechanism for empowering culturally diverse communities to contribute and make decisions in the development and design process of their neighbourhood parks, rather than deferring entirely to professional planners. Alas, generating discussion between planners and culturally diverse communities is a two-way street. In terms of outreach, planners can no longer simply advertise community meetings and workshops, but instead must welcome the insights of the community members so that discussions can be free of scrutiny. Planners must begin implementing more proactive and context-specific strategies to attain the residents’ trust and input, such as being actively involved within the community (Knapp, 2007).

Interestingly, Luigi Ferrara, the Director of Arts & Design at George Brown College, believes that the current state of Toronto park facilities fails to encourage community cohesiveness because the infrastructure only serves a particular cohort of the neighbourhood’s demographics (Ferrara, 2010). Historically, parks were planned and designed according to a particular standardization that specifically indicates the appearance and built form of the space. The majority of the City’s parks were designed approximately 50 to 60 years ago and, according to Ferrara, now is the time to revitalize and improve existing parks in accordance to the needs of the community. As further highlighted by Ferrara at the City of Toronto’s Parks Plans Media Advisory, “Every 50 to 60 years there is a great need to improve and revitalize infrastructure, which also includes the ‘soft’ infrastructure within parks” (Ferrara, 2010). Ferrara’s point holds

truth in regards to Rexdale Park, the space was built in the 1960's and is now failing to satisfy the shifting needs of its community. As demonstrated by the focus group participants, the design and soft infrastructure within Rexdale Park needs to be improved in order to suit their needs. An integral part of the revitalization process is to discover a new methodology which unleashes a transformative engaging power.

It is estimated that by 2031, 63% of Toronto's population will be comprised of visible minorities, and as a result it is essential that planners begin to refashion the public engagement process to one that is built upon citizen energy and input (Stats Canada, 2006). Ferrara argues that a new consultation framework can emerge through forming partnerships between trusted community agencies, schools, or religious institutions (Ferrara, 2010). By establishing these partnership relationships the City of Toronto can act as a facilitating catalyst rather than a service provider.

8.2 Establishing Partnerships

In culturally diverse neighbourhoods it would be wise to establish a Park Improvement Area (PIA), which would act similar to a Business Improvement Association. This partnership would be formed between the diverse local retail economy and the residents of the community, while functioning as a micro way of organizing and lobbying for park needs, as well as a method of leveraging funding for park revitalization within the community. Parks are where the connectivity and sense of community is established. As such, with the formation of the PIA, the City of Toronto would need to forfeit their guardianship of the space to the association. According to Ferrera, many of Toronto's existing parks are portrayed by community members as

being more like private rather than public, which in turn directly affects how often the park is used (Ferrera, 2010). This partnership methodology would grant the community the capacity to take ownership of the space. The process of creating a successful and inclusive park setting is not ultimately about the end result but rather about the capability of building a community throughout the process.

The City of Toronto has the ability to prolonging the implementation of certain issues, while also seemingly portraying certain subject matters as being impossible through their false policy frameworks and constant study reviews. Yet, as the demographics continue to diversify, it is vital that the city begins to adapt to a culture of accomplishing specific tasks, especially those of which pertain to planning and designing parks for an array of cultural backgrounds.

8.3 Creating Inclusive Spaces

Participants of the adult and senior focus groups, in conjunction with the work of Low et al. (2005), Knapp (2007), and Agrawal (2010), believe that in order to make a space that is pluralistic and accommodating to all, the space must incorporate natural elements that echo home patterns of all the residents. Of course, parks cannot become over planned spaces, but they should be designed with elements that incorporate cultural and spatial resonance. If devised correctly, it would become a welcoming space for a diverse group of individuals to participate in the recreational programs offered, as well as just a spiritual space where one can go to reflect. As highlighted by Knapp, “When people see their values, preferences and culturally specific elements reflected in a place, they feel welcomed. No community group’s history should be erased from the physical and cultural reality of a public space” (Knapp, 2007, 3). By incorporating elements that reflect the cultural needs and preferences of different ethnicities,

people would value both the space and interactions that occur within it. As Toronto neighbourhoods become more diverse, such as Rexdale, park design warrants special consideration, especially in terms of understanding the needs of different groups and strategically incorporating those into successful park design that effectively fosters a sense of community while also fulfilling the recreational needs of the entire community and not just a particular segment group.

Jane Farrow, a local Toronto community activist, states that although the purposes of plans are well-intended, they become restrictive and thus a neighbourhood empowerment model should be considered. The neighbourhood empowerment model is a method that would effectively allow council to actively engage the surrounding neighbourhood in creating spaces that fundamentally reflect the needs of their community. According to Farrow, a sizable portion of existing Toronto parks do not portray a sense of public communal space, as they feel more like rule driven private municipal spaces. At times residents express some hesitation in using parks because of uncertainties relating to what are permissible uses within the space, such as what activities are allowed and which are in need of a permit, which also mirrored issues raised in the focus groups. Focus group participants were unaware of whether or not certain activities were permissible within Rexdale Park, solely because the park infrastructure did not accommodate those specific uses. One participant from Chile stated that she was unsure of whether she had the capacity to host a family gathering within the space, because the park did not provide the needed infrastructure to support the activity. Parks that are planned and designed correctly, and have the capacity to cater to the pluralist needs of the community can become a

magnet for community well-being, as it becomes a manifestation that reflects local and cultural history, fosters social interaction, and politically engages individuals within their neighbourhood. Parks are ultimately about people, however through typical excluding practices these spaces present the impression that they are ultimately about a certain group of people.

Claire Hopkinson, the Executive Director of Toronto's Arts Council, considers park spaces as hubs of creativity and culture, in which neighbourhoods should be granted inclusive access within to share their rich histories and stories. The concept of public art that commemorates and expresses the cultural diversity of the neighbourhood was raised in the focus groups. The focus participants strongly believed that such public art warrants special consideration, because it holds the ability for the culture of different ethnicities to be reflected in the space and allow individuals to form a sense of attachment to the space, as well as an understanding of one another. The concept of art in the park as a comprehensive inclusionary measure holds the potential of slowly diminishing cultural barriers that were once evident in a community, by potentially reducing the level of animosity between different cultures that share neighbourhood parks. This is because the introduction of art evolves into a learning experience, while also holding the ability of decreasing any forms of community tension.

8.4 Culturally Inclusive Design

The traditional rationale of planning parks and catering to multicultural communities were based on standardizations, which ultimately resulted in developing similar parks. Standardizations are doomed to fail because one design and planning concept cannot be applied to different communities as well as be expected to show successful results. Parks can no longer

be standardized space, steering from the standard park nomenclature to create different park settings can contribute to the overall cultural vibrancy of the City.

As the cultural diversity of different communities grow, the planning process and designs of parks must differ according to the cultural needs and desires of the community. Results from both the focus groups and the interviews indicated that parks should not be overly structured or standardized spaces. However, a sizable portion of the focus group participants, especially in the senior cohort, specified that planners should plan and design parks that integrate an array of uses through elements that bring people together. According to Ho, the most meaningful public spaces are those that strike a balance between “official and vernacular uses” (Ho, 2005) by incorporating various types of activities while still simultaneously allowing the design to remain flexible enough to accommodate the values and preferences of different cultural groupings as they evolve over time.

Flexible park design allows for a variety of recreational needs to partake in the same space. Agrawal believes that through the provision of flexible park design, municipal park planners have the capacity to create a space that is inclusive to all, while also developing community cohesiveness (Agrawal, 2010). Layering of programs is similar to flexible programs because it leaves room for adaptation. Lister, an advocate of flexible park designs, points out that in recent park design competitions the concept of layering of programming has been the vital component to the design (Lister, 2010). The layering of programming provides the opportunity to create space that is adaptable and permits residents to manipulate the area to suit their recreational needs.

8.5 Recommendations

Unlike the perceived belief of the planners in terms of engaging the community, the thoughts and input collected throughout the focus groups did not seem to be a ridiculous wish list, but rather logical ideas and features that could positively affect the community cohesion and participation within the space. Disconnects between the planners' 'norms' and the communities' home country cultural practices do exist. This was especially evident through the focus groups where the female participants from Somalia expressed hesitation to partake in Toronto park settings because of the lack of designated 'women only' spaces. In some regions of the Middle East women are only given permission to participate in certain public activities that do not co-exist with the male gender. Thus parks are a place of refuge for these women, suggesting that if these women are restricted from participating solely because our planners are not taking into consideration their cultural needs than surely something is lacking in the current planning process. This problem was articulated perfectly by a Middle Eastern participant who stated, "I want to go to the park, but there is no space for women. In my culture women cannot interact with men in public spaces, women and men have separate space in parks in my country." Consequently, based on the research, focus groups, and interviews, these recommendations will provide planners with new strategies to plan and design parks for a multicultural population:

- Form a democratic movement within the planning process that would provide those who have different recreational needs with a platform to voice their ideas and desires. Planners must begin to acknowledge that the concept of the "public interest" has a new meaning, whereby planners must begin to plan and design for a multitude of interests. The entire planning process needs an overhaul and must begin to discuss the concept of multiculturalism and tailor the park design according to the diverse needs of the community. Planners need to observe and understand the user needs of the community. This can be

conducted through public consultation that allows residents to inform planners of their recreational preferences. In addition, continuous audits of a community's shifting demographics can be performed, in order to understand how these new demographics use the space and what their recreational preferences are. Furthermore, planners can audit park spaces to analyze and determine the level of use, accessibility and community perspectives. This evaluation would examine the parks deficiencies, whether in terms of function, design and existing infrastructure, location, or accessibility.

- Planners have to generate a two-way discussion, where planners need to begin to implement more proactive and context-specific strategies to attain both the residents' trust and input. The traditional rationale of park planning is no longer a sustainable methodology as it continues to plan from a "neutral" standpoint, which only further promotes exclusion rather than inclusion. In order to do so, planners must work within the community and establish a trustful rapport. Two-way discussions can be formed through both public consultation and workshops that allow residents to freely share their input and concerns regarding the space. Planners must then incorporate residents' expressed views in tweaking, revitalizing, and planning spaces to accommodate the community's shifting recreational preferences.
- Do not overly plan and design parks. Regardless of a planner's preconceived notion of the community's unrealistic requests. Residents only request changes that will increase park participation and community cohesion. During the focus groups, participants' requests were effective and manageable.
- Establish a Park Improvement Association between the local diverse retail economy and residents, which would act similar to a Business Improvement Association. This association would function as a micro way of organizing and lobbying for park space and infrastructure revitalization, as well as a means of leveraging funds for different park needs.
- As the demographics of Toronto transform so do the recreational needs and preferences of the population; therefore, design a space that leaves room for adaptability.
- Flexible programming can allow users to manipulate space according to their needs; therefore, there is no need to plan overly structured programmed space.
- Planners ought to envision parks as twenty-four hours, seven days a week urban amenities and zone parks as "multipurpose" spaces, permitting different uses at different times. This would allow for night-time activities, which would grant the space the capacity to facilitate a greater variety of sports and recreational activities that conform to the needs and interests of a multicultural user group. Most of the youth that participated in the focus group stressed that they want a park that is able to adapt to a variety of activities.
- Layering programming could be a potential method of creating a space for everyone a space that is defined by interchangeable boards that can be re-arranged, adapted, or manipulated as per desired by the particular user group.

- Integrate gathering spaces in the overall design. On a higher level, a vast majority of cultural user groups enjoy using gathering spaces in the park to celebrate the space with friends and family.
- Depending on the ethnic population the park serves, the allocation and designation of space for “women only” may prove to be an inclusive element.
- Increase the amount of natural landscape such as trees and flower gardens.
- Public art that represents different ethnic populations adds both an interesting and educational element to the space. Public art that commemorates the heritage of different cultures is a unique method of establishing a sense of place and community cohesion as it brings attentiveness to other cultures.

Planners need to recognize the diversity of the City and begin to plan parks according to recreational preferences of the emerging demographics. In order to successfully plan and design a park that does not passively exclude anyone, it is the responsibility of the planner to develop a democratic discussion form that engages the entire community, rather than only the local stakeholders. In such a matter, planners have to incorporate the community input and user needs into the final design in order to plan for a successful park.

9.0 Conclusion

Parks are vital urban amenities that function as open natural spaces that elicit social interaction and community cohesion. As Toronto continues to intensify, parks provide spaces where residents can interact with their neighbours in a casual manner, as well as reflect on a personal level. It is apparent that parks are a vital element to the health and cohesiveness of a community. However, in order for a community to experience and benefit from the space, all members should have equal access to and within the space. As the urban population begins to diversify, it is the role of the planner to plan and design park spaces that are tailored to the recreational needs of all. The traditional homogenous model of planning parks is no longer sustainable as it continues to passively exclude some groups from using and participating in the space. The City of Toronto needs to completely transform the entire planning process, whereby prioritizing community engagement as a leading methodology of planning and designing parks for multicultural communities. Planners can no longer afford to maintain a neutral position, attempting to only plan for the greater good and the public interest. As Toronto becomes progressively more diverse, the idea of *one* public interest ceases to exist, because there are multiple interests, and therefore planners need to acknowledge this and begin to integrate these multiple interests into both the park planning and design process.

Different ethnic groups envision and use park spaces in different ways. Thus, the traditional means of park planning is no longer a sustainable approach. It becomes the responsibility of the planner to create and develop spaces that are inviting to all, while also creating an environment that welcomes social interaction. By facilitating ethnically diverse focus

groups it was evident that different user groups desire the implementation of different elements. However, contrary to the beliefs of City of Toronto planners, all of the requests made by the participants were reasonable. Some of the requests on the participants wish list included, but was not limited to: an increase in gathering spaces, the integration of more natural elements, women only spaces, a design that involves adaptability, and public art that commemorates the heritage of different cultures. These requests are simple enough to implement and integrate in new park planning policies that are specific to developing parks for a multicultural population. Ultimately, as Canada's major urban environments grow more ethnically diverse it is vital that planners establish an open dialogue with residents and integrate the recreational needs of the multicultural population in future park plans.

Appendix A

Focus Group Questions

1. Please introduce yourself to the group by indicating your name, age, country of birth, and how many years you have been in Canada?
2. What is your general impression of Rexdale Park?
3. How satisfied are you with the existing park's current physical structure, programming, and design?
4. How often do you use the park? What do you normally do in the park?
5. What are the good things and bad things of the park space, if there are any?
6. If not, what solutions/suggestions can you contribute in order to design a more inclusive space?
7. What elements, features, or components would you add to the space that better serves your needs?
8. Please describe a best park example you have experienced? What were the main attractions?

Appendix B

2. www.1000books.org

Key Informant Interview Questions

1. What is the historical and current planning and designing practices involved in developing parks throughout the city?
2. How does the concept of multiculturalism fit into the practices and policies in regards to developing parks? Do any supporting documents exist in regards to this issue?
3. How is the issue of ethnic exclusion in Toronto parks going to be dealt with?
4. How are future parks going to be designed to include the notion of multiculturalism?
5. In your planning career have you experienced (or heard of) any challenges planning parks that cater to diverse groups?
6. If so, what were the solutions to these challenges?
7. Are there any changes to existing park infrastructure designated in the future to accommodate better to the needs of the growing multicultural population?
8. What is your ideal image of a park that caters to a multicultural population?
9. What is the role of planners in integrating or engaging multiculturalism in a public space?
10. Do you think Rexdale Park is a successful park space that fosters a sense of ethnic inclusion?
11. Questions 11- 13 are specifically the academic planners: What is the importance of neighbourhood parks?
12. What are the historical practices of designing and developing parks in the urban environment?
13. What are the current practices and procedures in designing and implementing parks?

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