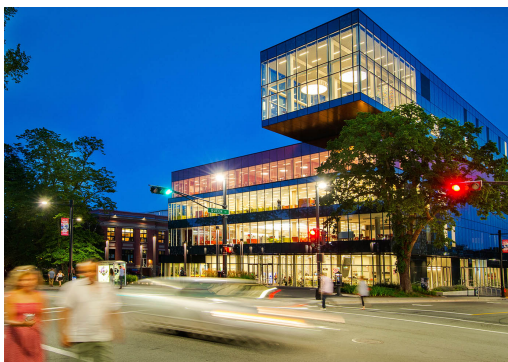


State of the Civic Commons

Summary in Halifax / K'jipuktuk

Prepared for McConnell Family Foundation
Prepared by CoLab in partnership with Evergreen

November 2016



Context



INCLUSIVE ACCESSIBLE PUBLIC SPACES

Where we do
together what
we can not do
alone

This document is a working document, which aims to identify the needs for good public spaces in our communities, the issues facing them, and the assets and opportunities that currently exist for our common spaces in K'ijipuktuk/Halifax. This research is based on conversations with citizens, community leaders, community arts organizations, city councillors, health practitioners and policy makers, schools, urban gardening groups, youth, indigenous groups, Queer folk, and BIPOC. This document is not intended to be exhaustive, but to provoke thought and conversation.

This research is part of a larger national initiative which seeks to understand the important ways that the civic commons contributes to city life and the ways we think about, and utilize, our civic assets in many cities across Canada. This research is being completed in partnership

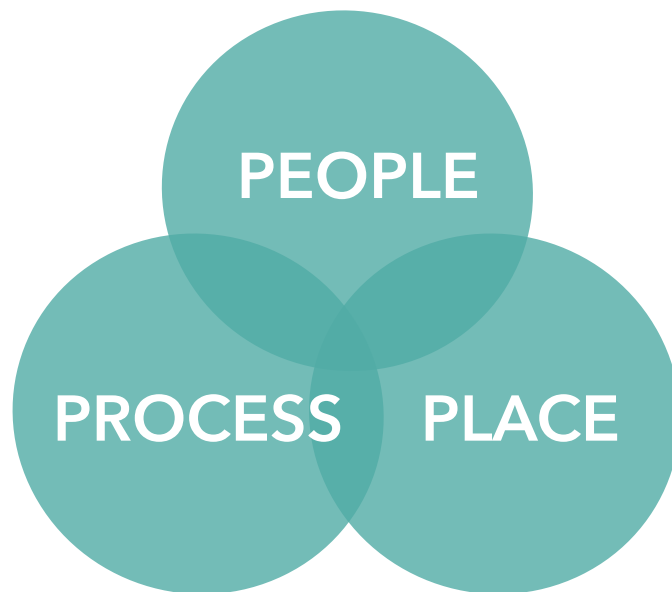
with Evergreen and supported by The McConnell Family Foundation in partnership with Evergreen.

THANK YOU to everyone who is contributing to this work. Behind every great project, initiative and community space in our city are the amazing people who make it happen. People who are driven to create a higher standard of living for all citizens, and work at it every day. It has been an honour and a source of inspiration to hear some of the stories that make up our place.



Approach

In a top down and bottom up approach, Halifax needs to engage in Process, People and Place to create an diverse and thriving civic commons. Process provides governments with the support, resources, and connections to work for community action and to initiate effective placemaking projects. People from the community will be enabled to shape, deliver, access, and manage local public spaces in their neighbourhoods. Places that promote sustainability, resilience, and health will be built upon and created. Opportunities abound in underutilized civic land, and re-thinking definitions of “place” will create quality urban spaces that meet the needs of the population.



What makes the civic commons so important?

From the interviews 4 themes kept recurring:



Trends



Reconciliation

Reconciliation – Building empathy between communities is needed. This may be achieved through integrative and affordable community events in public spaces. E.G. Point Pleasant Park is a natural space with two unrecognized and unprotected indigenous burial sites.



Gentrification of the “Two North Ends”

Gentrification of the “Two North Ends” – The North End is undergoing gentrification and creating a division between the mid-income residents and people living in social assistance housing projects.



Low Arts and Culture Investment

Low Arts and Culture Investment – Little investment in common spaces focused in culture and the arts. Public Art is lacking, and is often exclusive or inaccessible, as it tells a story of colonial pride. There are currently no subsidized artist studio/living spaces in Halifax.



Exclusive Public Spaces

Exclusive Public Spaces – Spaces need to be more inviting to a more inclusive and diverse population: diversity in age, race, socio-economic status, gender and sexuality.



Lack of Municipal Provincial Collaboration

Lack of Municipal/Provincial Collaboration – Without a shared vision between the municipal and provincial governments, assets are underutilized and opportunities for enhancing community wellbeing is missed. Lack of alignment within government and community needs e.g. connecting infrastructure to socioeconomic health incomes.



Underutilized Community Assets –

Underutilized Community Assets – Halifax has many aging municipal and provincial buildings that are often underfunded, or sold to developers instead of transitioned to community owned and operated.



Outdated Regulations and Bylaws

Outdated Regulations and Bylaws – “The municipal government has the right mandate, but the wrong tools”. E.g. current engineering, road standards, and municipal design guides are out of date.

Trends



Public Investment Allocation

Public Investment Allocation - provincial and municipal governments are investing in large-scale public assets and recreational assets in the urban and exurban fringes of the city. There needs to be greater investment in local neighbourhood scale parks and streetscaping, which forms the underlying structure of the civic commons.



Outmigration

Outmigration - Nova Scotia has a declining population, and Halifax is struggling to retain people.



Urban vs. Rural Investment within the Municipality

Urban vs. Rural Investment within Municipality - HRM has a large geographic span, which implies a management of the starkly differing needs of urban, suburban, and rural communities.



Mistrust of Municipal Government

Mistrust of Municipal Government - Scrutiny of the government compromises its power. There are few opportunities or spaces to truly work collaboratively with the government.



Policies of Fear and Risk Aversion

Policies of Fear and Risk Aversion - Government needs to support change rather than dehumanizing public spaces with overbearing policies to eliminate risk and limit liability.



Existing Policies to Leverage

Existing Policies to Leverage - The Halifax Centre Plan, Integrated Mobility Plan, Healthy Communities, Urban Forest Plan, and Capital Health's Community Health Plan

Recommendations

Aligning Halifax on Civic Commons Strategy

There are so many people acting on behalf of the Civic Commons, without seeing themselves as part of a larger initiative/movement. These people need to be connected in order to share resources and see how they could maximize impact. Every year a few more holistic and forward thinking plans are made by different departments within the municipal government. A group needs to evaluate these plans, and act as mediator to find alignment. There is a shift in thinking in some of the key influencers to be thinking holistically about complete, healthy and liveable communities. These influencers include the municipal government urban planning, transportation, Capital Health, United Way Halifax, Halifax Libraries, Waterfront Development, etc. This presents a great opportunity to find strategic alignment - something that is already happening informally, but could use support. The group would act as a policy re-think tank to remove barriers to those groups that act in support of a healthy civic commons. Process would include regular sessions to connect individuals, groups, and organizations that are working in this field to explore needs and how resources can be shared to maximize impact. First year would focus on pilot projects in 3-5 neighbourhoods/areas that are centred on the three pillars of Process, People, & Place with intended outcomes of removing barriers and creating a replicable model.

Recommendations

Acting as Liaison between creative groups and Public Assets

The role of this group would be to do the background work that lowers the barriers and risks for temporary uses of vacant spaces. This group would coordinate complementary and evolving temporary uses until a future long term activity takes place. This would be the foundation for better coordinated planning and decision-making at all levels. The organizations would manage the short-term use, covering liability and other insurances, taking over basic maintenance and providing amenities if possible. Then finds 'custodians' who use the properties for creative and/or commercial purpose until the owner finds a permanent tenant or is ready to proceed with redevelopment.

Network and Continuing Research

The idea of a national learning network, in the form of a community of practice, is something we view as a key element of a strategy. However, this network must support the creation and growth of a local network. We believe the function of such a network is to showcase the strength of Canadian initiatives. We are, therefore, of the view that the first stage consists of gaining an understanding of the conceptual framework, vocabulary, and inspiring examples of the Commons movement. Afterwards, the purpose of the network would be to highlight and share local successes and the lessons learned from them.

Cutting the red tape to public assets

Change the way the Province assesses, circulates, and disposes of surplus properties. Enable policies to empower transitioning of municipally managed public assets to community managed assets for community benefit. Including working to make the process for assessing, circulating, and disposing of surplus properties more accessible to community and non-profit groups.

Assets & Partners

ASSETS

- Halifax and Dartmouth Commons,
- New Central Library
- Other libraries
- Oval Skating Rink
- Dartmouth Pizza Oven
- Intersection placemaking projects
- Trail System
- Common Roots Urban Farm
- Mobile Food Bus
- Switch (Open Street Sundays)
- Hope Blooms
- Nocturne (Art at night festival)
- Pride Week
- Wonder'neath Open Studio
- iMove
- Dartmouth Food Centre

UNDERUTILIZED ASSETS

- Vacant lots and buildings in our centre (ie public pavements)
- The Khyber (sitting empty)
- The Bloomfield Centre (sitting empty)
- The Old Spring Garden Library (sitting empty)
- Small neighbourhood parks (with grass & little other features)
- Parking lots in front of big box stores, hospitals
- Churches and other faith based buildings and outside space

POTENTIAL PARTNERS

ArtsHalifax
Halifax Libraries
United Way Community Hubs,
Halifax Greater Partnership
Capital Health
Waterfront Development
Planning and Design Centre
City of Halifax
Walk n Roll
Wonder'neath
Fusion
Halifax Cycling Coalition
Planifax
Ecology Action Centre
Friends of the Commons
Dalhousie College of Sustainability