

# **Building Community Centres That Build Community**

By **Paul Kalbfleisch & Phil Fenech**



**Perkins&Will**

# Building Community Centres That Build Community

**Increasing the return on community centre capital investment by expanding their purpose—from being hosts of structured community events to also providing engaging public spaces that address society’s epidemic of loneliness and support a sense of collective optimism.**

## Executive Summary

This whitepaper is a joint writing and visioning effort of Perkins&Will, a global architectural design firm of spaces that bring people together, and Paul Kalbfleisch from PAUL Consulting, Inc. Kalbfleisch, along with real estate developer Scott Higgins, is co-author of *The JOY Experiments: Reimagining Mid-Sized Cities to Heal Our Divided Society*.<sup>1</sup>

This unique effort brings two streams of urban investigation and perspective together to explore how the design of cities, and the building of community centres can address societal changes that are harming the mental health of individuals, and ultimately the resilience of our communities.

There is an urgency to address these challenges. We are in the grips of an epidemic of loneliness that is eroding community bonds and threatening society’s ability to unite and overcome the complex challenges of our future.

Cities are the ideal environment for healing social bonds. They are big enough to make a significant difference and yet small enough for citizens to feel the effects of their contributions. There is growing evidence of this as more and more research is published.

A common theme coming out of the research is the need for social infrastructure—or as Kalbfleisch refers to it—“Infrastructure for the human spirit” that supports the notion of play and collaboration to create collective community joy.

In this context, collective joy can be defined as the sense of being connected to something or someone beyond ourselves in a way that pulls us out of self-consumed thoughts and gives birth to optimism.

It is a shared experience brought about through play; that surprisingly complex social activity in which we learn to:

- Be curious and collaborative
- Improvise and innovate in real time
- See our differences as an asset
- Empathize
- Celebrate in a group fashion

As a result, there is a greater need to build and transform spaces – especially those associated with municipal community centres, parks and libraries. This paper provides a case study in what can be done towards that important goal. These new approaches, which advocate the need for more imagination rather than more money, can elevate the role of the community centre and calls for a more responsive typology with a deeper understanding of how we all use and experience public space.

<sup>1</sup>Paul Kalbfleisch “The JOY Experiments - Reimagining Mid-sized Cities to Heal Our Divided Society” Copyright 2024. Published by Dundurn Press, Canada





Improving the public architecture of community centres can become part of a powerful solution for the woes of society.

However, capitalizing on this opportunity will require a strategic shift in the perspectives of all city building stakeholders. It will mean:

- An expansion of the community centre’s traditional role as host of existing community structured activities, to a place of community wide public gatherings with spaces designed for spontaneity and collective joy.
- Contributing to recreating a sense of “social village” in which the connections of secondary relationships (familiar but not intimate) are possible.
- A design process that treats citizens as co-creators by inviting the community to complete the design experience through the act of play.

It begins by knowing how your community plays and striving for places that support and celebrate that spirit. The solution comes from a design process that empowers community.



Introduction:

## **The Future is Societal**

Today, we are faced with many complex challenges – from our economy to climate change. In the background of all these issues is a worrying decline in our societal resilience, which is affecting our ability to collaborate and adapt to change. In this context, it is fair to say that one of the key issues that will define the future in terms of being better or worse than the present is how we choose to positively shape or dismantle society.

The foundation of society is the social infrastructure within our communities. Over the next decades all aspects of our cities will be viewed as opportunities for societal change including the public architecture of community centres, libraries and parks. This paper lays out a new vision and role for these centres and public spaces with an expanded value proposition to meet new needs. To understand those needs, the changes that are taking place within our societal behaviour need to be addressed.

## **Addressing the Change That is Us**

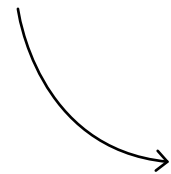
Over the last 60 years there has been a dramatic change in how people interact with their cities and fellow citizens. The most striking change, as described in Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone*, is that participation in clubs, churches and other community organizations fell by nearly 50 percent between 1985 and 1994. This trend coincided with greater access to automobiles and TV. With the advent of the Internet, cellphones and social media, the social decline has continued and accelerated, leading to a growing epidemic of loneliness that has been well documented in the February 2025 issue of *The Atlantic* – “The Anti-Social Century”. Author Derek Thompson stated that this “self-imposed solitude might be the most important social fact of the 21st century”.





Photograph by Scott Norsworthy

## Consider the Following:



According to the American Time Use Survey, an annual study conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in-person socializing declined more than **20 percent** between 2003 and 2023. Among unmarried men and people younger than 25, the decline was more than 35 percent.

The share of young people who meet up daily with friends outside of school declined nearly **50 percent** since the early 1990's. The sharpest decline occurring post 2010.

Homebound isolation has been accelerated by Covid work-from-home habits, home entertainment systems, and the size of houses which grew by **50 percent** between 1973 and 2023.



The results of this self-imposed solitude have, at a personal level, left people mentally unhealthy:

In June of 2025, Statistics Canada released data that created a less-than-ideal picture of social connections and well-being over the last 30 years. In that time, Canadians have been spending less and less time with friends:

In 1986, just under half (**47.9%**) of Canadians saw friends on an average day.

Working-age Canadians (25 to 64 years) recorded the sharpest drop over the 30-year period, with their likelihood of seeing a friend on an average day declining by **two-thirds**.

For people who did see friends, the average time spent together declined from 5.0 hours per day in 1986 to 3.8 hours in 2022.

A 2018 Cigna study showed that **nearly half** of Americans always or sometimes feel alone, and **54 percent** always or sometimes felt that no one knew them very well.

A 2022 Canadian survey released by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) found that Canadians between 18 and 39 years of age reported the highest levels of moderate to severe anxiety, loneliness and feelings of depression of any age group (**33.5%** for anxiety, **29.1%** for loneliness and **27.7%** for feelings of depression).

Gen Z adults (1997-2012 age range) get the title of “**the loneliest generation**” and feel they are in worse health than older generations.

A 2023 US government survey found that **more than half** of teen girls felt persistently sad or hopeless.

Older adults are also suffering:

Recent Canadian studies reveal that **over one-quarter** of adults aged 65 and older live alone, and nearly **one in three** report feeling lonely.

The latest Canadian estimates from the National Institutes on Aging (NIA) 2024 survey of adults over age 50 found that **up to 59%** have experienced some degree of loneliness and that **43%** are at risk of social isolation.

At a societal level, these trends have increased social divisions and distrust of institutions. And there are indications that at a general level, we are losing our social abilities and skills due to lack of use. According to The Atlantic article, many people don’t even recognize that their unhappiness and fear is being caused by loneliness.



Above:  
Photograph by Bob Gundu





## Cities as the Solution: **Returning to the Village**

During the same timeframe as our journey to the anti-social century, much of the social infrastructure within our communities has been stripped away as the goal of efficiency became the priority for city planning and retail shopping. Corner stores, bustling downtowns and even the social attributes of the front porch disappeared from urban centres. However, according to Marc Dunkelman, an author and research fellow at Brown University, cities and the idea of a “social village” is where we should be looking to reclaim our social skills and societal resilience.

Dunkelman explains that our ubiquitous phone-based culture helps connect us to our inner social ring of family and best friends and it strengthens our outer social ring of a “tribe” or people with whom we share common beliefs, values and interests. However, our reliance on digital technology isolates us from our middle ring of familiar, but not intimate, relationships. These are our neighbours and community members that in previous decades we would have known well,

but who today are strangers. These relationships teach us tolerance, collaboration and in turn make us feel acknowledged, accepted and supported throughout the day. Dunkelman calls this middle ring “the village”. It is what we have left behind in our adoption of efficiency and technology.

Dunkelman’s work underlines the belief that the platform for positive change are cities – especially when cities prioritize the collective human spirit of their citizens as a tool for both social and economic prosperity. Throughout history cities have been the habitat of the human spirit; the source of invention, collaboration and compassion that is so badly needed right now. And like the habitats in nature, which get their strength and resilience from their interconnected web of systems, the social resilience of our cities will depend upon urban designs and public architecture that prioritize interconnected social infrastructure and activity.

**Above:**  
*Photograph by Lisa Logan*





Photograph by Paul Kalbfleisch

# It Starts with *Play*

In the book *The JOY Experiments – Reimagining Our Mid-Sized Cities to Heal Our Divided Society*, authors Scott Higgins and Paul Kalbfleisch propose, considering our current societal challenges, that the Live Work Play urban planning prioritization model should be adjusted so that Play receives top prioritization in a new Play Live Work structure.





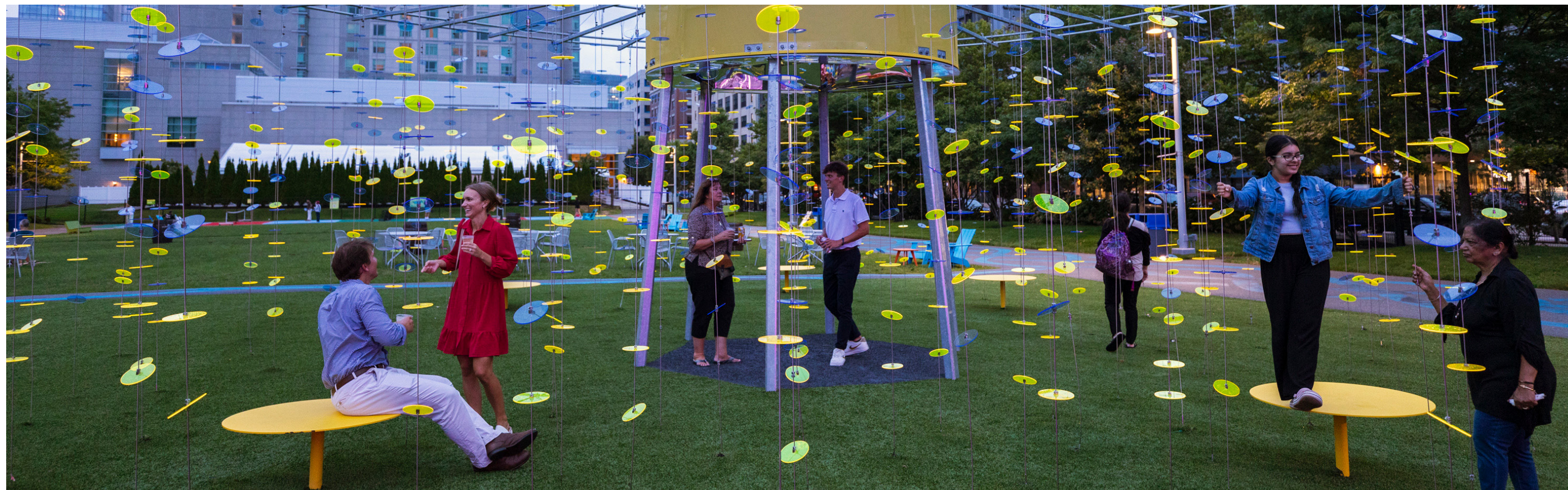
In this approach, “Play” is the strategic opportunity for cities to foster social interaction between citizens as the prime method for distinguishing a city’s appeal. Most importantly, unlike other aspects of the urban experience such as housing and employment, cities have complete control over implementing a play strategy.

**In this context,  
play entails  
understanding  
and giving  
precedence  
to how a city:**

- Acts like a community.
- Connects citizens to make them feel they belong.
- Creates moments of collective joy as a strategy for social resilience.
- Celebrates its uniqueness and identity.
- Supports an innovative entrepreneurial ecosystem that can deliver social and economic prosperity.
- Fosters trust and compassion.

Left:  
Photography by Tom Arban





Play is also serious business. It is one of the most complex social activities in which humans engage. Through play we learn to develop curious minds that can innovate and improvise. We also learn to see the differences between ourselves and others as good rather than bad. In play we develop the ability to collaborate, celebrate success and support each other in moments of crisis.

When thinking of play within this city/societal context, it helps to organize it into layers or categories. Troy Glover, professor at the University of Waterloo's Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, along with Brock University professor Erin Sharpe, have examined the various ways in which the highly social activity of play can influence the relationship people have with

their cities. Their work has created two categories of play: Playing in the city and Playing with a city. Playing in the city focuses on organized and sanctioned urban efforts designed to invite people to act playfully in specific activities and spaces, whereas playing with the city focuses on citizen-led actions, including how spaces are defined and bound.

Scott Higgins and Kalbfleisch's work describes a third layer of play - "Infrastructure for the Human Spirit", which involves spaces designed for spontaneous and joyful moments when people are consumed in activity that involves more than themselves. This form of infrastructure encourages people to collaborate and define the rules of play and their roles within that context. These shared

experiences and emotions help build a stronger sense of trust and optimism. Infrastructure for the Human Spirit, when designed to be permanent and the actions of collaborative play become repeatable cultural rituals, can be referred to as Playing as a city. These joyful, creative and collaborative environments can include:

- Redefining the purpose of public space to become engaging places of cultural celebration.
- Engaging public art that expresses and encourages community storytelling.
- Breaking down social siloes by providing FREE spaces for the act of joyfully playing with strangers.



**Clockwise from Top:**  
 Photograph by Mel Taing;  
 Photograph by Laura Stamer



## Case Study:

# Gaslight District

Higgins and Kalbfleisch have brought this type of infrastructure to life in projects created by HIP Developments – Higgins’ real estate development company. At the Gaslight District in Cambridge, Ontario, Canada, HIP created a public square and events space that is meant to be a form of an urban park where “Cambridge comes to play as a city”. Interactive art installations were created to engage the public in the stories of their community and other citizens.

*River Lines* is an 80 square foot permanent dance platform created by the Montreal art and design studio Daily tous les jours. The installation gives citizens the ability to interact and celebrate their history. The location of the installation is along the 1974 flood line of the Grand River. In that year the river flooded its banks at dangerous levels. Citizens gathered along the flood lines and acted as a united supportive community. Today, *River Lines* gives citizens another chance to feel like a community only this time it is play and celebration that brings them together. There are no rules or instructions to the *River Lines* act of play. As people step on certain tiles, light and musical notes are emitted. As more people enter the dance area, more sounds and beats interact with each other creating a unique piece of music every time – a uniquely Cambridge dance.



**Right:**  
Photograph by doublespace





**Clockwise from Top:**  
*Photographs by Paul Kalbfleisch*

## Case Study: **St. Pete Pier**

Infrastructure for the human spirit and the concept of playing as a city could also describe St. Pete Pier in St. Petersburg Florida, designed by The Rogers Partners / ASD|SKY / Ken Smith Workshop, is a 26 acre “pleasure pier” extending into Tampa Bay from the downtown area. The crisscross and undulating design of the property ensures that there are very few perceived barriers between the many free activities and restaurants. Interspersed between waterpark zones, beaches and nature paths are various forms of viewing bleachers to ensure everyone can feel part of the city at play regardless of their physical or social needs. There is even a “tilted lawn” for sunbathers and those in need of a nap as they make their way to the pier’s lookout. Engaging public art throughout the area supports the celebratory mood of the pier.

St. Pete Pier can be a destination for exercise, a child’s 2nd birthday party or an afternoon at the Tikki Bar, and while all these activities are very different, the pier allows them to overlap in a wonderful way. It is a piece of cultural geography; a place where the joy of play is fused with a shared identity that allows everyone to feel like they own a piece of the city. It is where they can feel they are seen, accepted and participating.



# A Powerful New Relevance for Community Centres

Community centres and their symbiotic partners of parks and libraries, are a critical component of the Play pillar in the new PLAY LIVE WORK urban planning model. They have been one of the few pieces of municipally funded infrastructure that is heavily focused on fostering community through hosting clubs, teams and organizations for meetings and other structured activities. As a result, they have offered valuable and intentional gathering places for people who once belonged to organized social structure.

This hosting role falls somewhere between Glover and Sharpe's "Playing in a city" and "Playing with a city" categories. It remains a very important function for community centres, however the demographic and psychographic data previously mentioned indicates that there is a new and growing segment of the population who are isolated, lonely, and not inclined to belong to organizations and as a result lack the sense of belonging in their cities. Reaching this group, which is important for mental health and societal resilience, requires a new social participation model; one that is very different than the traditional belief that belonging to clubs and community programs leads to larger participation in society.

**Right:**  
*Photograph by Bon Gundu*





Infrastructure for the human spirit starts with participation in social play to create needed social structure, familiarity and confidence in belonging to clubs and community programs. It starts with PLAY!

**From:**

**Belonging Creates Participation**

**To:**

**Participation Creates Belonging**

When this approach is applied to community centre design, it can create a strategic expansion of the value proposition, from host of community activities to the creators of community that ensures municipal governments gain maximum value from their capital investments.

Community centres as infrastructure for the human spirit with an expanded value proposition requires a broader scope, a strategic perspective shift and a more artistic approach to design.

**Right:**  
*Photograph by Rodrigo Chavez*







## Broader Scope

The play and activity areas of community centres must be able to attract and engage the public. Designers must acknowledge that they are competing with mobile/digital technology, social media and home entertainment systems for the public's attention.

The relevance of uses contained in these buildings must be re-imagined. In Canada the trifecta of gym, pool and library have become standardized program partnerships. In many cases municipalities have extended that partnership to include social agencies, health care services, childcare providers, police outreach centres and private wellness businesses. And, new models of integration with commercial and residential developers can literally bring the community building potential of these centres to the doorstep of the residents.

Ensure there are flex spaces for partnerships with local community groups and community led initiatives. Engage younger users with programs and initiatives that use the draw of digital media to create personal connections. Over time, these centres should enable the residents and groups to create their own spaces and playful events. This broader scope and partnership deepen a community centre's connection to the users and enables it to adapt to social changes

Expanding partnerships creates different destinations for everyone encouraging residents to come for a variety of reasons. To work effectively it must be planned to encourage social mixing that allows strangers to bump into each other.



# Strategic Perspective Shift

Thriving communities are created with a collaborative attitude and an approach that include citizens to be part of the process. After all, it is their community that is being created. Or to paraphrase Adam Scott, Creative Director of FreeState Studios - rather than taking the approach of build it and hope they eventually come, create communities that use a “involve them and they will come again and again” process.

This shift requires designers and their clients to adjust their perspectives and roles from creating defined solutions and activities to shaping invitations for citizens to participate in the question “what type of community do we need to become in order to thrive in the future?”. This could be thought of as adopting a more artistic frame of mind by moving beyond just seeking structured community feedback in the design process, to inviting the public to define and complete the desired experience through their public play actions.

The play and activity areas of community centres must work harder to attract and engage the

public to draw them away from social media and digital entertainment. Community engagement can help address this challenge by gathering input on what attracts them. The results from community input are often wide ranging and contradictory. Embracing the complexity can lead to innovative combinations of space, program and activity.

Play can become an integral part of the design and engagement process that entices the community to participate and co-create. The development of the Wallace Emerson Community Recreation Centre by Perkins&Will began with extensive community engagement that included events of creative play. Youth groups in the neighbourhood were invited to a summer camp workshop to play with models to create their vision of the park. Their play inspired the design team to seek more expression from the architecture. Play also became a part of the codesign process at the Seaton Community Centre with stakeholders actively creating and discovering.



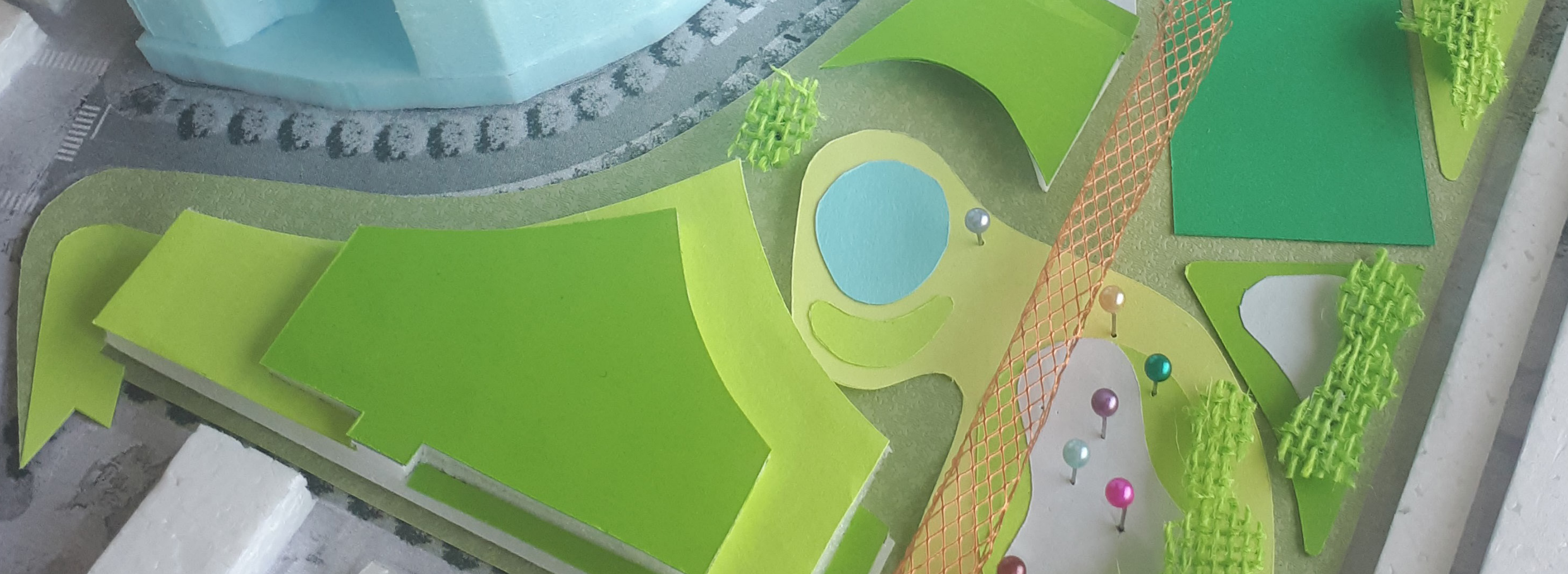
**Above:**  
Wallace Emerson Community Centre  
Community Engagement

To effectively engage the diverse demographic of the Wallace Emerson community, our team worked to meet stakeholders on their 'home turf'. While the existing park and community centre were at the end of their lifespan, they provided a clear community portrait and needed to be respected in the engagement process. Multiple sessions included park and laneway tours, meetings at the seniors' drop in centre, 'design your own park adventure' sessions with children.

**Right:**  
Seaton Community Centre and Library  
Stakeholders were active participants in playing with options during a codesign process.







## An Artistic Approach

We need new ways to invite participation and gathering in our community centres and spaces. Our social skills aren't what they use to be as we remain fixated on our phones, ignoring our neighbors and the possibility of interaction.

An artistic approach would embrace blurred uses, porous borders and the pleasure of unexpected discoveries to allow our personal spaces to overlap and share an experience.

It would leverage the potential at the edges of territory and learn from eminent sociologist, Richard Sennett who suggests that public

space can emerge at the permeable borders of interaction which are open for engagement and exchange.

Within our zoning and planning activity, we should consider moments of serendipity that can create pleasant surprises. This involves exploring new ways to enable interaction and social bridging. In our design exploration we should feel free to experiment, through art and a range of media, to discover new relationships of public space and buildings. Our favourite urban spaces are the ones that offer the

surprise of collective public play. This should become an intentional ingredient of community centres and parks.

People can invent their own rules for interacting with each other. They are experimenting with aspects of community building as they discover their differences in a positive context and learning what it feels like to collaboratively act like a community. This free form act of play also makes it easier to engage their imagination and consider a future different and perhaps more optimistic than the present.

**Above:**  
Photograph by Perkin&Will





# The Value of This New Relevance

These changes in purpose, perspective and approach frame a new relevance that is significant for three reasons.

Firstly, it provides direction on how to address the erosion of our social networks. Secondly, rising construction and project costs have made it more important to leverage maximum value from this investment in social infrastructure and to defend their worth. Thirdly, by stressing perspective shifts, this new approach relies on inspiring more design imagination rather than demanding bigger budgets.

We must raise the expectations of our community centres and parks to support connectivity and gathering in many ways and set a new social participation model that leads to greater participation in society.



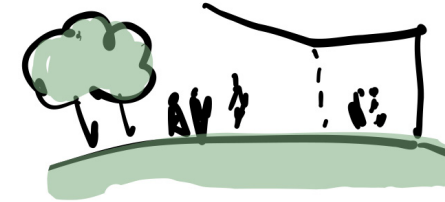
## Introduction: A Tool Box

The new relevance for Community Centres will bring added value to a community beyond responding to the needs of planned activities, commonly called the program. They will offer more opportunities for PLAY. The following five reminder tools can help design teams, and project stakeholders ensure that spaces we build support play and vibrant community participation.

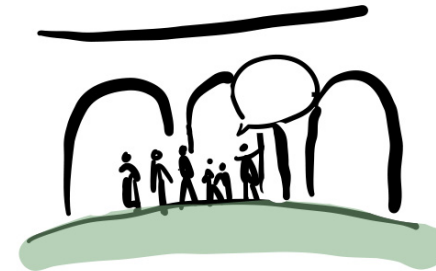
Each reminder tool is supported by an example that we feel captures the intent of the prompt. We offer suggestions on how to implement these tools during community engagement, design planning and how to measure effectiveness during a post occupancy survey. Not all tools need apply equally or at all. Some may not be applicable, but others may offer a way to connect to the location and the users.

The goal is to use the right tools at the right time to plan more vibrant and engaging public spaces. To encourage a range of play is a search that is both intuitive and quantitative. Expanding our range of inquiries, in addition to meeting the required space needs, will advance the evolution of our community centres and parks.

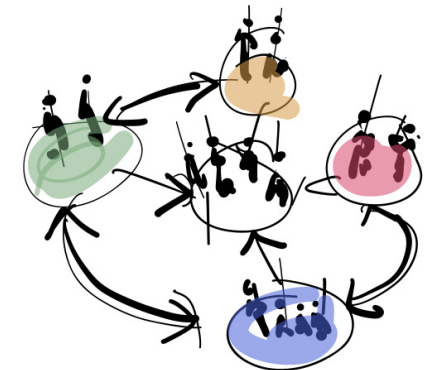
This form of community involvement moves beyond just providing feedback for the design process to co-creation of the product.



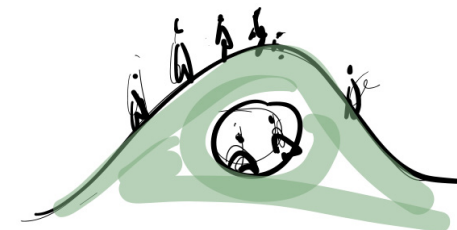
Create Transitional Seams



Embrace Storytelling



Offer Choice



Encourage Hanging Out



Support Performance





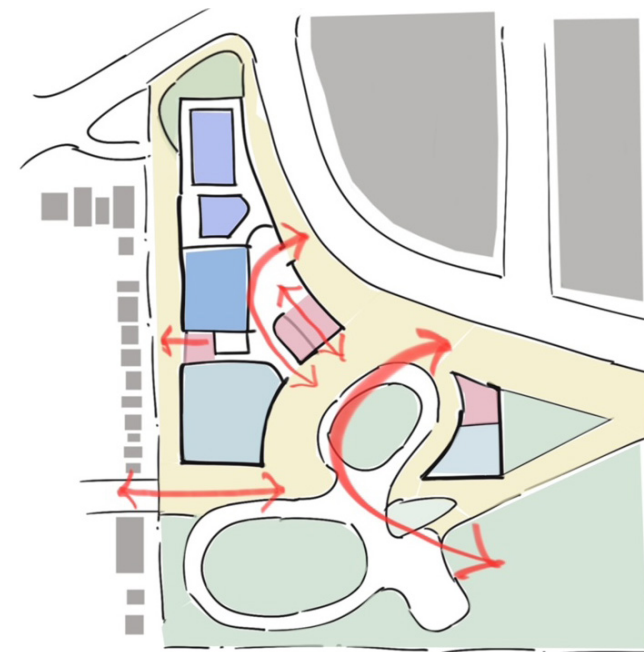
# Create Transitional Seams

Break down barriers and create transitional seams where social activities and people overlap in less defined environments. In the natural habitat these transitional areas are moments of strength and resilience. We should think of our community centres and parks as the habitat of the human spirit with the flexibility to connect us to each other and to nature. These overlaps activate interior and exterior spaces and encourage gathering and play.



## Carrville Community Centre, Vaughan, Ontario

The sculpted portals to this centre not only create dramatic entries, they also provide perfect transitional spaces that allow community gathering at a variety of scales. These transitional spaces are opportunities to define the character of the centre, offer a moment of excitement and embrace the uses. Photograph by Lisa Logan.



Visualization by VISMO

## Above and Left:

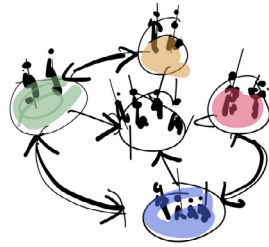
### Wallace Emerson Community Centre

This project, currently under construction, was designed by Perkins&Will and Public Work to create many transitional experiences. The community centre and the park building shape a public space, skate trail and park entry allowing the public realm to extend and overlap the program spaces.

**Does the building engage the surrounding civic space or park?**

**Are there sheltered areas that allow the merging of interior and exterior programming?**





# Offer Choice

Citizens should have choice in how they participate in public activities - whether that be choosing the role they play in a game or how they interpret a piece of public art. Improvisation increases a sense of ownership, control and pride in what they are doing. Materials can be humble and design only suggestive of use. The spaces could feel incomplete without public use. This engenders public play that connects people to each other either as participants or spectators.



## **Nathan Phillips Square Revitalization, Toronto, Ontario**

Perkins&Will and PLANT Architects were selected to revitalize Toronto's Nathan Phillips Square in front of the iconic City Hall designed by Finnish architect, Vjiljo Revell. The design of new elements, like the urban stage, celebrates the theatre of urban life allowing people the choice to unwind or be active, engage in collective experiences or seek solitude. It can be a stage, a stair, a viewing gallery or a mountain to climb!



**Clockwise from Left:**  
*Photograph by Lisa Logan;*  
*Photograph by David Meija Monico;*  
*Photograph by Steve Evans*

**Are there choices of play through a design that suggests many approaches?**

**Flexibility can support functional and informal use. Create opportunities for the space to change by allowing furniture or walls to move.**



## **Corner Commons, Toronto, Ontario**

At a smaller scale, this temporary community driven public space, organized by Perkins&Will, is a kit of parts that was flexible enough for community programming and events. This installation exemplifies a rapid placemaking approach that allows quick improvisation and choice of use.





# Support Performance

Design stages not spaces. Every activity/act of play is a form of performance where people end up expressing something while others play the role of audience and observe. Outdoor spaces and interior public areas should be seen as new purpose-built flex areas that encourage community led activities and zones of social overlap and interaction. These areas help community centres adapt to social change and are a key recommendation of a recent UN study on loneliness. They offer the infrastructure to support events and activate public gatherings.

Imagine the types of events that can be held at the centre, raising awareness of the programs, building participation and connecting the community.

Is the infrastructure suitable for a range of happenings that will bring communal joy?



## Aaniin Community Centre and Library, Markham, Ontario

The city of Markham and architects Perkins&Will listened to community input to create an internal central gathering location flanked by amphitheater seating, flexible storage areas and mezzanines. This open gathering space functions more akin to a public square enabling the centre to host a variety of events, ranging from impromptu performances to a bustling cultural celebration.



Photograph by City of Markham



## Albion Library, Toronto, Ontario

The parking area of this library by Perkins&Will is re-imagined as a public square supporting performance and gathering such as Foodie Fairs!



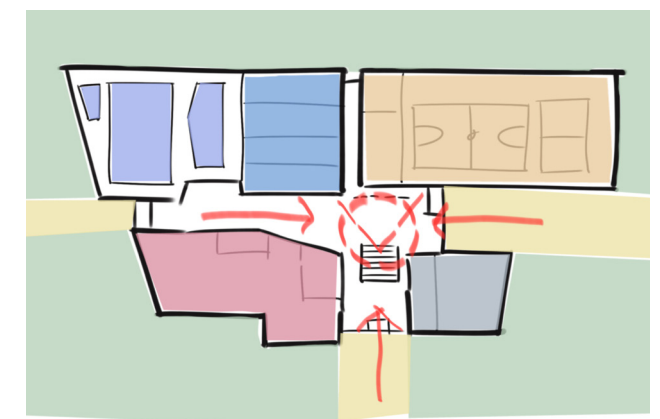
Photograph by Toronto Public Library



Photograph by Rodrigo Chavez



Photograph by Tom Arban







# Encourage Hanging Out

Think in terms of verbs not nouns. Spend time imagine the activity or feeling you are trying to encourage. In a park, perhaps a slide is better than a bench if you want people to share a laugh while they relax. In a building offer a porch or alcove to allow small groups to gather. Move beyond the focus on central spaces and consider the smaller, peripheral spaces. Allow youth to hang out and play simultaneously. Provide quieter spaces for older adults to connect regularly. Over time these centres will become a favourite safe third space for everyone.



## Girls Just Wanna Have Fun

This Innovation Incubator study by a Perkins&Will Urban Design team used research, engagement and play to understand how teenage girls uniquely experience the urban realm. Key design drivers of fun, flexibility and freedom will make spaces more attractive to use.



Read the study [here](#)

**Clockwise from Right:**  
 Photograph by Ben Rahn / A-Frame  
 Photograph by Perkins&Will  
 Photograph by Steve Evans



## Oak Ridges Community Centre, Richmond Hill, Ontario

The signature feature of this community centres is a generous westerly faced wood porch under a sloping wood framed green roof canopy that encourage users to enjoy the view of Lake Wilcox, participate in wellness activities, listen to trail head talks or just simply relax and observe.



## Orillia Public Library, Orillia, Ontario

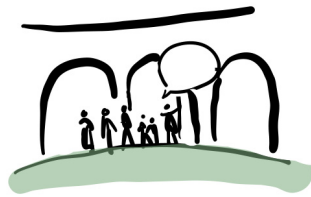
Library programs are perfect opportunities to weave in a range of spaces. The Orillia Public Library creates a transitional gallery space that is connected, but slightly removed, from the activities. The result is a favourite spot for teens to hang out.

Have we created safe spaces that encourage people not connected to structured programs or sport, to visit the community centre or park?

Is the centre becoming an impromptu gathering place?

What healthy social activities take place during hours when community centre programs are not being offered?





# Embrace Storytelling

What stories are unique to the stage you are creating? This is important because we attract what we celebrate in our stories. If what we are creating can be placed in any neighbourhood... any city, then we aren't doing our job. Potent story telling is an important part of building community support at the outset or a project as well as, during and after launch. Spaces and buildings that have meaningful history or references help build community pride and participation. They fuse the joy of play with a shared identity.



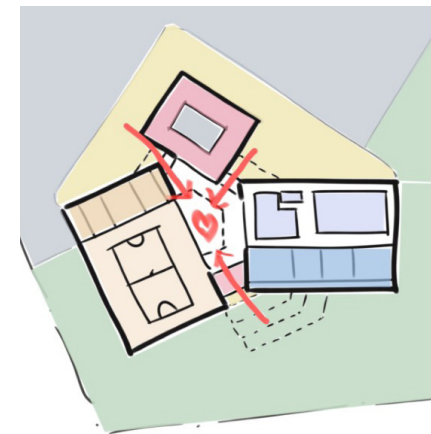
## **Georgina Multi-Use Recreation Complex, Georgina, Ontario**

The Georgina MURC was designed by Perkins&Will to reflect the community image as a semi-rural, recreational township on the banks of Lake Simcoe. Three distinct sloped roof enclosures focus on a central hearth space. The building forms recall the floating vernacular boat houses and the informal cluster relationship was inspired by tents gathered around the fire. These evocative analogies have become a favourite narrative amongst the residents.

**Are we responding to community input on their sense of place?**

**Does the centre resonate with the community through social media and events?**

**Has it become a part of the broader identity of the town, city or country?**



Photograph by Scott Norsworthy



Photograph by Scott Norsworthy



Visualization by VISMO



## **Dawes Road Library, Toronto Ontario**

This library, designed by Perkins&Will with Smoke Architecture embraces a broader storytelling role. It is currently under construction and was inspired by the form and meaning of an Indigenous star blanket—an emblem of protection, celebration, and unity. The design serves is a vibrant representation of culture, community, and the shared journey of understanding our identity.



# Conclusion:

# Good Design

# Empowers

# Community

The intent of this paper is to help city builders appreciate the societal change they find themselves operating in, and to think of that context as an opportunity to increase the relevance and value of their work.

Societal resilience in many parts of the world has been drastically weakened due to the isolating effects of digital technology and the disappearance of social infrastructure within cities. As a result, loneliness, depression, and the deterioration of collective identity and collaboration within communities is threatening the social and economic prosperity of the future.

This moment in time is a pivot point. The steps taken today to positively shape society, rather than continue to allow its dismantlement, will determine whether communities can optimistically tackle the complex issues that face us in the future.

Those involved in creating the future physical constructs of cities should use this new “societal mission” as a criterion for the success of their projects. The definition of social infrastructure must be expanded to include all aspects of a city that can support the collective human spirit as a social and economic asset. This work should be thought of as “Infrastructure for the human spirit”.

Community centres can become a unique and important form of infrastructure for the human spirit. Their relevance and value will evolve from being places that hosts organized community activities to becoming active, engaging spaces that create community and a sense of ownership through collaborative public play. Through play communities learn to develop curious minds that can innovate and improvise. People also learn to see the differences between themselves and others as good rather than bad.

This new opportunity for community centres and city building aligns with Perkins&Will’s, strategic philosophy that good design empowers community, especially when it focuses on facilitating physical and emotional connections between people. Good design embraces the responsibility of creating a sense of collective identity and optimism within communities. And good design acknowledges that citizens ultimately complete the project experience through the choices they make as they interact within the infrastructure we create.



**Paul Kalbfleisch** writes, speaks, and consults on the societal importance of cities as the habitat of the human spirit. His work elevates the role of urban space in healing societal divisions and building creatively collaborative environments for social and economic prosperity. He also co-wrote, along with real estate developer Scott Higgins, *The JOY Experiments: Reimagining Mid-Sized Cities to Heal Our Divided Society*, which was published globally by Dundurn Press in May 2024.

**Phil Fenech** is an architect at the Toronto studio of Perkins&Will. He is a practice lead and specialist in the design of community facilities that offer opportunities for recreation, wellness, and learning. He is a frequent contributor to conferences and publications on the value of community design. Phil believes these buildings help our society in many ways and has witnessed the joy people have when they drop in to participate in programs or simply hang out. They are proof that design can make stronger communities.

**For more information, contact:**

[paul@paulconsultinginc.com](mailto:paul@paulconsultinginc.com)

[phil.fenech@perkinswill.com](mailto:phil.fenech@perkinswill.com)