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GTA

Toronto the grey: the city's green space is disappearing, and it's likely to get worse

From physical health and climate-saving effects, to being a 'lifeline' for renters, advocates say politicians need to focus on green space before it's too late.

By May Warren Housing Reporter

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Etobicoke's Mabelle Park is being transformed with consultation from nearby residents. Green space in Toronto is declining, according to the most recent numbers from Statistics Canada, and this inevitably has the biggest impact on renters, who don't have the luxury of backyards.

Andrew Francis Wallace / Toronto Star

Armed with orange hard hats, white coats and red noses, a pair of unusual consultants headed out two summers ago to ask residents what they wanted out of a neglected Etobicoke thoroughfare ringed by apartment towers.

“They created these characters called Sssshharchitects,” said Leah Houston, founder and executive director of community initiative MABELLEarts.

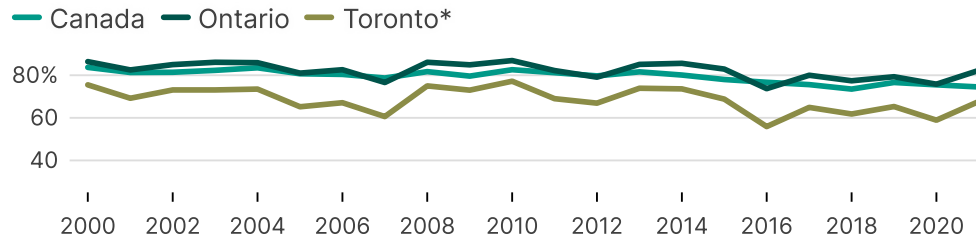
The clowns spoke to more than 200 people living in the rental and Toronto Community Housing buildings nearby “in a playful and fantastical way but also in a deeply practical way” about what they wanted, and needed, out of a planned revitalization of Mabelle Park.

The answer: a place to connect with each other, and to nature.

It's a positive example of a community-led initiative at a time, when, sadly, such spaces are shrinking across the city — with dire consequences.

Average greenness on a decline

Urban greenness in large urban centres across Ontario, and Canada, compared



Note: Large urban centres have populations of 100,000 or more

* Refers to Toronto large urban population centre. For reference [see map here](#)

SOURCE: [STATISTICS CANADA](#)

The most recent numbers from Statistics Canada show that Toronto's "average greenness score," an assessment of the urban ecosystem that uses satellite data, has been declining, from about 62 per cent of the city in 2018 to about 52 per cent in 2022. At the same time, the city is becoming denser, with more residents renting — according to the census tenant households jumped by about 25 per cent from 2011 to 2021.

Advocates say it's a trend that can have negative effects for Torontonians' mental and physical health, especially for renters, who often don't have the luxury of backyards.

And they say the trend will likely worsen, given new provincial housing legislation that strips parks of some of their traditional funding, and the fact that, on the cusp of a mayoral election, disappearing green space is not at the top of politicians' to-do lists.

A disappearing 'lifeline'

Natalie Brown, director of programs with Park People, a non-profit that advocates for parkland, said for tenants in highrise and apartment buildings, and anyone who doesn't have access to

a private backyard, “city parks are a lifeline.”

She says the StatsCan numbers only tell part of the story, give the city's increasing density.

StatsCan uses a measure called “average greenness,” taking 230-by-230-metre-square areas and giving them a “greenness score.”

“Within that area if there's a huge parking lot for most of it, it's probably going to get scored as grey, if it's residential and there's a lot of tree canopy,” it's more likely to be classified as green, said Jennie Wang, StatsCan's chief of the environment accounts and statistics division.

Overall, Ontario's average score was about 71 per cent in 2022, down slightly from 77 per cent in 2018, according to the StatsCan data.

Kitchener (66 per cent), London (77 per cent) and Ottawa (81 per cent) all had scores higher than Toronto. But Milton, which has experienced a surge in recent new developments on former farmland, scored much lower at just 26.3. Montreal, on the other hand, scored 69 per cent.

Wang cautioned the results of development can sometimes be temporarily. For example, if an agricultural area has been cleared to make way for a subdivision, for the first few years it's going to be grey, but after trees have been planted and grass is growing, it might change to green.

“If you're looking at an area that really hasn't changed that much, an existing area of Toronto where there's been no real development, then it might be reflecting perhaps there's more street trees,” she said.

Greenspaces are important in terms of health, both physical and mental, and climate resiliency, especially given the extreme weather the climate crisis brings, Brown said.

“We need spaces that are going to cool the city, that are going to absorb floodwater,” she said, adding: “At a human level, we know that green space tracks with people's physical and mental well-being.”



Clowns from community initiative MABELLEarts spoke to more than 200 people living in the rental and Toronto Community Housing buildings nearby "in a playful and fantastical way but also in a deeply practical way" about what they wanted, and needed, out of a planned revitalization of Mabelle Park.

Warren, May

Recent research from the University of Waterloo found that the health and environmental savings from parkland far outweighed the tax dollars spent on one park in Peterborough. The study estimated the park cost \$6.4 million to build but the benefits could total more than \$4 million a year — through a combination of savings from reducing physical inactivity, improving mental health, air quality, and quality of life.

Who is Toronto's green space for?

For many people, especially renters without their own private outdoor space, public parks were a salvation during the pandemic, becoming the de facto spots for birthday parties, family gatherings and even dates.

And according to Park People that use continues to be higher than pre-pandemic levels. A 2022 report from the organization found that the majority of residents (55 per cent) reported that they'd spent more time in parks over the last year than in the previous year, slightly down from the 66 per cent in 2021, but almost 60 per cent said they'd like to spend more time in parks.

“Where I live in the west end the pressure on parks like Trinity Bellwoods has actually been kind of extreme,” said Brown, noting at McCormick Park in Little Portugal, where she often takes her five-year-old, there are more people picnicking and holding birthday parties, even as the emergency phase of the pandemic fades.

Greenspaces are “vanishing” across the city, but “the lens through which we understand what green space can do and be, in the context of a rental, low-income racialized community,” is also important, says MABELLEarts’ Houston.

“Even though we know it’s homeowners who have the access to the private green space, we’re often designing public spaces with them in mind,” she added.



Leah Houston, executive director of MABELLEarts, a non-profit, stands near Mabelle Park in Etobicoke.

Andrew Francis Wallace

Homeowners might want a place to walk their dogs, or sports fields, she said. In contrast, at Mabelle Park, based on community feedback, they put in both local plants and plants from some of the countries that residents came from, such as sage, as well as a food bank.

“What’s needed is for all of us to be thinking about how we can be leveraging these spaces, in ways that actually make sense for the people who live there, not for some middle-class ideal.”

To that end, MABELLEarts, with funding from the City of Toronto section 37 money (which comes from developers and is meant for community improvement initiatives), the federal government, and corporate donors including Pearson Airport, have been working on Mabelle Park since 2007 — adding greenery, yearly Ramadan celebrations and employment initiatives.

Earlier this month they broke ground on a community clubhouse, with input from the clown consultations.

“For us it was really important to drill down and understand what residents wanted the park to be used for,” said Houston, and “not to make assumptions.”

Sadly, parks haven't been an issue that mayoral candidates have picked up as priority, said Park People's Brown, and competing crises make it an ongoing struggle to fund Toronto's parkland and ravine strategies, year after year.

However, the current controversy over the plan for the new Ontario Place, which involves a 65,000-square-metre private spa run by an Austrian company, has reignited discussions on the importance of public space

Meanwhile, she said, the province's recent housing bills reduces green space requirements for developers.

City staff in both Toronto and the GTA have warned the province's Bill 23, the More Homes Built Faster Act, aimed at relieving the housing crisis by adding 1.5 million homes over the next decade, threatens new parks by reducing the funding municipalities get for them and giving developers more say in what does get created.

The province has said the bill is necessary to encourage construction and get new homes built, fast.

“It's part of accelerating this downward trend and the sad thing is (cities) are just not going to be livable places in the long run if that green space isn't there,” Brown said. “We do need to see that public pressure to tell all levels of government that this is something that we want to see invested in.”

As part of this, Brown and her colleagues at Park People are trying to get Torontonians to think less of parks as leisure and more as “essential infrastructure,” such as roads or sewers, that needs to be invested in at that level.

“And that’s what will make Toronto livable, for my child and for others in the decades to come.”



May Warren is a Toronto-based housing reporter for the Star. Follow her on Twitter: [@maywarren11](https://twitter.com/maywarren11).

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