

Victoria Memorial Square Park Improvements



Phase 1B: Building a Vision

Thought Exchange and Design Charrette Summary Report

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Project Background

The City is improving Victoria Memorial Square, located at 10 Niagara Street. The park is a designated heritage site and is part of the Fort York National Historic Site and the King-Spadina Heritage Conservation District.

The park is built over the oldest settler cemetery in Toronto and currently includes a monument, playground, and drinking fountain as well as several heritage features, open lawn areas, and mature trees. The park's historical significance and unique site constraints will be taken into consideration when planning the design.

Park improvements may include:

- Additional heritage interpretation elements
- New social gathering spaces
- Upgrades to existing pathways
- New site furnishings (i.e. benches, chairs, seat walls and/or picnic tables)
- Updated historical interpretive signage, including an Indigenous history component, to be integrated with City's new wayfinding system
- General site improvements including upgrades to the existing granite border/pathway, playground improvements, and a refresh of existing monuments
- New planting features and trees
- New grass
- Lighting improvements
- A potential integrated art feature

Project Timeline

- Winter 2022: Hire a design team
- Summer 2022 to Summer 2023: Community engagement and design development
- Fall 2023 to Spring 2024: Detailed design and hire a construction team
- Summer 2024: Construction starts

The timeline is subject to change.

Draft Drivers of Change

As an outcome of the engagement that occurred during Phase 1A of the community engagement process, the project team has developed the following draft Drivers of Change. The Drivers of Change are the factors driving the need for the park improvements, as identified by participants in the process.

A rich colonial history

Victoria Memorial Square is a unique park site with a rich cultural heritage that dates back to the founding of the city of York. It is part of the Fort York National Historic Site and the King-Spadina Heritage Conservation District and is the site of Toronto's first

settler cemetery, which includes burials of military personnel and their family members. There is an opportunity to further enhance the heritage of this site while bringing forward new heritage interpretations.

A rich Indigenous history

Victoria Memorial Square is a site steeped in colonial history, but the story does not start there. There is also a rich and ancient Indigenous history to the site that is tied to its adjacency to Taddle Creek and the former Lake Ontario shoreline, in addition to the roles of First Nations in the War of 1812. This presence is not adequately represented in the current space.

A protected commemorative landscape

Despite its heritage significance, the park has become damaged and spoiled by heavy use. In addition, many of the graves are relatively shallow, and are at constant risk of being compromised by dog activity. The park improvements must preserve and protect the site's historic cemetery and other heritage resources from further deterioration and should reflect respect for the importance of this commemorative landscape.

A growing and evolving neighbourhood

The neighbourhood surrounding the park has seen dramatic increases in population growth in recent years, thanks to new development. There is a need for the park to support changing demographics as well as intensified use in this rapidly-changing area of the city. This will mean making park improvements that allow for a wider range of uses at various times of the day, and that are durable, sustainable and can withstand high traffic usage patterns.

Out-of-balance park uses

As the community has grown around the park, the balance of users has changed. This has led to conflicts between user groups, including dogs and their owners, children and their caregivers, and others who use the space as a place to rest or hang out. There is a need for park improvements that enhance the existing park programs through the lenses of inclusivity, safety and accessibility to ensure that all park users are able to enjoy this public space.

Thought Exchange

As a key activity in Phase 1B of the engagement process, the project team conducted an online thought exchange from February 16 to March 1, 2023. A thought exchange is a type of survey that enables community members to both share their thoughts and ideas as well as to read and rate those of other participants' in a collaborative, two-way process. This tool allows staff and the public to understand the community's priorities better than a typical survey would allow.

The goal of the thought exchange was to define an overall vision for the park improvements, including a series of Design Principles which will guide the development of design options in Phase 2.

The thought exchange received **188** thoughts and **8,500** ratings from **270** participants of various ages and backgrounds.

Who Participated

- 24% of participants were 19 to 29 years old, 47% were 30 to 39 years old, 23% were 40 to 55 years old, and 3% were 56 to 64 years old
- 43% of participants identified as a woman and 28% as a man
- 52% of participants identified as white, 15% as Asian, 12% as a person of colour, and 5% as Latin American
- 16% of participants identified as an immigrant or refugee
- 2% of participants identified as First Nations
- 6% of participants identified as a person living with a disability
- 17% of participants identified as LGBTQ2S+
- 15% of participants had access to private outdoor space like a yard, 19% to semi-private/shared outdoor space, and 61% to only public spaces like parks

For a full summary of participant demographics, including a graphic representation of these numbers, please see the Appendix.

How We Reached People

The community was informed of the thought exchange through print and digital media.

Signage near the site

Project information was displayed on large notice boards placed in the park. These notice boards provided information about the project, details about the thought exchange, and how to access additional information on the project webpage.

eFlyer

A digital flyer was circulated to community groups and the local Councillor's Office for additional distribution.

Social Media and Digital Ads

The City of Toronto used its Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts to promote the thought exchange through paid advertisements and organic posts from February 16 to March 1, 2023.

Project Webpage

A webpage (toronto.ca/VictoriaMemorialSquare) was created to serve as a communications portal to inform the public about the park improvements project. The webpage features up-to-date information regarding the project and engagement opportunities, including links to the thought exchange and a button to sign up for e-updates.

Key Insights

Participants were asked to complete the following statement: **"After the park improvement project, Victoria Memorial Square will be a place to/that..."**

The highest rated thoughts were:

1. **An outdoor space that the neighbourhood is proud of.** King west is a vibrant neighbourhood with a community requiring beautiful outdoor spaces for mental health. (4.6 rating)
2. **Has plenty of well kept, green grass to lounge and relax on, trees for shade, and some public seating like benches to sit and read a book.** There are so many condos and buildings in the area but not enough green spaces where everyone can relax in and enjoy the outdoors. (4.6 rating)
3. **Green.** Need a place to rest (4.5 rating)
4. **Relax and hang out.** There are few downtown parks that offer the same sort of quiet and relaxing atmosphere as VMS. It is a gem. (4.5 rating)
5. **Is a green oasis in the city.** Open green spaces are scarce in these areas. (4.5 rating)
6. **Relax in a calm, green oasis.** Because this is a special and sacred space within the city. (4.5 rating)
7. **Sit and lounge.** To have inviting, calm, green space. (4.5 rating)

The thoughts were organized into 15 themes. Ranked by the total number of thoughts within each theme, the top five themes were:

1. A place to relax/hang out/sit (72 thoughts)
2. A place to bring your dog (53 thoughts)
3. A place without dogs/dog poop (45 thoughts)
4. A green oasis (39 thoughts)
5. A place for honouring/remembering/learning (30 thoughts)

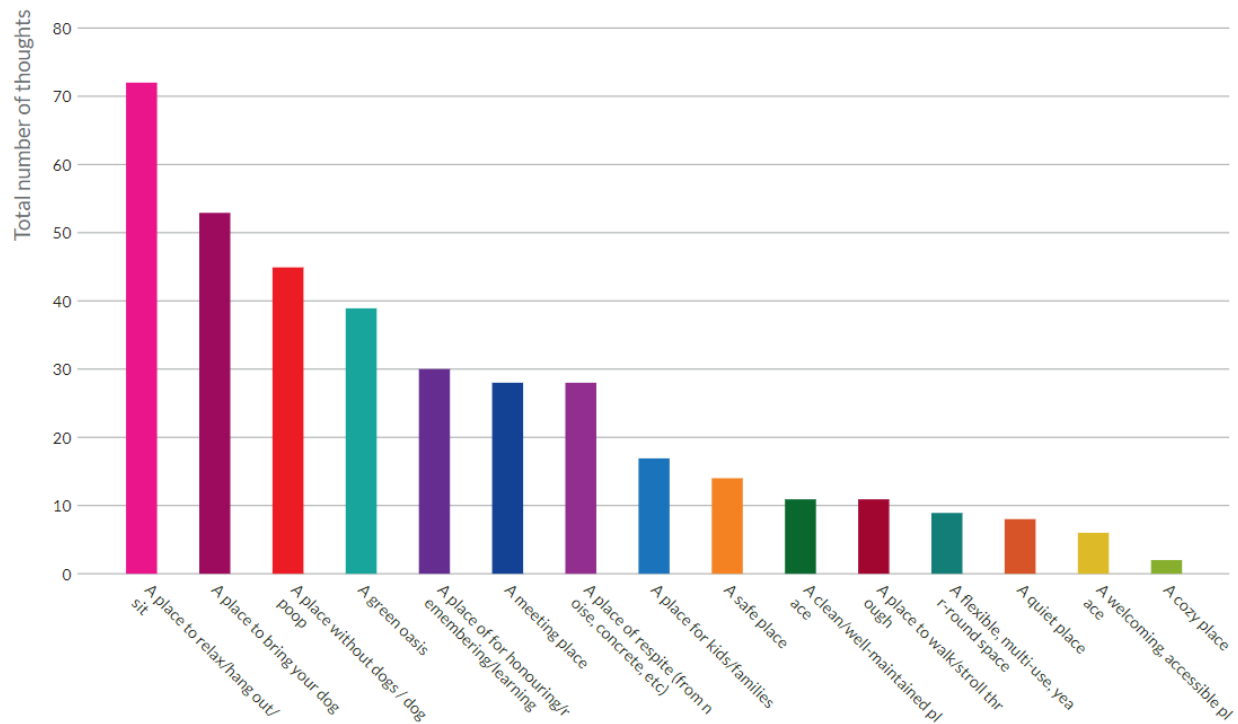


Table 1: Themes organized by the total number of thoughts within each.

When taking into account the ratings that participants assigned to each thought, a different set of priorities emerged. The theme “A green oasis” moved from fourth place to first, “A cozy place” moved from last place to second – rising 13 places – and “A place to bring your dog” moved from second place to last – falling 13 places.

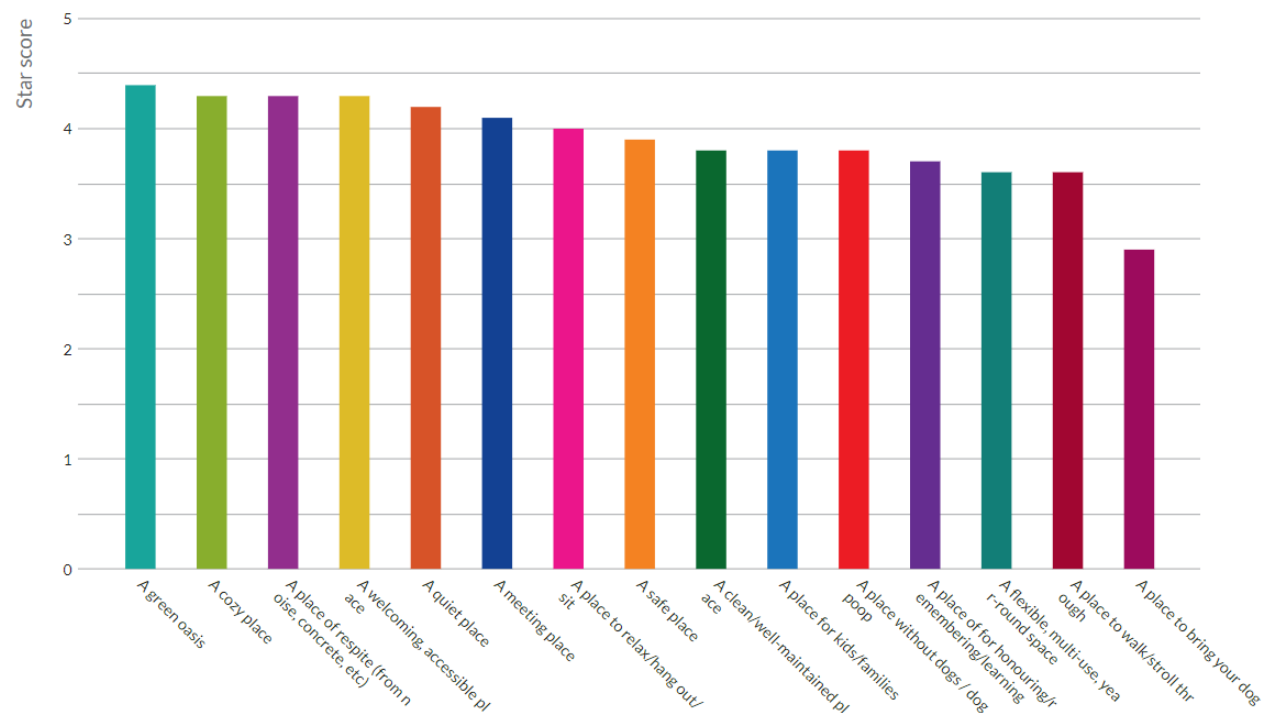


Table 2: Themes organized by the average rating of thoughts within each.

Ranked by the average rating of thoughts within each theme, referred to as the star score, the top five themes were:

1. A green oasis (**4.4** star score)
2. A cozy place (**4.3** star score)
3. A place of respite [from noise, concrete, etc.] (**4.3** star score)
4. A welcoming, accessible place (**4.3** star score)
5. A quiet place (**4.2** star score)

The thought exchange also identified areas of common ground between those who strongly supported the presence of dogs in the park and those who strongly opposed it. Despite their disagreement about dogs, both of these groups prioritized a place to sit, lounge, and relax as well as a quiet green space to enjoy nature and trees. These priorities are reflected in the draft vision for the park.

A full, interactive summary of the thought exchange, including the complete set of thoughts and ratings, can be accessed [online](#).

Design Charrette

A design charrette was held with the Community Advisory Committee (CAC) from 5:30 to 8 p.m. on March 7, 2023, at Fort York Public Library. The purpose of the charrette was to convene community members to actively generate and explore ideas that are reflective of the feedback received through the broader community engagement that has taken place so far and that could inform the park improvement options moving forward. Ten members of the advisory committee participated in the charrette, all of whom reside within close proximity to the park.

The following City of Toronto staff were in attendance:

- Lara Herald, Senior Project Coordinator
- David O'Hara, Park Design Manager
- Daniel Fusca, Public Consultation Manager
- José Ramón Martí, Public Consultation Coordinator

Councillor Ausma Malik, her staff, and design consultants from The Planning Partnership were also in attendance.

The charrette began with a presentation to set the context for the exercise: drivers of change, results of engagement to date, include outcomes of the thought exchange, observations of the site and context, draft vision and principles, and precedents for the park improvement. Following the presentation, participants worked in two table groups, each led by The Planning Partnership staff.

Key Insights

Design Vision and Principles

A preliminary draft of the project Design Vision and Principles was shared with the CAC. The following is a summary of the discussion regarding the draft design vision and principles:

- It's important to keep Victoria Memorial Square in the context of Wellington Place, part of an ensemble, not on its own
- In the vision, reference to a national historic site and the 1834 plan (maybe a principle)
- With construction of the Ontario Line at King and Bathurst, there will be increased pressure on use of the park
- Need a principle that addresses cycling, how it is accommodated in and around the park
- Need a principle that addresses maintenance, given all of the complicated objectives, need a stationary maintenance team, as opposed to "flying squad"
- Not a typical park; it's a square and needs a different approach

Although outside the scope of this park improvement project, comments related to future transit infrastructure, cycling infrastructure outside the park, and park maintenance were noted, will be taken into consideration as part of site context, and will be coordinated with relevant divisions, as required. With respect to cycling infrastructure within the park boundary, given limited availability of space, site constraints and safety concerns, integration of cycling infrastructure within the park would be limited.

Site Context and Conditions

The following is a summary of the discussion regarding the team's observations of site context and conditions:

- Likely more graves than the City's inventory reveals
- 99% of cemeteries in Ontario do not allow dogs. Need a more aggressive approach in terms of dogs
- No one knew the granite path is the limit of the graveyard. Too subtle to leave in place without information
- Interpretive signs are destroyed. Need a different approach to signage. The Ontario Courthouse and Fort York provide precedents
- Public art can be used to help tell the story
- Dogs are taking the blame for the park condition. The "Thursday to Sunday late night crowd" are also impacting the park
- Think about children – see lots of kids, suggest need to connect with kids. St. Andrew's playground is a good precedent
- Add education of the park, historical representation, in the playground too
- St. Andrew's Park – great precedent for kids and dogs, it's more like a square than a traditional grass and trees park. There are clues there as to how improvements to Victoria Memorial Square should be approached

- More generous hard surface, planting that's not grass, and topography
- If this is read as a field, it may never solve the problem of dogs
- Change it so it is no longer attractive for dogs and dog owners
- Residents have seen health of trees decline over time and the loss of large trees
- Need to clarify the boundaries of the park – part of the park is road right of way, thinking to curb
- Need to clarify the status of irrigation system
- Concern that the design charrette should be grounded in a realistic understanding of what can be done with the capital budget allocated to the project

The following is a summary of the ideas shared in each of the two table groups.

Group #1 Ideas

Cemetery:

- Reimagine the cemetery in a different way
- Make the cemetery more visible, and create a stronger historical presence on the site
- Remove grass on the cemetery and replace with garden/meadow planting
- Activities around the edge of the cemetery, keep the cemetery as calm as possible
- Line edges of cemetery with a barrier, for example long benches combined with a low wall. It would also be a great idea to add lighting to this structure.
- Widen the narrow edge around the cemetery
- Introduce some kind of markers to tell the story of the cemetery
- Maintain fishbone configuration of cemetery
- Hard surface around memorial and at wall
- Create a gathering space around the memorial
- The cemetery is invisible; cemetery should be more visually prominent and tell its own story

Landscape:

- Walk through the gardens to smaller seating areas
- Introduce organic forms and topography to the site
- Enhance the corners of the cemetery and introduce some kind of storytelling: each corner has its own story
- Around the cemetery at the south edge of the park, and in other areas, create topography to discourage dog owners from running through
- Should we think of the space as a park, or more like a square or plaza?

Circulation:

- The diagonal movement through the park is of great importance; increase in the future
- Northeast corner tie into Wellington green way

- It would be interesting to introduce some kind of built structure (like a pergola) at the northeast corner. There was also the possibility of kiosk or public art in this space
- Taking over lane on Wellington
- Maintenance issue
- Make the entrances bigger, add more areas of hard surface

Public art:

- Dedicate a space to public art, preferably with a historical connection

Dogs:

- Most members of the group felt that a fenced dog area will be needed, since there are so many dogs and dog owners here daily
- Perhaps a temporary dog area, which could be removed in the future

Play area:

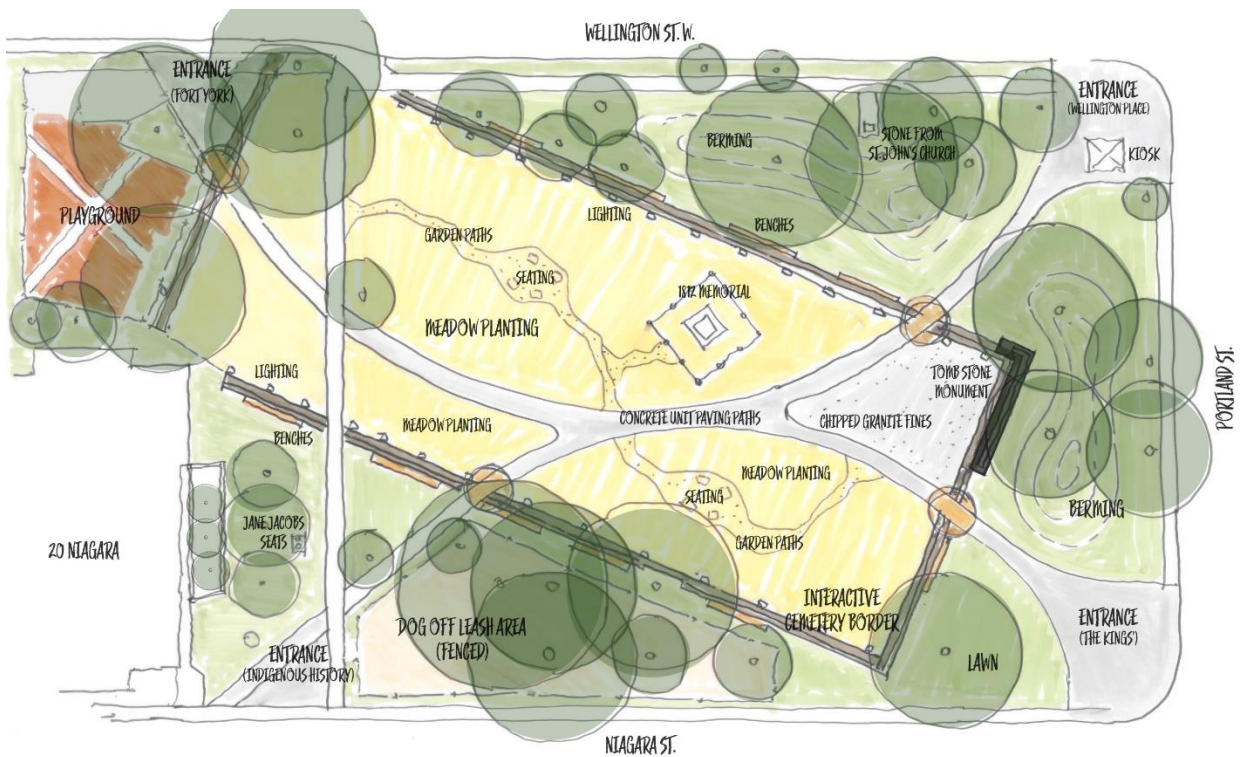
- Add more play elements to the entrance at the northwest corner, to tie into the playground. Play elements should have a historical connection

Key direction:

- Maintain the wishbone path circulation layout through cemetery
- Introduce themed park entrances at each corner (Kings, Wellington Place, Indigenous, Fort)
- Introduce a garden meadow over the cemetery
- Increase the legibility of the cemetery and its border with lighting and a widened granite walkway
- Increase seating in the park
- Introduce decorative lighting for heritage features including the cemetery, 1812 monument and gravestones
- Create an off-leash dog area



A sketch of potential park improvements created by Group #1.



A refined drawing of potential park improvements proposed by Group #1 prepared by the City's design consultant.

Group #2 Ideas

Cemetery:

- Explore ways to help make cemetery read more as a cemetery
- The character of the existing east end of the park by the markers was described positively as “romantic”; area most similar to a mature arboretum-like cemetery; whimsical round benches
- Enhance the edge, raise cemetery and incorporate wall, lighting to control access through the site

Landscape:

- Raising topography; especially angled berms, strategic walls, meandering paths, lighting, storytelling
- Look at European and New York park precedents with low fences or gardens around areas that are not for pedestrian traffic; European parks with lawn, but no dogs/traffic
- Some members felt the garden space directly east of 20 Niagara should be integrated into the park; at minimum all agree the snow fence should come down or be replaced

Circulation:

- Reduce the number of park pathway entrances; focus them into clearer entrances to direct pedestrian traffic
- Interested in highlighting the northeast corner and the connection to the wider street to the east (two pedestrian crossings); a potential space for a grander entrance
- Re-route circulation to avoid the park being used as a short cut, discouraging cut through traffic by pedestrians/cyclists/delivery e-bikes
- Widen perimeter sidewalks to encourage people to walk around the park
- Focus on the park being a destination, not just a cut through
- Add bollards or other furnishings along Niagara to prevent delivery trucks from parking on the sidewalks; safety concern

Dogs:

- How to reconsider two opposing uses; heritage significance while also dealing with issue of dogs
- Initially the group did not want dogs allowed; discussed that “good” dog owners would go to Clarence Square if site features prevented dogs from using the space
- Felt that some kind of dog relief area would still be needed for all the condo traffic, but it should not be large or the focus of the park; one of the peripheral spaces
- Some members liked the artificial turf at St. Andrews park and felt it performed well, might have an application in a small area here

- Some members agreed that people walking their dogs at night helped spaces feel safer
- Dog park at perimeter – e.g. St. Andrew's park

Park infrastructure (e.g. lighting, seating):

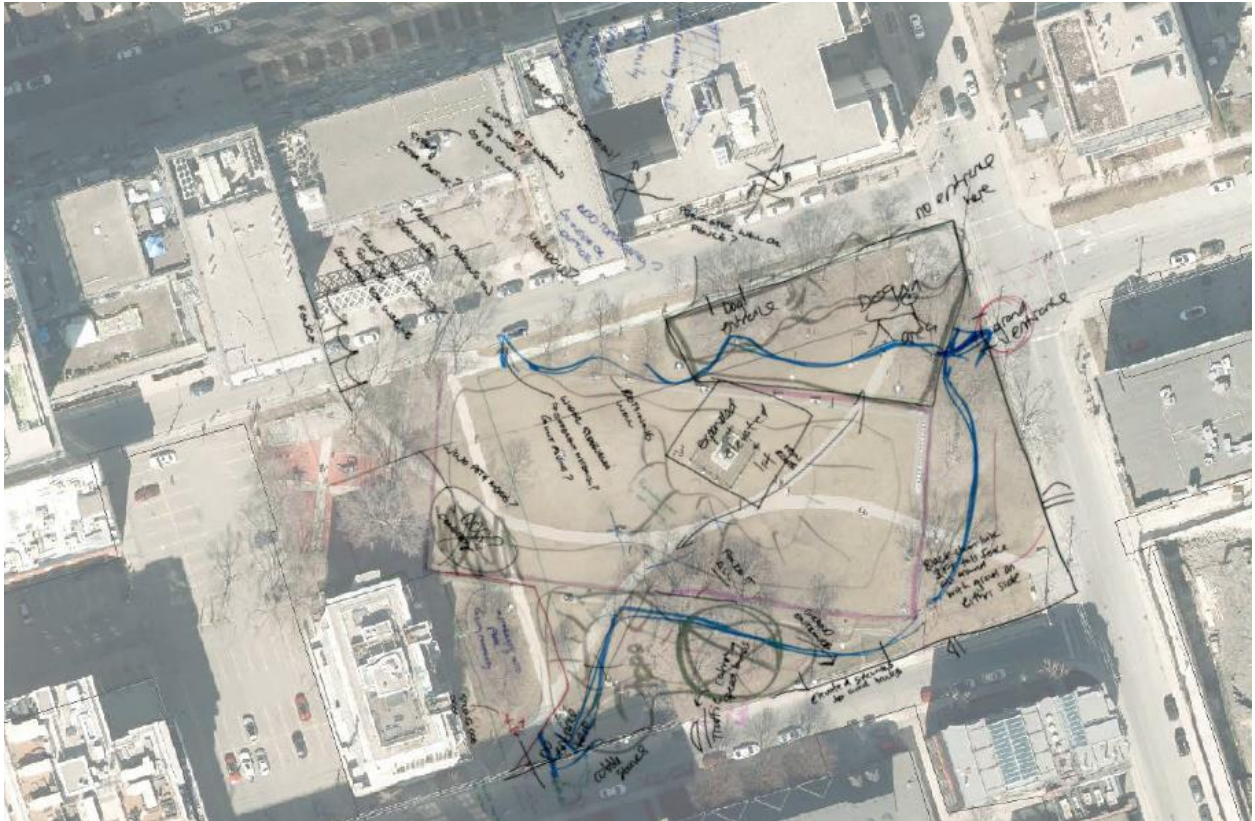
- Value high quality seating
- Interested in lighting, described the park as dark; the lighting at St. Andrew's and at CAMH was described as cool, creating a feeling of safety
- Lighting trees or features at night was discussed

Signage:

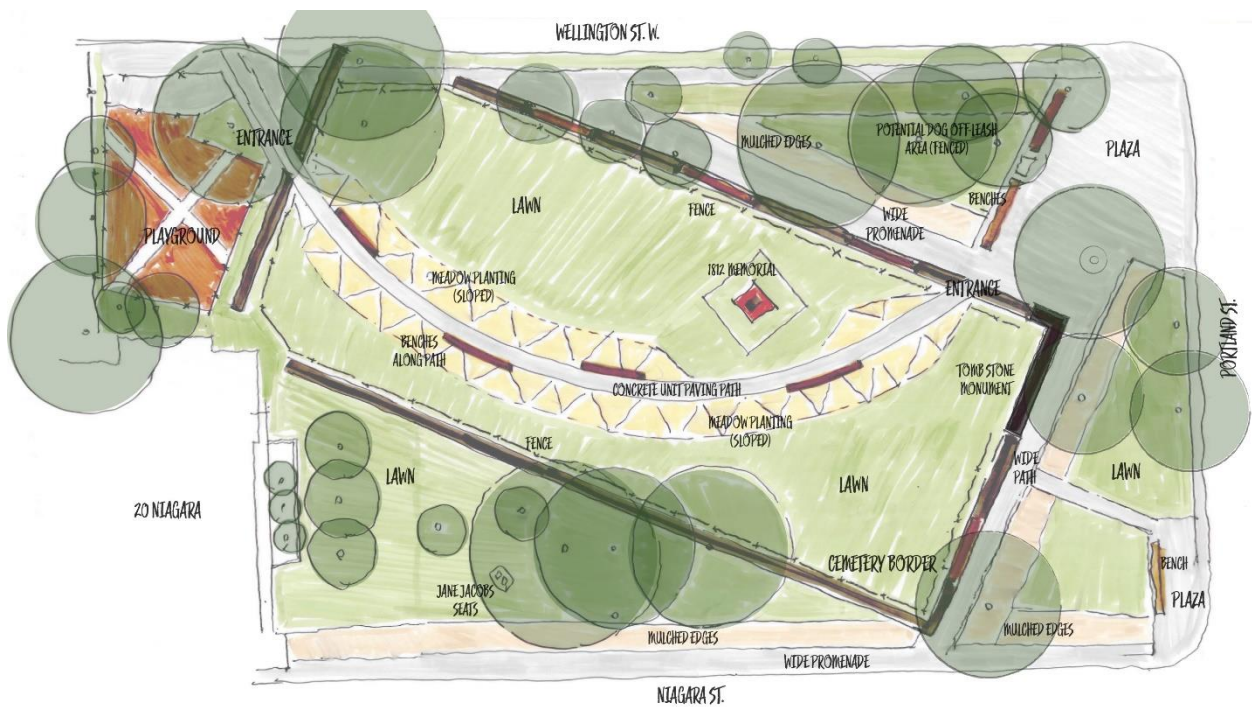
- The Weston entrance to the ROM was discussed as an example of aesthetically pleasing signage with the text "ROM" in the beech hedge

Key direction:

- Create a more quiet and contemplative space in the area of the cemetery by redirecting primary paths of travel to the periphery of the site
- Introduce topographical features or vertical elements such as walls or low fences around the perimeter of the burial area, to enhance its presence in the park and deter movement across
- Introduce more lighting and seating around the perimeter of the park to accommodate passive activities and improve safety
- Enhance the historical character of the park, and use design elements to communicate the narrative of the space



A sketch of potential park improvements created by Group #2.



A refined drawing of potential park improvements proposed by Group #2 prepared by the City's design consultant.

Draft Design Vision and Principles

Draft Design Vision

Incorporating the insights and reflecting the priorities and concerns shared by community members during the first phases of engagement, the project team has drafted the following vision statement:

Victoria Memorial Square is a **green oasis** and **cultural gem** in a fast-changing neighbourhood. It is valued as both a **meeting place** and a **sanctuary**: a cozy place to retreat to; a place to gather, sit, and relax.

The park works well for a lot of different people: families picnicking, friends relaxing, people walking their pets, and so many others just passing through. It's an inclusive, accessible, clean, and safe place for everyone.

The park is also a place of discovery that both honours and celebrates its **rich heritage**, from centuries of use by Indigenous people living in settlements along Garrison Creek and the Lake Ontario shoreline, to its colonial uses as a **Military Cemetery, War of 1812 Memorial** and **public park**. The park's role in the larger context of the historic Wellington Place plan, and its relationship to nearby Clarence Square via Wellington Street, is reflected in the enhanced park design.

Other, more contemporary memorials are equally celebrated, including the park's Jane Jacobs benches, and tree and bench dedications. **Activities or uses that might damage the park's cherished cultural heritage and its archaeological resources or disrupt the park's delicate balance of users, including off-leash dog walking, are both managed and limited.**

Draft Design Principles

Based on input from the community, the project team has drafted the following design principles:

1. Balance the needs of a wide range of users.
2. Manage and limit off leash dog use within the cemetery and park.
3. Ensure a healthy and thriving tree canopy and landscape.
4. Integrate and celebrate Indigenous placekeeping into the heritage narrative and park design.
5. Preserve and celebrate the colonial heritage including the Military Cemetery and War of 1812 Memorial.
6. Preserve and celebrate the contemporary heritage of the park including the Jane Jacobs benches, memorial benches and trees.
7. Recognize and tie the park restoration design to the Wellington Street revitalization and Clarence Square.
8. Ensure the park is well lit and safe and feature lighting is integrated to amplify the cultural heritage elements.

9. Integrate heritage interpretation at key entrances and within the park.
10. Include green space and plantings to create an oasis where people can relax and lounge in a place of respite.
11. Integrate a variety of seating types to make this a welcoming and accessible space where people can hang out and gather.
12. Provide park infrastructure that can withstand increased pressure due to growing population and future transit infrastructure and development coming to the area.

Next Steps

The City's design consultant will be taking all of the inputs gathered through public engagement to date, including the Drivers of Change, the draft Vision and Principles, and the feedback provided by the Community Advisory Committee at the design charrette, and will develop two design options for the park. These design options will be brought forward to the community in the next phase of engagement to be refined into a single option, which will also be refined through public engagement.

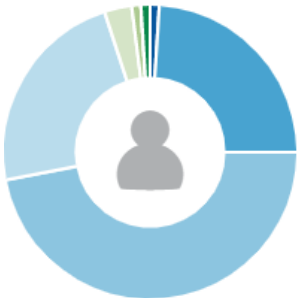
Appendix

Participation languages



%		Answer
98%	(265)	English
2%	(5)	French

How old are you?




%		Answer
0%	(0)	5 to 12 years old
1%	(2)	13 to 18 years old
24%	(62)	19 to 29 years old
47%	(122)	30 to 39 years old
23%	(61)	40 to 55 years old
3%	(8)	56 to 64 years old
1%	(4)	65 to 74 years old
0%	(0)	75 years old or above
1%	(2)	Prefer not to answer

What best describes you and your household's access to outdoor space?



%		Answer
15%	(39)	I/we have access to private outdoor space like a yard
19%	(48)	I/we have access to semi-private/shared outdoor space
61%	(156)	I/we only have access to public spaces like parks (I do not have access to private or semi-private outdoor space)
0%	(1)	Prefer not to answer
5%	(12)	Other

Check all that apply. Do you identify as any of the following?

%		Answer <i>(Multi-select)</i>
2%	(7)	First Nations (status, non-status, treaty or non-treaty), Inuit or Métis and/or Indigenous to Canada
2%	(6)	Black (e.g. African, African-Canadian, Afro-Caribbean)
52%	(134)	White (e.g. English, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Slovakian)
15%	(40)	Asian (e.g. Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Indian, Thai)
5%	(13)	Latin American (e.g. Brazilian, Colombian, Cuban, Mexican, Peruvian)
12%	(33)	A person of colour
17%	(46)	LGBTQ2S+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Two-Spirit)
6%	(17)	Person living with a disability
16%	(42)	Immigrant and/or refugee
43%	(112)	Woman
28%	(74)	Man
0%	(0)	Trans woman
0%	(2)	Trans man
1%	(3)	Gender non-binary (including gender fluid, genderqueer, androgynous)
1%	(3)	Two-Spirit
0%	(0)	None of the above
5%	(15)	Prefer not to answer