

The Food/Care Connector: An Interactive Walking Tour on Food Security Infrastructure in West
Toronto

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Food security in cities is determined by various factors including access to safe, affordable, and culturally-relevant foods options, as well as healthy soil for food growing. These factors however are unevenly distributed in cities across Canada, as food insecurity disproportionately affects low income families and people of colour (Tarasuk et al., 2019). In Toronto, the pandemic has exacerbated issues of food access for many already vulnerable communities. Since the beginning of the pandemic in March of 2020, the Daily Bread Food Bank and North York Harvest Food Bank reported a 47% jump in visits from the year prior, representing the highest ever single year increase in food bank usage in Toronto (2021). Inequalities in cities have only become more pronounced in the past years, which emphasizes the necessity of grassroots, mutual aid organizations to identify the issues from the ground-up.

Through this project, we explore infrastructures of food security and community care in the West Toronto neighbourhoods of South Parkdale, Dufferin Grove and Little Portugal. We have designed a walking tour and story-map interactive workshop drawing from Oritz and Valdivia (2015) concept of “urban transformation”. Our walking tour focuses on these neighbourhoods because of both demonstrated need for food supports in these areas, and the various community engagement efforts to meet these needs. The tour activates the concept of sustainability in a way that is accessible, at a human scale, and promotes engagement in real time. The stops along the way are grassroots, community-based initiatives that are actively promoting food security and community care within systems of mutual aid; three gardens, a food bank, and two community fridges. In the model of “urban diagnosis”, participants on the tour are asked to identify the positive and negative elements of the neighbourhood that promote or hinder food security (Oritz & Valdivia, 2015). The community input on gaps in the food system can be emailed to the Food/Care Connector email. The tour is a participatory tool that allows walkers to identify as co-creators of the walking tour and help transform a space into an equitable and sustainable community, acknowledging the importance of community input in this process (Pothukuchi, 2004).

Food is a critical infrastructure integral to the fabric of communities. Food systems come in all shapes and sizes but to be labeled sustainable, they must be multifaceted in considering the social, environmental and economic resiliency of their model (Nguyen, 2019). On the social dimension, a food system is considered sustainable when there is equity in the distribution of the economic value added, taking into account vulnerable groups categorized by gender, age, race and so on. Of fundamental importance, food system activities need to contribute to the advancement of important socio-cultural outcomes, such as nutrition and health, traditions, labour conditions, and animal welfare (Nguyen, 2019).

Our project aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of zero hunger by recognizing the gaps in food security infrastructure and creating a framework to address them. A target of the zero hunger SDG is facilitating access to nutritious food for all by 2030 (United Nations, 2021a). We are engaging this target by addressing the gaps in food infrastructure and prioritizing food security for all Toronto residents. The central role of the community in identifying gaps in this project aligns with SDG 10 of reduced inequalities. A target of this SDG is the social, political and economic inclusion of marginalized individuals (United Nations, 2021b). This model of an interactive workshop will create space for the contribution of racialized and marginalized residents to advocate for food security infrastructure that best meets their needs (Ortiz & Valdivia, 2015).

With a participatory model, the finished products of our project are truly only the beginning. The Food/Care Connector identified specific sites where food is grown or shared in a way that reduces inequalities for racialized and low-income people. The interactive walk is the first tool used by participatory planners in assessing the ability of the built environment to address the needs of all members of a community (Ortiz & Valdivia, 2015). The walk is an essential component of urban diagnosis because it is adaptable to anyone's schedule which strengthens our intentions for accessibility. Participants are asked to also engage with critical discussion questions related to food access in their communities, to gather information for next steps in the urban diagnosis process, with the ultimate goal of empowering community members towards "urban transformation" (Ortiz & Valdivia, 2015). Through intentional workshopping and asynchronous walking tour input, the story map and walking tour will grow into a community resource that celebrates the work being done to address food insecurity, as well as identifying the gaps in the food system.

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