Portrait: Thorncliffe Park and Flemingdon Park, Toronto
March 2015

This portrait was produced by the Toronto Centre for Active Transportation, a project of the Clean Air Partnership in Toronto, Ontario.

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*Special thanks to all members of the community mapping team who volunteered their time

Local Partners:
Flemingdon Health Centre
Toronto Emerging Artivists (TEA)
Thorncliffe Park Women’s Committee
Evergreen, Health Promotion Department
Toronto International Film Festival, Special Delivery Program
Architecture for Humanity, Toronto Chapter
Active Neighbourhoods Canada (ANC) is a national partnership of organizations bringing participatory planning to 12 communities in Alberta, Ontario and Quebec. We work with local partners in each community towards changes in the built environment that encourage active transportation, active public spaces and active, engaged citizens. This portrait illustrates the first Ontario community to join the ANC project: Thorncliffe Park/ Flemingdon Park. It is a snapshot of the community compiled through events, observations and secondary research.

The Active Neighbourhoods project employs lessons learned from the ‘Green Active and Healthy Neighbourhoods’ pilot created by the Montreal Urban Ecology Centre and further develops the methods to suit local contexts. Each local project is divided into three phases. Documentation of phase 1 and 2 for Thorncliffe & Flemingdon can be seen on the following pages.

Phase 1: Understanding
The goal of the first phase is to understand the current context in the neighbourhood in order to identify potential improvements and constraints related to mobility. Different data collections methods are used to create a ‘Portrait’, including field surveys, documentation and consultation activities.

Phase 2: Exploring
The objective of Phase 2 is to establish a common vision, define priorities for action, and create design solutions that respect the local identity and practices of the neighbourhood. Examples of methods used during this phase include a Citizen’s Forum and workshops with professionals.

Phase 3: Building
Local partners collaborate on a Community Plan outlining goals and design solutions. The plan is used as a tool to strategize and partner with local municipal officials, transit authorities, other levels of government, as well as institutions, retailers and individuals towards the incremental implementation of these goals.
**ACTIVE NEIGHBOURHOODS PHASE 1 AND 11 TIMELINE**

**PREPARATORY PHASE**
- January 2014
- February 2014
- March 2014
- April 2014
- May 2014
- June 2014
- July 2014

**PHASE 1: UNDERSTANDING THE NEIGHBOURHOOD**

**Activities:**
- *Reach out to potential local partners in Ontario communities*

**Activities:**
- *Determined partners and community network for first project*
- *Drafted Memorandum of Understanding as a group*

**Activities:**
- *Held Negotiation fair with local partners to determine possible programming intersections & to plan phase 1 activities*
- *Lead exploratory walk as part of Jane's Walk and collected qualitative data*
- *Collaborated with STEPS & TEA on 100 in a Day: Pop-up public space and Miniature city mapping activity*

**Activities:**
- *Public Launch of project at Neighbours Night Out*
- *Held booth at Neighbours Night Out, collecting qualitative information about the neighbourhood and welcoming local officials to the project*

**Activities:**
- *Convened community mapping team, trained participants in various mapping & data collection methods (5 days of mapping)*
- *Collaborated with TEA Youth to support successful application for Nxt City Prize*

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**Canadian Partners**
- Includes the Montreal Urban Ecology Centre and Sustainable Calgary

**Advisory Committee Meetings**
- *Meetings between Project Managers, TCAT Director & students*

**Local Team Meetings**
- *Meetings between Project Managers, TCAT Director & students*

**Local Team**
- Includes representatives from local partner organizations (i.e., Flemingdon Health Centre)

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**Active Neighbourhoods Canada • Thorncliffe Park & Flemingdon Park**
Active Neighbourhoods Canada • Thorncliffe Park & Flemingdon Park

**August 2014**
- **Activities:**
  - Lead ravine bike ride & discussion group with staff from Evergreen
  - Hosted Film Screening with TIFF & Thorncliffe Women’s Committee
  - Held Young Urbanist Summer Camp at Flemingdon Health Centre

**September 2014**
- **Activities:**
  - Held TIFF teen mapmaking & stop motion workshop at the Flemingdon Health Centre
  - Participated in the Flemingdon Urban Fair

**October 2014**
- **Activities:**
  - Compiled and synthesized qualitative data from all phase 1 activities
  - Drafted Portrait document

**November 2014**
- **Activities:**
  - Share portrait draft with partners and incorporate feedback

**December 2014**
- **Activities:**
  - Professional workshop planning and advertising
  - Finalize Neighbourhood Portrait

**January 2015**
- **Activities:**
  - Held professional workshop at the Aga Khan Centre with guest speakers
  - Planning citizen forums to follow professional workshop

**February 2015**
- **Activities:**
  - Planned and advertised professional workshop

**March 2015**
- **Activities:**
  - Finalized Neighbourhood Portrait

**ACTIVE NEIGHBOURHOODS PHASE 1 AND II TIMELINE**

**PHASE I: UNDERSTANDING THE NEIGHBOURHOOD**

**PHASE II: EXPLORING SOLUTIONS**
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Introduction

Welcome to Flemingdon Park and Thorncliffe Park, two vibrant and unique neighbourhoods in Toronto, Ontario. Thorncliffe and Flemingdon were two of Toronto’s first planned communities, completed in the late 1960’s. They are considered inner suburbs, lying just North East of the Metro Toronto core and are easily accessible by public transit. The two communities sit on either side of the beautiful Don Valley Ravine and the Don River that runs through it. Most residents live in towers that overlook the greenery and the buildings are a common sight to motorists travelling along the Don Valley Parkway.

Thorncliffe and Flemingdon are diverse neighbourhoods that serve as landing pads for new Canadians. The typical resident has a lower than average income, a fact common to neighbourhoods of this type: ‘Vertical Poverty’, a recent study by the United Way shows that “poverty is becoming increasingly concentrated vertically in the high-rise towers that dot the city’s skyline” (United Way 2011).

This portrait will serve as a diagnostic tool to understand the local opportunities and challenges towards healthier, more active public spaces that encourage walking and cycling.
Thorncliffe and Flemingdon were developed in the 1960’s following urban planning ideals that promoted distinctly separated land uses. The romance of the automobile was in full swing and the assumption that everyone would own a car in these neighbourhoods was prevalent.

The illustrations on the left show us that land uses are clustered, first in a map view and second from photos taken by members of our community mapping team. When uses are clustered like this it takes a long time to walk from place to place, favouring automobile or transit users.

Flemingdon Park and Thorncliffe Park are important areas because they were the first of their type to be built in Toronto, of which approximately 1000 were built in the 20 years following (ERA Architects 2008). Understanding the public realm in these communities could thus be useful for many other communities in the GTA. Recent research into these neighbourhoods has shown that restrictive land use planning is one of the biggest challenges to creating more vibrant public spaces. Through concerted efforts new mixed use zoning guidelines come into effect in the summer of 2015, allowing for new uses to be mixed into residential areas.
With some exceptions, the residents of Thorncliffe and Flemingdon dwell in high rise apartment buildings. These modern towers were designed to maximize density while leaving generous amounts of open space for recreation & parking. This typically means that each property has 80-90% open space. (ERA Architects 2010). These planned tower communities were a response to a housing boom after the war and to an influx of immigrants to Toronto. This approach was originally introduced by Le Corbusier in his controversial plan for Paris (shown on the left, unbuilt) as a response to overcrowding and disease in industrialized cities.

Open space can be attractive and vibrant, or it can be desolate and scary. The physical form goes a long way in determining this. On the left we see R.V. Burgess Park in Thorncliffe. It is seen as a community hub and is a well-used, vibrant public space. The park is centrally located, it is overlooked by many towers, it has amenities and has benefited from the events & stewardship of the engaged residents. A central public space of this type does not exist in Flemingdon Park, although a new group, the Flemingdon Urban Fair Committee is now working to create similar events and spaces.
Physical and Social Characteristics

The goal of creating accessible connections between residents and ravine trails was a part of the original intention of these communities. Through qualitative research and fieldwork we have seen that the connections today are very limited and uninviting. While walking and cycling rates are relatively high in Thorncliffe and Flemingdon, a recent asset mapping exercise showed that interest and engagement in physical exercise is very low (Wijesuria 2010). It seems that walking and cycling for recreation and exercise are relatively rare in these communities, even though they are situated on magnificent walking and cycling trails in the Don Valley.

This summer, community members gathered to discuss access to the ravines while riding bikes to the Evergreen Brickworks to highlight the rich connections the neighbourhood has to city resources. Clear signage, better seasonal maintenance and dedicated bike lanes were all mentioned as important measures to making the trails more accessible. It was also noted by community members regarding park space within the neighbourhood that even though there is lots of space for recreation, it is often separated by fences, making it less useful and inviting.
Thorncliffe and Flemingdon are ‘arrival cities’, they are examples of the neighbourhoods on the edges of cities around the world that are spaces of transition for those migrating from other places. In his book of the same title Doug Saunders describes arrival cities as the future centres of innovation and economic development that will shape our urban existence (Saunders 2010) “Yesterdays villagers and immigrants become today’s urban merchants and tomorrows professionals and political leaders” (Saunders 2010).
Physical and Social Characteristics

There are a lot of young people in Thorncliffe and Flemingdon. Youth make up a disproportionately large share of the population when compared with the City of Toronto at large. With rising rates of childhood obesity and plummeting rates of active travel to and from school across Canada, there is an effort to promote safe, daily active transportation among youth and address the barriers to active school travel (Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card 2014). Because pedestrians and cyclists, particularly young ones, are vulnerable road users that have an increased risk of injury when interacting closely with motor vehicles, these efforts must also address barriers that exist in the urban design of communities.

We have been working with youth in different capacities to try and understand what their concerns and ideas are for the future of their streets. These activities have served to amplify their voice and their vision for the neighbourhood.

Youth Voice

Local youth know these streets well and have a lot of great ideas, some of which are seen on the next two pages. The images below are drawings from the Young Urbanist Summer Camp held at the Flemingdon Health Centre. During this camp, youth ages 10-13 explored and designed imaginative solutions to address and improve public spaces, the environment and local active transportation. The images propose ideas for the intersection at Don Mills and Overlea, and nearby on Don Mills Rd. where there is an obscured entrance to the ravine trail system.

Green roofs on the local schools and green pedestrian paths connecting them over the busy intersection at Don Mills and Overlea.

A pedestrian scramble, more street trees and better lighting at Don Mills and Overlea.

A new crosswalk on Don Mills south of Overlea that leads to an improved path to access the Ravine, a bike lane and a kiosk in the apple tree that sells apple pies!
A wayfinding mosaic proposed for Vendome Place - a part of Flemingdon that is confusing to navigate and which feeds into residents’ concerns about safety.

In addition to the Young Urbanist Summer Camp, we worked alongside local teens through our partnership with the youth-lead public arts group, Toronto Emerging Artivists (TEA). Their mission is to bring communities together and foster discussions of local issues, with a focus on activating public spaces.

The schematic design to the right represents a wayfinding and place-making project they proposed for an underused and uninviting area in Flemingdon. This was submitted to, and recognized by the 2014 NXT City Prize design competition as the strongest submission from a team under 18 years of age. The project is being further developed by TEA as they work towards the goal of improving wayfinding and public space in their community.

The two images below are from a stop-motion animation workshop done with local teens to both examine their favorite places in the neighbourhood, and illustrate their vision for these places through animation. The videos revealed interesting ideas on how to create fun and inviting spaces in the ravine. They display a desire for improved access to this natural public asset.

A tree house in the ravine - an interesting places that invites you to play in nature.

A slide under the bridge leading down to the ravine trails - a fun and unconventional way to travel!
CICLOVIA PROGRAM IN THORNCLIFFE AND FLEMINGDON
Ciclovia/Car-free Sundays are programs where the streets are opened to people and closed to cars for a few hours on Sunday.

PEDESTRIAN SCRAMBLES AT BIG INTERSECTIONS
Pedestrian scrambles are intersection systems that stop all vehicle traffic and allow pedestrians to cross in every direction.

CONNECT THE DON VALLEY TRAIL TO THORNCLIFFE AND FLEMINGDON
The trail is far too hidden when it should be easily accessible, safe and convenient for those of all ages and abilities to enjoy.

RE-CREATING PLACES: TRANSFORMING EXISTING SPACE INTO GREAT PUBLIC SPACE
Reclaim underused spaces such as empty parking lots & space around the hydro corridor and activate them with amenities and activity spaces.

In 2010 8-80 cities undertook an engagement project in Thorncliffe and Flemingdon to collect ideas towards more livable communities. We have used their recommendations as guides in the ANC project. The recommendations are summarized in the image on the left.

Our observations and conversations allow us to add some updated information to these long term goals. First, the current construction schedule makes Ciclovia programs and street closures unlikely for some time.

Re-creating places is an important goal using short-term easy to implement ideas, the ample existence of open space provides opportunities for such actions.

‘Pedestrian scrambles’ is a suggestion that deals with a perennial issue in Thorncliffe and Flemingdon: The schools and religious institutions let out large numbers of people, forcing the streets and intersections to accommodate massive increases in volume at certain times.

The connections to the ravine continue to be poor and improvements in this realm would go a long way towards encouraging active transportation.
Physical and Social Characteristics

Great strides forward have been made in Thorncliffe and Flemingdon. Both internal community organizing and policy changes are starting to show improvements in the public realm.

One example of this progress is a sidewalk that was previously a dirt path leading to the food store labels. The city responded to the desires of the community for better pedestrian conditions. This is exactly how positive change happens: through incremental changes in key pieces of infrastructure that effect people’s daily travel. Residents themselves have done great work towards enlivening public space. Over the past 6 years the Thorncliffe Women’s Committee has enabled arts and fitness programming, a community garden, park beautification, community engagement and advocacy improving park infrastructure, a very famous Friday community bazaar with local performances, park clean-ups and environmental education. Its advocacy coupled with City commitment has resulted in the park receiving used playground equipment, a renovated splash pad, new swings, benches, bins, lights, picnic tables, and the first of its kind, a permanent outdoor Tandoor bake oven.

As a tool to complement recent changes in zoning, The Centre for Urban Growth and Renewal recently published a report that offers strategies for improving apartment neighbourhoods some of which provide important guidance for improving active transportation and public space in Thorncliffe and Flemingdon.
Proximity to downtown and relatively high density ensure excellent transit access for both communities. Buses travelling along Don Mills and Overlea connect with many subway stops or other important destinations.

Recent research on tower neighbourhoods in the Toronto area has shown that these communities generally have lower car ownership rates, higher transit user rates and higher rates of walking and cycling compared to the GTA average (ERA Architects 2010). Thorncliffe and Flemingdon are no exception to this rule.

A direct consequence of this lower than average car ownership is a large number of underused parking spaces both in buildings and surrounding them. Many community members share the idea that these spaces could be activated in more interesting ways.
Movement Patterns

Flemingdon and Thorncliffe are both neighbourhoods that see a high rate of pedestrian activity. A walkability workshop carried out in Thorncliffe in 2009 showed that walking was the dominant form of transportation within the neighbourhood. Further, 84% of participants reported that most travel to work or school was done within the neighbourhood (Hess and Farrow 2009).

Although cycling is not a prevalent form of transportation within the neighbourhood, it is common to see recreational cyclists connecting with the Don Valley trails especially on weekends.

The graphics above show average rates of pedestrian and cyclist travel counted by the community mapping team in the summer during the hours shown above, and then multiplied by expansion factors to reach daily averages.

One important thing that we observe in the pedestrian traffic is the tendency for it to ebb and flow with the schedules of institutions such as the schools and the Mosque. This has a tendency to overwhelm the sidewalks and intersections.

Walkscore Thorncliffe: 71
Walkscore Flemingdon: 63
Source: www.walkscore.com
On a beautiful summer day we went out with the community mapping team—a team made up of residents and interested volunteers to assess the functionality of the streets near our three focus areas featured on the left. We used a standardized street audit tool created by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). Although there was quite a bit of variation across areas, the two most common comments were about a lack of seating and a need for wider sidewalks.
Overlea is considered an attractive street, with Linden trees lining the sidewalks and the median, contributing to pleasant sites and smells. Seating areas can be found nestled in the trees near the Tim Horton’s. Through discussions on Jane’s walk and other conversations we learned that the imminent redevelopment of the area for a Costco is very controversial. People expressed concerns over the street trees and medians being destroyed in an effort to accommodate more traffic for the store.

The Mosque, located just beyond the bounds, Northeast of this intersection accommodates large groups of people at specific times of the day and week. This critical mass, similar to school traffic creates heavy burdens on pedestrian infrastructure at certain times. Solutions created and validated by the community include a pedestrian scramble at this intersection and widening sidewalks along Thorncliffe Park Drive, where most residents travel from.
Focus areas 2 and 3 are in need of better signage at minimum, to improve access to the ravine trails. Access to the ravine was brought up in many contexts as a major opportunity for improving active transportation in these communities.

In Focus area 2 the need for more crosswalks on Thorncliffe Park Drive was identified by a number of residents. The 2009 walkability workshops in Thorncliffe also highlighted interest in another crosswalk on Thorncliffe Park Drive West to accommodate all of the current jay-walkers (Hess and Farrow 2009). Similarly, community mappers noticed the tendency for people to cut across paths and make shortcuts-suggesting that the right-of-ways do not provide the most convenient paths.
Focus area 3 encapsulates both an entrance to the ravine and a major intersection with two large schools on either side. Concerns about safety at this intersection were brought up by community members particularly regarding the large volumes when school gets out and also the tendency for young people to run across the road. A fatal car accident in the previous year was brought up as an example of these dangers. Valley Park Middle School was recently ranked by a Global News article as one of the most dangerous schools for pedestrians.

Don Mills is seen as loud and inhospitable by the community members we talked to. Street trees were suggested as a buffer to traffic noise.
Thorncliffe & Flemingdon are home to some important destinations of all kinds. The graphic on the left highlights some of the important destinations that came up in mapping activities with community members. Sunny’s Food Market is a covered outdoor plaza with a large grocery store and many other shops. The Ontario Science Centre is a landmark and destination for the whole city, bringing families and school groups into the neighbourhood regularly. Don Mills and Overlea is an important intersection with two schools: Valley Park Middle School and Marc Garneau Highschool. The East York Town Centre and R.V. Burgess Park form the central nodes in Thorncliffe and both ‘Iqbals’ a South Asian grocery store, sweet store and restaurant and the Mosque are found in a small shopping plaza Northeast of Overlea.
In 5 minutes I can walk to....

- 1 green space
- 2 schools
- 1 retail store
- 1 community centre
- 5 bus stops
- 1 pump station
- 1 health clinic
- 1 public meeting space
- 1 public phone

6 green spaces
2 schools
1 retail store
1 community centre
5 bus stops
1 pump station
1 health clinic
1 public meeting space
1 public phone

While Thorncliffe Park is walkable, it is not very sit-able” (Hess and Farrow 2009). A desire for more benches in both Thorncliffe and in Flemingdon was brought up in many of the conversations we had. Benches go a long way in enlivening the public realm. If people are going to spend time in public for anything other than movement, benches are necessary.

While the amenities and destinations in Thorncliffe and Flemingdon may seem plentiful from this map, it is still lacking in diversity of destinations when compared to more compact walkable areas. This is why current changes in zoning that take effect this summer (2015) are so important, as they will allow for the addition of new uses within the strictly residential areas.
Public Space

A recent publication benchmarking the success of Toronto neighbourhoods highlights 4 areas where Flemingdon and Thorncliffe are falling critically behind: unemployment, social assistance, low income and marginalization. While these factors provide many obstacles to the overall health of the neighbourhood, two areas stand out as ranking above average: green space and levels of municipal voting. In other words, we can infer that the population is engaged and there is plenty of open space that can be activated.

As a reflection of these qualities (detailed on page 14), it is evident that residents have become active stewards of their local environment, however it is important to engage other institutions for these actions to make lasting change. It is important to note that much of the open space in Thorncliffe and Flemingdon is privately owned. The maintenance of grounds and landscaping consequently is often varied depending on the practices of each company.

One consequence of private ownership is the presence of fences between properties. The existence of these fences are not necessarily welcome by residents. A discussion with some teens in the neighbourhood made us aware that the use of greens for sports is inhibited by the fences dividing up the space.

On publicly owned land, the community has identified trash as an ongoing issue. This was reported in the needs assessment survey (Wijesuria 2010) as well as in many of our recent engagement activities. It was also noticed by community mappers that the presence of illegal ‘dumping grounds’ at points of connection between the city and the ravine is prevalent.

Stewardship of the built environment is the responsibility of private landowners, the City of Toronto, and the local residents who call it home. Finding complementary goals within all of these interests is key to improving shared spaces.

Active Neighbourhoods Canada • Thorncliffe Park & Flemingdon Park

Source: Urban Heart Matrix, Centre for Research on Inner City Health
Summary of Opportunities and Challenges

Opportunities

- Ample open space is available
- Proximity to the ravine & recreation trails
- Cultural diversity (as an indicator of innovation)
- Recent changes in land use zoning will allow for new amenities and destinations
- Local examples of great public space such as R.V. Burgess Park
- Socially engaged residents
- Great transit access (less reasons to drive)
- Underused parking lots provide potential for creative uses
- Existing culture of pedestrianism
- Considered a ‘strong neighbourhood’ meaning the City of Toronto recognizes the importance of investment in these areas

Challenges

- Poverty and Marginalization impacting ability to engage & associated with poor health indicators
- Restrictive land use planning
- Perception of crime in isolated public spaces
- Poor access points to Don Valley ravine
- Unnecessary fences dividing up private property
- Large arterial roads are both barriers to pedestrians & can be dangerous and/or inhospitable
- High differentials in pedestrian traffic flow overwhelms infrastructure
- Flemingdon Park can be difficult to navigate
- Lack of amenities such as benches and trash bins make public space uninviting

Through engagement activities, as well as primary and secondary research, we found a series of opportunities that exist within the neighbourhood that could have potential to encourage more active neighbourhoods. On the other hand, there are a series of key challenges standing in the way of that path. This is not exhaustive list, but a summary of the most relevant issues.
Sources