

Catwalks are little pedestrian short-cuts, usually the length of a house or two. There are no maps, arrows or signs to direct you, but where they lead is intimately known by those who walk through their community.

These pathways were a big part of my childhood. When I was finally old enough to roam around my neighbourhood unsupervised, I found a series of catwalks ending at a tiny park nestled between houses, amongst a group of trees. I had never seen it before and at the time it felt like a dream. And perhaps it was – I was never able to find it again.

Catwalks criss-cross 134 neighbourhoods in Calgary. In many communities, like MacEwan where I grew up, they are short-cuts that navigate you through a sea of impassable cul-de-sacs. Marlborough is one of those communities.



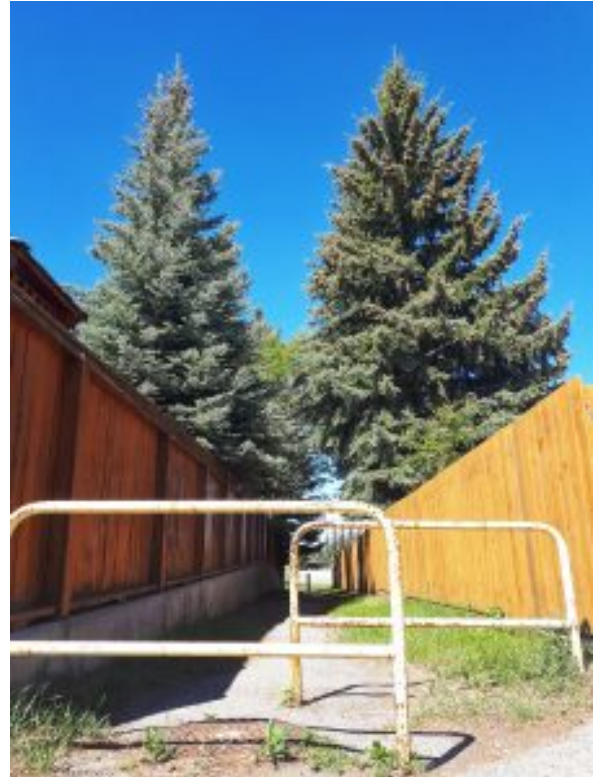
When Sustainable Calgary began the participatory planning process with Marlborough, catwalks were quickly identified as important parts of the community's pedestrian network. A quick google search will prove this. When you use these handy short cuts, Bob Edwards School to TD Bank is a quick 12 minute walk. Skip the catwalks, and you'll be walking for at least 22 minutes. Community members told us that though the catwalks are important, they are also neglected, unsafe, and unkept.

In Calgary, maintenance of catwalks is the responsibility of homeowners and as such, their upkeep varies greatly. My dad proudly tells me of the lilies he planted in the one next to his Brentwood home. Yet many catwalk caretakers are unaware, unable, or unwilling to carry out these responsibilities. This means that these pathways are often neglected, exactly what Marlborough residents told us. In spite of this, they are well-used, and often those users are children.



That's why, when we began our work in Marlborough's catwalks in July, we didn't do it alone. Youth from the YMCA Marlborough Kids in Motion program worked with us. We wanted their input because kids tend to see things differently and their imaginations help us to think outside the box, to design and empathize in new ways.

When we gave these youth the opportunity to redesign the catwalks they use every day, it was no surprise that they came up with beautiful, brilliant ideas. One child said that he was scared to use the catwalks at night, especially in the winter when it gets dark. So when he began his catwalk redesign, he added lighting, and for good measure, a snowball launcher. Some drew gardens and pools and lemonade stands. Others added crosswalks and removed the yellow barriers that prevent many people from using the catwalks. Their designs taught us that they wanted fun and art, but they also wanted equity and safety.



Using their ideas as inspiration, we redesigned the catwalk together. Solar lights were installed to line the pavement and wooden pallets were made into fruit and vegetable gardens. The kids painted bird feeders and hung them at each entrance.

The next week, we came back to see how the community had responded to the catwalk. We were struck by the contrast of the catwalk we had reimagined and its neighbour. The path we had worked so hard on looked just as it had the day we built it. The watering cans, lanterns, and solar lights were still there, plants were blooming, and not a piece of litter was in sight. But the neighbouring catwalk told a different story. A shopping cart stood where it hadn't before, and new trash littered the walkway.

So, in August, we redesigned that catwalk too. A neighbour mowed the lawn, we cut down weeds and the shopping cart was returned. The kids from the YMCA painted canvases to display and a crosswalk to connect the catwalks.



As we sat together and painted, one of the neighbours came by. She told us she had lived in Marlborough for more than 40 years and that when she first saw us working, she thought that the catwalks would be nice for a day or two before everything went missing. It was Marlborough, after all. We heard that a lot. Neighbours called their community “Murderborough”, and joked about how everything would get stolen or broken. The neighbour smiled and said that as days and weeks passed, she saw that the catwalks were cared for and respected. “It goes to show,” she said, “that people really feel pride for their neighbourhood”.



Throughout the process, this pride was palpable. Neighbours helped paint, hang lights, and water the gardens. One day, a child from the YMCA program biked over with his friends to show them what he had accomplished. He toured them through the catwalk, showing them the garden. “This is kale” he said, “it’s healthy for you”. He showed them the bird houses he painted and the lights he helped to hang.

These catwalks had been described as unsafe and scary. And rightly so. Yet, when we came back week after week, there were signs that the catwalks we redesigned were being used, and not only to pass from street to street. The hula-hoops we left leaned against the fence and new chalk drawings covered the pavement, welcoming people into the catwalks and telling them to “have a great day!”.



Research tells us that if people have a hand in changing their communities for the better, [there will be less vandalism and theft](#), more care and respect. This small project, a tiny pop-up of two catwalks redesigned in two days, confirmed this for us. When you make spaces safe and welcoming, it

gets kids outside, it gets neighbours talking, and it makes people feel pride for where they live.



But we are not done yet. There are 21 catwalks in Marlborough. We have partnered with Marlborough Elementary School and Antyx Community Arts and are working towards getting more permanent changes made to the catwalks. Wayfinding, lighting, and accessibility are our priorities, and our hope is that these changes can be made throughout Calgary. If we can accomplish that, we can encourage kids to get outside, to get neighbours talking, and to build community pride in 134 communities across Calgary.