



Beyond Bricks and Books: Exploring the Quality of Campus Open Spaces

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The influence of the physical landscape on people's health (Thompson, 2011, Velarde et al., 2007), is well known, however there is little research on examining open spaces on institutional campuses (Peker & Ataöv, 2020). Many higher education institutions are beginning to recognize the value in planning for a variety of open spaces through their Campus Master Plans (CMPs). Having safe and inclusive places of socialization for underrepresented groups are especially crucial for the cultural integration and mental health of students, faculty and staff. Focusing on open spaces as an important element of campus design and essential to complement built form and transportation corridors.

This Master's report aims to assess four campus open spaces at the University of Toronto – St. George and Queen's University. This report will address the following research objectives:

1. Determine policy directions within the campus masterplans and applicable municipal policies with respect to open space,
2. Utilize an evaluation framework to assess the quality of existing open space within the two higher education institutions through post-occupancy evaluation methods,
3. Provide recommendations to improve and better incorporate open spaces within higher education institutions.

Methodology

This research utilizes a mixed-methods, collective case study design. The campus masterplans of both the University of Toronto – St. George and Queen's University were

examined along with any supplementary campus planning documents that would affect the campus' open spaces. An evaluation framework adapted from Damone (2019) was then used to assess four case study sites across both universities – two park sites and two street environments. At the University of Toronto – St. George, St. George St from College St to Harbord St as well as Back Campus and Hart House Circle were selected. At Queen's University, University Ave from Stuart St to Union St as well as Nixon and Benedickson Fields were selected. Each of the 21 criteria was assessed with a Likert scale and accompanying notes by a variety of observers.

Results

Generally, the park sites scored higher than the street environments on most criteria with the University of Toronto scoring higher across more criteria across observation locations than Queen's University. The Accessibility of Environment and Safety sections yielded high scores across all observation sites due to their central location on campus and commitment from both institutions to such in their CMPs. The Engagement or Interaction with the Environment section yielded mid-level scores across various criteria, with the University of Toronto locations scoring higher than those of Queen's University, and park sites scoring higher than street environments. Access to Nature criteria received low scores overall for street environments, although St. George Street generally outperformed University Avenue. However, both park sites received high scores. In terms of Community Engagement, both street environments scored low across all criteria, while park sites generally achieved mid-level scores. Similarly, the Amenities section produced comparable outcomes, with low scores for street environments and mid-level scores for park sites.

Table 1: Average Score at Each Observation Location

Institution	Case Study Site	Observation Location	Score (out of 5)	
University of Toronto – St. George	St. George Street from College Street to Harbord Street	College Street	2.52	
		McLennan Physical Laboratories	2.67	
		Sidney Smith Hall	3.29	
		Harbord Street	2.57	
	Back Campus and Hart House Circle	Back Campus Fields	3.57	
		Gallery Grill	3.90	
		University College Quad	3.09	
		University College Courtyard	4.43	
	Queen’s University	University Avenue from Stuart Street to Union Street	Stuart Street	1.86
			Bader Lane	1.76
Ontario Hall			1.67	
Union Street			1.90	
Nixon and Benedickson Fields		Nixon Field	2.38	
		Agnes Benedickson Field	3.62	
		Summerhill House	3.81	
		Theological Hall	3.52	

Recommendations

The following general recommendations were proposed for both universities:

<p>Collaboration with the City</p> <p>Develop Urban Forest Management Plans and encourage the consolidation of land and resources</p>	<p>Universities as Living Laboratories</p> <p>Establish living labs to catalyze innovative open space development.</p>
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The following recommendations were proposed for each case study site:

<p>Queen's University University Avenue</p> <p>It is recommended that along University Avenue, planters and trees be placed adjacent to the edge of the road, acting as both a visual and physical buffer.</p>	<p>University of Toronto – St. George St. George Street</p> <p>It is recommended that along St. George Street, a variety of seating options be provided.</p>
<p>Queen's University Nixon & Benedickson Fields</p> <p>It is recommended that throughout Nixon and Benedickson fields, a variety of adaptable seating options be provided to accommodate programmable as well as passive interaction spaces. Public art, murals or interactive nature displays should be implemented throughout the area to increase opportunities to linger.</p>	<p>University of Toronto – St. George Back Campus & Hart House Circle</p> <p>It is recommended that bulletin or notice boards be placed throughout Back Campus Fields along with low impact outdoor fitness equipment.</p>

Overall, it is crucial to recognize the numerous challenges in establishing effective open spaces on campus, especially considering land availability and financial resources constraints. Nonetheless, this study offers valuable insights into the utilization of open areas across the campus, pinpointing areas for enhancement and highlighting successful models. It's evident that an assessment of campus open spaces emphasizes the necessity for ongoing cooperation, creativity, and a focus on user needs to guarantee these spaces remain lively, accessible, and welcoming for all university members and beyond.