

# West Annex Heritage Project



**THE ANNEX  
RESIDENTS'  
ASSOCIATION**

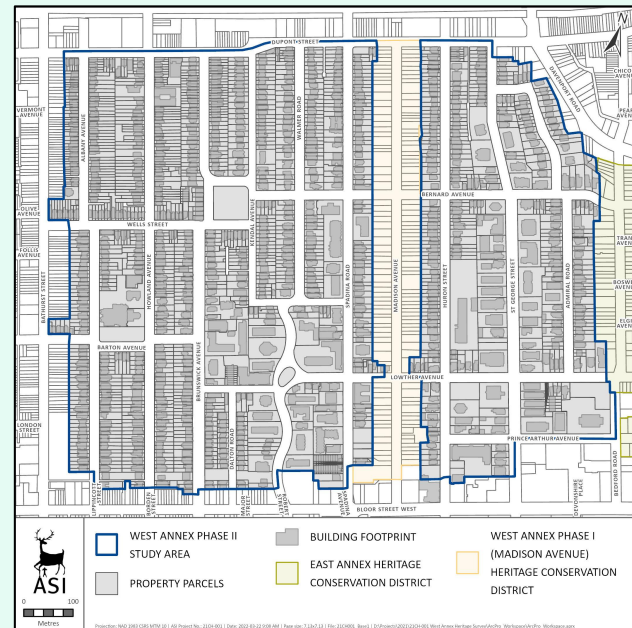
## FOCUS GROUPS

<b>Meeting Date:</b>	March 22, 2022 (12-1:30pm) March 24, 2022 (7-8:30pm)
<b>Participants:</b>	65 including Project Team members
<b>Format:</b>	Facilitated Zoom Session Informational Presentation Online Poll (Stakeholder Mapping) Focus Group Discussion in Breakout Rooms (x2 per session)

Report prepared by  
Maximum City

## PURPOSE OF MEETING

- To review the West Annex Heritage Project's goals and progress
- To present key time periods and history of the West Annex
- To review the refined themes and examples within the Historical Context Statement (HCS)
- To hear from community members about places to include in the HCS' Community & Social Context theme



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On the afternoon of March 22 and the evening on March 24 via Zoom, 65 participants took part in two focus group sessions on the West Annex Heritage Project, which included a presentation followed by a small-group discussion in breakout rooms. The presentation reviewed the project's goals and progress, presented a key timeline and brief history of the West Annex, and shared the four refined themes of the Historical Context Statement: Natural Environment, Urban Context, Community & Social Context, and Proximity. During the breakout sessions, facilitators led groups in a brainstorm and discussion session. Specifically, participants were asked to identify places in the West Annex that tell the story of the Community & Social Context theme, listing specific examples then sharing more details about some of these places.

For the purposes of reporting, community feedback from the sessions has been grouped into four categories: **Inclusion & Access; Uniqueness & Attachment; Places** (which represent the bulk of the report on pages 2-8); and **Project Process & Other Questions**. Across these categories, community members emphasized the connections and activities that take place within different spaces; the presence of both planned and spontaneous places that highlight community; the presence and value of diverse and unique building forms; as well as the importance of walkability/pedestrian lifestyles and the proximity to services and different places in and surrounding the neighbourhood.

The next page provides a summary of the four categories, followed by a more comprehensive overview of **Places** and an alphabetized list of all specific sites mentioned during the sessions.

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## 1. INCLUSION & ACCESS

### Summary

Participants emphasized the presence and value of diversity, mixed building forms, and a desire to ensure that the celebrated features and benefits of the West Annex can be shared increasingly and inclusively.

### Participant Quotes

*"Would like to see creative plans to see how these large houses can be developed into multi-family homes."*

*"The mix is one of the things that provides the vitality of the Annex."*

*"More housing in the Annex means more families from more cultures who can live in our awesome neighbourhood."*

## 2. UNIQUENESS & ATTACHMENT

### Summary

Participants emphasized a strong sense of attachment to the neighbourhood, and a celebration of the area's unique attributes, history, and fostering of connection and community.

### Participant Quotes

*"We meet, we talk to each other, we garden, we celebrate in public places and most importantly we can walk to all of it."*

*"[It is] a unique experience in a city to have such a friendly experience and to know so many neighbours."*

*"The Annex has rich history and is lived in."*

## 3. PLACES

### Summary

Place examples varied widely but highlighted some distinct categories: Parks, Streets, Sidewalks & Boulevards, Front Porches, Lawns & Gardens, Institutions & Organizations, Residences, and Commercial uses. These six categories are ordered roughly in terms of the most commonly cited places during the focus groups.

What follows in this report is an overview of these categories, examples, and corresponding participant quotes.

## 4. PROJECT PROCESS & OTHER QUESTIONS

### Summary

In addition to the breakout room discussions, the project presentation was paused at two junctures to allow for participant questions about the material presented and any process questions. During these Q&As, participants wanted to know about the process of becoming a Heritage Conservation District (HCD), how Madison Avenue went through this process, as well as practical and general questions about what the "protected" and "preservation" language of HCDs means with regards to specific properties and individual homes. For example, one participant wanted to know if modifications to their home to facilitate aging in place would be possible under an HCD. Participants also asked about the potential development of the Walmer Road Baptist Church site.

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## STAKEHOLDER MAPPING: Do you identify as any of the following in the West Annex? (Select all that apply)

37 participants responded to the poll, providing 41 responses

**76%**

Homeowner

**16%**

Renter/Tenant

**8%**

Other/Prefer  
not to answer

**5%**

Landlord

**3%**

Business  
Owner

**0%**

Developer

**0%**

Housing  
Insecure

**QUESTION:** What **places** in the Annex tell the story of the **Community and Social Context** theme? If this place could talk, what story would it tell about our community related to this theme?

PLACE	WHAT WE HEARD	
Parks	Summary	Participant Quotes
	<p>Parks came up frequently in examples provided and were emphasized as popular, important, well-used, and inclusive sites. Parks were celebrated as community spaces where everyone in the neighbourhood can gather, as the site of seasonal activities, and as key green and historical spaces.</p> <p><b>Jean Sibelius Park:</b> Noted events and activities in the park include birthday parties, community skating rink, and spring compost day.</p> <p><b>Taddle Creek Park:</b> Noted as an important water source for birds in the area and for the ecological character of the neighbourhood.</p> <p><b>Gwendolyn MacEwen Parkette:</b> Noted for the diverse surrounding architecture and views.</p> <p><b>St Alban's Square:</b> Noted for outdoor picnics, music.</p> <p>Also mentioned: <b>Joseph Burr Tyrrell Park;</b> <b>Volunteer Community Gardens</b></p>	<p><i>"If you walk through the Annex you'll find a park. They're all used a fair amount. What I really like about them is that they're meeting places but meeting places for everybody. Especially during COVID, people have been meeting in parks, it's kind of an equalizer."</i></p> <p><i>"We may not have many [parks] but what we have we use intensively."</i></p> <p><i>"Within parks there are memorials and they speak to the layering of what has happened in the Annex."</i></p> <p><i>"Sibelius Park is a community amenity. It's a great gathering place for small children and a lot of them stick around until they're older... It's almost like a village common."</i></p> <p><i>"The park design [at Sibelius] also reflects community problem solving." (re: dog parks/kids)</i></p> <p><i>"We live close to Taddle Creek Park and I have three little kids. For my family it's a community hub, the kids run into kids from school, we chat to parents. I love knowing the history that it was named after this physical landform. Cohesion, community, belonging."</i></p>

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**QUESTION:** What **places** in the Annex tell the story of the **Community and Social Context** theme? If this place could talk, what story would it tell about our community related to this theme? (*continued*)

PLACE	WHAT WE HEARD	
Streets, Sidewalks & Boulevards	<i>Summary</i>	<i>Participant Quotes</i>
	<p>Streets and sidewalks were likened to parks and gathering places, and noted for how they encourage walking and social connection. Participants valued the diversity of housing types, unique architecture, and many heritage properties along Annex streets. The boulevard structure of many streets was recognized for its tree canopy and for creating safe and pleasant spaces for people, kids, and pets to interact and create a sense of friendliness and belonging. Streetscapes and sidewalks were connected to the importance of walkability and the “walking distance” (proximity) of different services and places in the West Annex. Streets were recognized as living and changing over time. Finally, the history of the West Annex as first and foremost residential with the layering in of services and businesses was seen as key to the neighbourhood’s evolving identity.</p> <p><b>Walmer Rd</b></p> <p>Walmer was celebrated in the discussion for its mix of building forms and heights.</p> <p><b>Admiral Rd, Albany Ave</b></p> <p>Participants noted how the streets have changed throughout Annex history. A connected and shared backyard open space behind houses on Albany was also mentioned.</p> <p><b>Spadina Rd</b></p> <p>Home to social services and Indigenous organizations.</p> <p><b>Dupont St</b></p> <p>Participants lamented the loss of small businesses that facilitate community interactions, along with concern over the impact of the Dupont Visioning Study resulting in a wall of development along the corridor.</p> <p><i>Also mentioned:</i></p> <p><b>Howland Ave, Bernard Ave, St George St, Brunswick Ave, Prince Arthur Ave</b></p>	<p><i>“We are encouraged to interact by the fabric of our environment.”</i></p> <p><i>“Walking around the streets, each one is a little different, a mix of styles of buildings.”</i></p> <p><i>“For me, the streets themselves are parks. It’s a whole cluster of things that happen on the streets. The street itself creates a fantastic setting for things to happen. I’ve seen groups playing music, celebrating birthday parties, all within that zone of the street.”</i></p> <p><i>“All our sidewalks, where we run into one another and chat.”</i></p> <p><i>“The tree canopy is great to walk through – it inspires and enriches people.”</i></p> <p><i>“The thing about the Annex – it is residential but it is surrounded by other uses and it is walkable to other things.”</i></p> <p><i>“[Walmer Rd is] the best street in the neighbourhood – a beautiful mix of built forms that shows how low, mid and higher rise buildings can work in a neighbourhood. The story is sad in a way, we can’t build this way in Toronto anymore, we can’t combine lots to build mid- to high-rise.”</i></p> <p><i>“Admiral Rd used to be rooming houses. We are living people in a living environment.”</i></p> <p><i>“Albany Ave is more attractive now than when it was initially built. It’s not a static thing.”</i></p>

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**QUESTION:** What **places** in the Annex tell the story of the **Community and Social Context** theme? If this place could talk, what story would it tell about our community related to this theme? (*continued*)

PLACE	WHAT WE HEARD	
Front Porches, Lawns & Gardens (and associated events)	<i>Summary</i>	<i>Participant Quotes</i>
	<p>Front porches and lawns were recognized repeatedly as spaces for both spontaneous and planned social gatherings that contributed to the sense of community and connection in the neighbourhood. Porches were noted as particularly essential for maintaining these connections during the pandemic. Porches and lawns were also identified as places where neighbours freecycle furniture, books, wine bottles, and other items. Gardens were also discussed as encouraging creativity and forming connections between neighbours.</p> <p><b>Horn on the Cob</b></p> <p>Horn on the Cob concerts were celebrated by participants as a front lawn community music event that emerged during the pandemic.</p>	<p><i>“Architectural features like porches and the smallness of front yards encourage interactions.”</i></p> <p><i>“Front yards became important places for community gatherings during the pandemic. One example being the Horn on the Cob music concerts... attended by a hundred people daily.”</i></p> <p><i>“Especially during Covid it was isolating for a lot of people, especially older [people]. You can sit on your porch and have a 20-30 minute conversation. You weren’t threatened by Covid but you had a sense of connectedness and inclusion to the rest of the city. Prior to Covid they were still fantastic. I’ll be sitting on my porch and a neighbour will come over for 1-2 hours, another will bring food. Another neighbour has a chess tournament every week. I could give a dozen examples of how porches have been instrumental in connecting people during Covid and before.”</i></p> <p><i>“We all sit out front on our porches, weather permitting, and chat with our neighbours. You come outside and immediately there are people around you. It’s a real privilege to be living within a small village within a bigger city.”</i></p> <p><i>“[The Annex shows] the influence of one neighbour on the other. We all did elaborate front gardens and before you know it other people are doing them too – there is a creative influence that we have on each other.”</i></p>



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PLACE	WHAT WE HEARD	
Institutions & Organizations	Summary	Participant Quotes
	<p>Participants recognized several public and private institutions (e.g. schools, churches, libraries, organizations) for their contribution to community and social context. These locations were seen as essential gathering places, homes to social organizations/enterprises, and sites for events. Multi-use institutions were celebrated as anchors of community connection.</p> <p><b>Huron St Public School</b> Noted for events and as a gathering place.</p> <p><b>Royal St George's School</b> Noted as a voting location and for their Christmas concert.</p> <p><b>Walmer Rd Baptist Church</b> Recognized for its role (particularly in the past) as a site for gathering, activities, social and family supports. Also recognized as the former home of the Avenue Road Food Bank.</p> <p><b>Church of the Messiah</b> Recognized as the current home to the Avenue Road Food Bank and playing an essential role in providing neighbourhood social supports.</p> <p><b>Spadina Rd Branch – Toronto Public Library</b> Noted as a small but well-used place with supportive staff that is also connected to the Indigenous institutions on Spadina Rd.</p> <p><i>Also mentioned:</i> <b>Fire Station; Society of Friends House; Native Canadian Centre of Toronto; Salvation Army (former houses on Brunswick Ave); York Club; Voting Stations; Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study.</b></p>	<p><i>"[Royal St George's] have an annual choir concert at Christmas time, bringing the community together at that time of the year. They try to include the community so that's good."</i></p> <p><i>"Huron St Public school is [a] welcome source of community gathering (particularly during Covid)."</i></p> <p><i>"The Walmer Road [Baptist] Church had summer camps and Friday evening gatherings – it was an amazing place for meeting people and getting support."</i></p> <p><i>"Church of the Messiah – the Avenue Road Food Bank, and the Walmer Road Baptist Church. That's where I learned about diversity, humanity, and the best people I've met in my life."</i></p> <p><i>"[T]he Spadina Library, which though small (and closed on Mondays) is a great community resource."</i></p> <p><i>"Firehall is a beautiful 1910 building (part of that construction peak and one of a cohort of similar across the older city). [Firehalls] are very open to talking to any visitors, and love showing kids the truck and answering questions."</i></p>

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PLACE	WHAT WE HEARD	
Residences	<i>Summary</i>	<i>Participant Quotes</i>
	<p>Participants mentioned several private residences as key sources of community and connection.</p> <p><b>Fraternity houses</b> Recognized as part of the social fabric of the neighbourhood and markers of the season.</p> <p><b>145 St George St (Apartments)</b> Noted for its strong and evolving community of multi-generational residents who have also worked together on the streetscape and gardens in the surrounding area. Built in 1959.</p> <p><b>Norman Elder House (Bedford Ave)</b> Noted as an example of the neighbourhood forming a collective attachment to particular places and a sense of collective ownership.</p> <p><i>Also mentioned:</i> <b>Jane Jacobs' former house (69 Albany Ave); rooming houses.</b></p>	<p><i>"The apartment [145 St George St] provides so much for the neighbourhood...they work on the streetscape as a community. That sort of community has really fostered a real community spirit which has expanded up and down the street."</i></p> <p><i>"The frats mark the seasons (when students move in, exams end, the end of the school year)."</i></p> <p><i>"We all felt that we owned a piece of the house." (re: Norman Elder House)</i></p>
Commercial Businesses	<i>Summary</i>	<i>Participant Quotes</i>
	<p>Commercial businesses were also identified as essential places for community gathering and connection, as well as emphasizing the proximity of the West Annex to a variety of services and businesses. Participants noted that the neighbourhood is porous and connected to the rest of the city.</p> <p><i>Mentioned:</i> <b>Wiener's Home Hardware; Bloor St restaurants and businesses</b></p>	<p><i>"Wiener's has been around 100 years (as a business) and has been a staple in the neighbourhood."</i></p> <p><i>"The tiny grocers on Bloor, I rely on them quite a bit. They remind me of middle markets; I associate them with the Annex and the services I rely on."</i></p> <p><i>"Can we talk about Bloor? It's impossible to talk about the Annex without talking about what surrounds it."</i></p>

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## LIST OF PLACES

Parks/Parkettes

Streets

Front Porches/Events

Institutions/Organizations

Residences

Commercial

The list below captures all specific sites, streets, institutions, or events mentioned by participants during the focus groups.

Gwendolyn MacEwen Parkette	Church of the Messiah
Jean Sibelius Park	Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study
Joseph Burr Tyrrell Park	Fire Station
St Alban's Square	Huron St Public School
Taddle Creek Park	Native Canadian Centre of Toronto
Volunteer Community Gardens	Royal St George's College
Admiral Rd	Salvation Army houses (Brunswick Ave)
Albany Ave	Society of Friends House (Lowther Ave)
Bernard Ave	Spadina Branch Toronto Public Library
Brunswick Ave	University of Toronto
Dupont St	Voting Stations
Howland Ave	Walmer Road Baptist Church
Kendal Ave	York Club (135 St George St)
Prince Arthur Ave	145 St George St apartments
Spadina Rd	Fraternity houses
St George St	Jane Jacobs' former house (69 Albany Ave)
Walmer Rd	Norman Elder House
Bloor St restaurants & businesses	Rooming houses
Wiener's Home Hardware	Horn on the Cob