

WORKSHOP PACKAGE:

WALKING IN THE SUBURBS

FIVE QUALITATIVE TOOLS FOR MAPPING LOW DENSITY ENVIRONMENTS

Activity Type: Understand

Participant Audience: Residents or community groups

Objectives

Canada is increasingly an urban nation. As the share of Canadians living in urban centres continues to grow, the growth of the suburbs is still higher (Statistics Canada, 2017). In addition, many areas that fall within 'urban' areas from a statistical point of view may actually look more like a suburb: largely car dependent, low density, and divided into separated land use areas.

Borrowing from a rich tradition of understanding the urban environment through observation from Kevin Lynch and Jane Jacobs, to the well developed public life study methods of Jan Gehl and Brigitte Svarre, and more recently the urban diary methods of Charles Wolfe, this suite of tools is uniquely adapted to observing suburban environments. It is an easy to use guide for leading a workshop that will give participants a new perspective on their everyday suburban environment and help them to articulate challenges and identify opportunities towards a neighbourhood that supports an active and healthy lifestyle.



Facilitating the workshop:

This package includes guides and materials to facilitate five exercises to observe and document suburban environments. In addition to this guide, the following materials are needed:


For the workshop leader: access to www.openstreetmap.org for generating base maps of the area, access to a computer & internet at the workshop location (for image and map processing for the share-back discussion), folding chairs for the pop-up public space, smartphone with camera

For participants: Smartphone with camera, stopwatch, markers, pen, clipboard, printouts of the workshop tools



Facilitation Process

The workshop is divided into 4 parts:


- 1. Presentation of themes:** Present rationale and objectives of the tools, and present the 5 themes (introduced on the next page of this booklet) in order to frame the field exploration and discussion.
- 2. Study area orientation:** Create a handout with background information, maps, and photos of the neighbourhood. Give participants an overview of the physical characteristics of the neighbourhood.
- 3. Field exploration:** Use the *five tools* in this package to observe and document the public space. This workshop is designed for an ideal number of 8 people, working in pairs. It can be adapted to more people or fewer people as needed. It could also be used as a resource for a single individual, though it would likely take more than one day to complete the whole set of tools.
- 4. Group discussion:** Upon return, the participants will share the contents of their field exploration, including photos, maps, and notes. The facilitator will upload the images and scan the maps in order to present back to the group and discuss reflections.



Tip: Tools can be added or removed from this workshop depending on the needs of the community. This workshop can be tailored for municipalities, resident's associations and/or community groups who are in the beginning stages of planning changes to a neighbourhood



Tip: Insert local maps into the tool templates using Openstreetmap and/or Google maps. To learn about creating basemaps, use our 'How to Create a Basemap' guide from www.participatoryplanning.ca



Tip: Ensure you have some time to transfer photos and prepare a slide deck for discussion-may be a good time for participants to have a lunch break



Themes:

These six themes provide a basis for participants to consider fresh ways of thinking about the suburbs. Present and discuss the themes at the beginning of the workshop. Be sure to tailor your language to the audience to make sure it is accessible. Try to add relatable examples where possible.



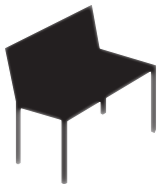
Focus on human interaction: The built environment supports and shapes interactions between people. The suburbs were designed with automobiles in mind, but as we shift to a less car dependent existence it's time to find the spaces for human interaction in the suburbs, whether they were shaped intentionally by professionals or have been retrofitted and appropriated by users. In an environment with less density it can be harder to find these spaces, but the presence of human interaction may be more subtle: worn grass, a space with trash or informal seating can sometimes indicate the presence of gatherings.



Notice how people break the rules: The ways that people use shared space in unintended ways are often clues to what the community may be lacking. People will create holes in fences in order to make more direct walking paths, or use closed off streets for safe spaces to walk for exercise. It is also a common sight in the suburbs to see people riding their bicycles on the sidewalk, even sometimes right next to a freshly painted bike lane. Take note of these instances, and how they might be a sign of a lack of appropriate infrastructure.



Notice non-human 'Public life': A lower density human environment can sometimes mean a rich ecology of plants and animals. Suburban environments often have more green space that can be ecological pathways. Green spaces also provide services such as protection from wind, dust, rain, and sun, which may make a walk around the block more comfortable and inviting.



Consider the 'generosity' of space: Even though we live in a world that is divided into parcels of privately and publicly owned space, each building, street, or park also has a relationship with what is next to it. Consider what different spaces give to the community. Perhaps the convenience store has a sitting area outside that is open to anyone? Maybe the vacant lot is providing a spot for animals to gather, or maybe the lights from a gas station are providing light for the walking path nearby. How could spaces provide more of these services to enhance the overall experience? How can these accidents or gifts help us to plan a better community?



Reject the stereotype that suburbs are bland or uninteresting: In *Retrofitting the Suburbs*, June Williamson argues "the suburbs are diverse, were always diverse and will become even more diverse". Suburbs were planned to be built efficiently and to respond to periods of population and economic growth. Many people consider suburbs to be "cookie-cutter" neighbourhoods. However, for over 100 years suburbs have been built as offshoots of urban centres. Their built form, density, tree canopy, connections to downtowns, and (most importantly) their people are very diverse.



Think at new scales: In *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch argues that people need to be able to 'read' the city as a composition in order to feel oriented and enjoy the city. This concept, called 'imageability', says that there are core design elements that help us to 'read' the city. Suburban neighbourhoods may have been planned to have similar core elements to urban neighbourhoods, but they were likely planned at a scale for the car. Consider how we can break up larger districts into more walkable, human scale areas.

SAMPLE MATERIAL: STUDY AREA INFORMATION

**Facilitators: Prior to the workshop, put together an information sheet like this about the neighbourhood or study area to share with participants.*

Name of Neighbourhood

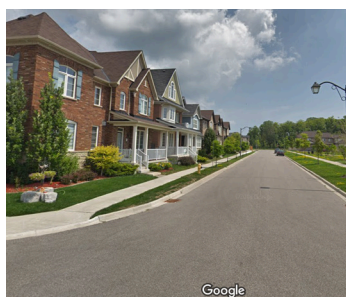
DESCRIPTION OF NEIGHBOURHOOD:

Include a few key characteristics about your study area. When was the neighbourhood built? How many people live here? Is it connected to a larger urban centre? What are the transit and transportation options like in this neighbourhood? Do you have any details about the demographics of people that live here?

Map of Neighbourhood



Photos of the Neighbourhood



TOOL # 1: MAPPING TIME

Objectives:

Movement through the city is a primary way that people interact with cities. By tracking the timing of typical pedestrians and cyclist trips, we can get a sense of the daily experience of active travellers. Sometimes we stop because we see something pleasant, or sometimes something gets in our way and it is frustrating. Additionally, many people walking in the suburbs are actually walking for exercise and not necessarily to get to a destination (Mitra et al, 2015). Having access to continuous barrier-free paths of travel that connect in loops can create enjoyable walking routes. Finally, the suburbs are often areas with a lot of change: new developments and shifting local economies are changing the makeup of suburban neighbourhoods. This series of exercises will document wait times, rhythm and also the larger indicators of change that are present.

Using the Tool

Materials needed for participants:

Smartphone with camera, stopwatch, markers and pens, clipboard

Facilitation Process:

1. **Before you leave** map your route: find a starting point in your study area. Make a loop from your starting point following a common walking route in the neighbourhood. Try to include a nearby transit stop along your route.
2. **Now walk the route.** Use a stopwatch to time your route and note on the map every time you need/want to stop and why. Also note if your walking rhythm is slowed or sped up and why. Make note of wait times at lights and crossings. Also note seating.
3. **When you get to the transit stop**, time the wait until the next transit vehicle.
4. **While walking around**, take notice and photograph a couple of items in the landscape that demonstrate change, either remnants of the past or signs of the future (e.g., abandoned lots, signs advertising new developments, and more)



Neighbourhood in flux: remnant of the past



Neighbourhood in flux: signs of the future

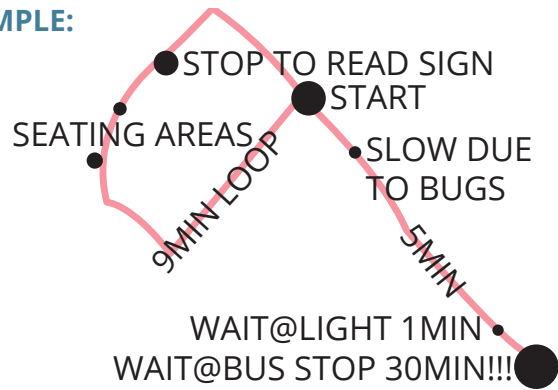
TOOL #1: SAMPLE HANDOUT



View of walking path

Map a loop and a linear journey to a transit stop. Time your journey and make note where you stop, slow down or speed up.

EXAMPLE:



TOOL #2: SUBURBAN DIARY

Objectives:

Traditional urban observation consists of sitting and watching the behaviour of crowds passing through shared spaces. In a less dense area, there may be fewer people to observe. Therefore, it may be more useful and informative to map out a specific journey in more depth. The use of photography can be a means of describing the built environment. Photographs are accessible and easier to read than maps.

Using the Tool

Materials needed for participants:

Smartphone with camera, markers and pens, clipboard

Facilitation Process:

In this activity, you will work in teams to photograph and document a walk through the neighbourhood. You can structure your walk by asking a very specific question or by walking and noting what you observe. Because it can be awkward and rude to take photos of people, instead make notes about people and focus your photos on built environment features.

By following a path from point A to B you can take note of who you encounter on the walk: Where do people seem to be going? What are they doing? Do they interact with you in any way? Are they alone or in groups?

Photowalk:

1. **Before you leave**, decide on the theme of your photowalk— do you want to map specific items like public amenities or alternative modes of travel? Or do you want to just walk and see what you notice?
2. **Map out your path of travel** on the map on the provided handout.
3. **As you walk**, take photos of significant features in the built environment. Notate on the map where you took your images.
4. **Limit yourself** to 10 photos so that they can be easily shared for discussion.

Mapping a walk:

1. **Walk on the same path** of travel as your photo mapping partner.
2. **Take note of people and what they are doing** - how are they using public space? Where are they going? Are they using space in any unintended ways? Do they interact with you?
3. **Take notes on the spaces given**, and notate the locations you've written observations about on the map.

TOOL #2: SAMPLE HANDOUT



Mapping a walk: Walk on the same path of travel as your photomapping partner. Take note of people and what they are doing, how are they using public space? Where are they going? Are they using space in any unintended ways? Do they interact with you? Take notes on the spaces given and notate where you saw them on the map below



- | | |
|----------|-----------|
| 1. _____ | 9. _____ |
| 2. _____ | 10. _____ |
| 3. _____ | 11. _____ |
| 4. _____ | 12. _____ |
| 5. _____ | 13. _____ |
| 6. _____ | 14. _____ |
| 7. _____ | 15. _____ |
| 8. _____ | 16. _____ |



TOOL #3: HUMAN SCALE

Objectives:

Most suburbs are designed with the assumption that people will travel by car. The distances the car can reach in a short time are much greater than by foot or bicycle, thus neighbourhood areas may have been designed to be quite large. The organizing principles of a neighbourhood, defined by Kevin Lynch, include the path, node, edge, district and landmark, each defined below:

- 1) **paths:** routes along which people move throughout the city;
- 2) **edges:** boundaries and breaks in the path;
- 3) **districts:** areas that share common characteristics;
- 4) **nodes:** key areas where major paths connect, or where people might stop and gather
- 5) **landmarks:** easily identifiable physical objects, like sculptures, key buildings, or land formations

These principles may be too large to experience on foot in a suburban neighbourhood. This tool will translate Lynch's organizing principles into a smaller area that can be experienced within a 5-minute walk. Within this smaller walkable study area, what do the organizing principles become? Are they present or are they missing? This exercise will help to recognize what opportunities exist to make the sub-districts more walkable.

Using the Tool

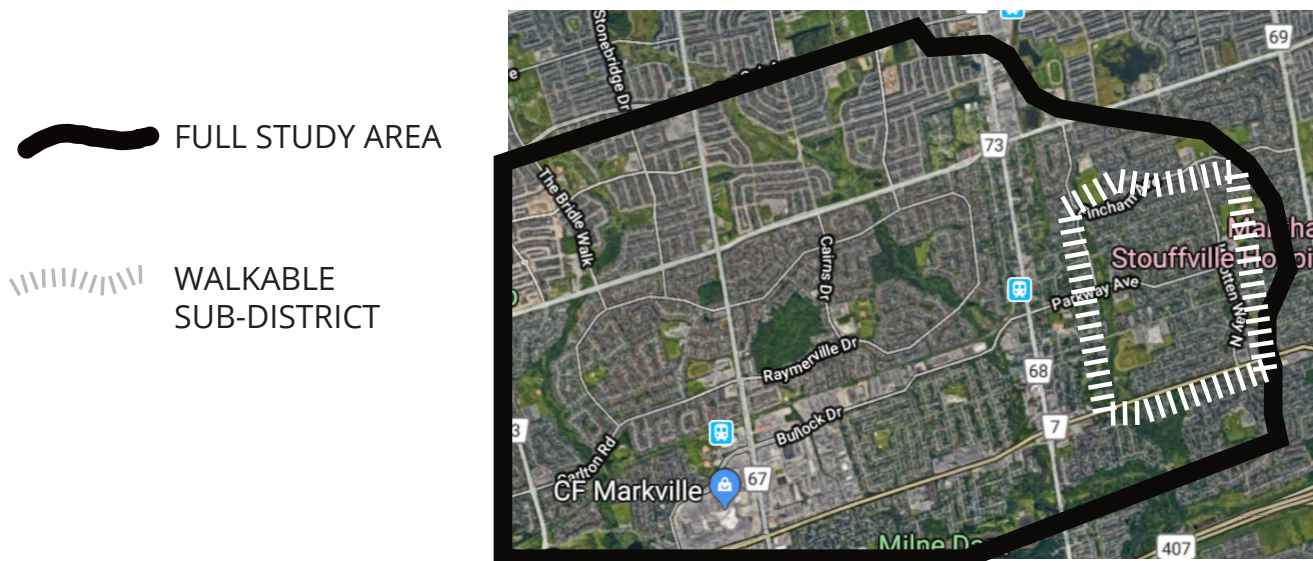
Materials needed for participants:

Markers and pens, clipboard, printout of map/workshop tools

Facilitation Process:

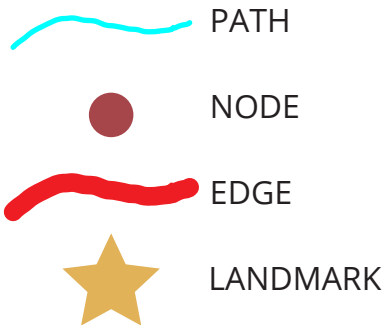
- 1) **Map the walkable district:** Before you leave, map out a smaller walkable district within your larger study area (.5 km square will be roughly a 5 minute walk radius). (See Sample Material below)

Example of breaking the study area into a walkable sub-district:



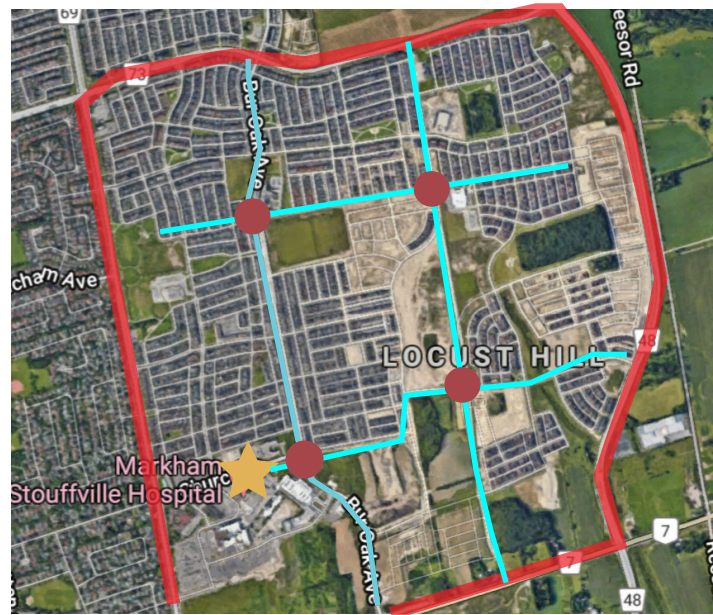
TOOL #3: HUMAN SCALE

2. **On a map of the walkable subdistrict**, add paths, edges, districts, landmarks, and nodes to this map, based on where you think these elements will be within the walkable district.

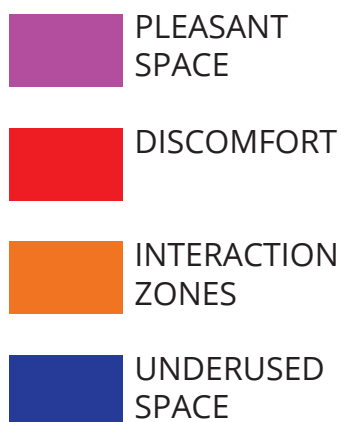


Remember:

- Examples of major paths may be roads but also may be pedestrian paths
- Nodes are places where major paths connect.
- Edges could be freeways that cut off traffic, or natural edges such as rivers or woods.
- Landmarks are usually structures or special areas that stand out from the rest.



3. **Take a clean copy of the map with you, and record your experiences as you walk:** As you walk through the district and observe the space, use colours to map a series of other factors that affect your experience in this space such as:



4. **Reflect and discuss:** Do these experiences relate to the paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks you've identified? Remember, There are no right or wrong answers for this activity. It is based on your own experience and perception.

TOOL #4: POP-UP PUBLIC SPACE

Objectives:

In the suburbs, interactions in public space may be scarce. An observer may need to create opportunities, or magnets of interaction, in order to explore how people use space. This tool proposes low-cost temporary means of altering public space, such as placing chairs or props in strategic locations.

Pop-up public space demonstration projects are a great way to show people the power of improving the public realm. In this exercise, take out a set of low cost folding chairs and set them up in a public space. Choose the space carefully--try to find areas that have some element of wind and shade protection as well as a spot that connects with converging paths.

Using the tool

Materials needed: Folding chairs, clipboard, markers and pens

Facilitation Process:

1. **Set up the chairs and find a nearby spot to observe** from afar and see if anyone uses them or is puzzled by them. Make notes. Note the location and take notes on the next page.
2. **Go sit in the chairs with your partner**, if people come by, let them know what you're doing and ask them what they think.



TOOL #5: FOCAL POINT

Objectives:

Higher rates of cycling in suburban areas are often associated with the presence of large institutional buildings (Verlinden, 2018). These buildings are often centres of employment, and may have the capacity to provide programs and infrastructure to support cycling and walking. This tool gives participants a framework for evaluating the performance of larger buildings in the neighbourhood.

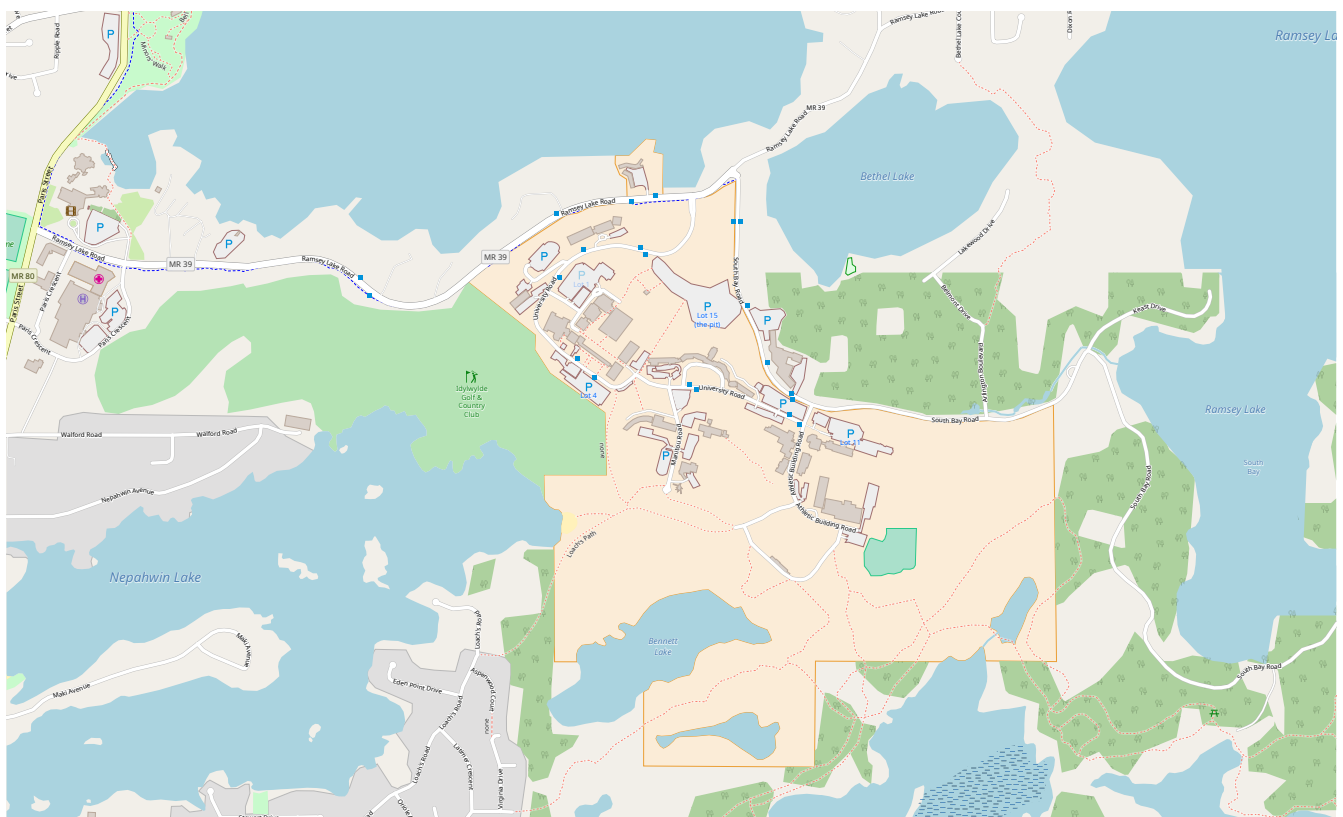
Using the tool

Materials needed: Focal point checklist (available for print on the following page), basemap, clipboard, markers

Facilitation Process:

1. **Find a focal point:** A focal point is a building or group of buildings in your neighbourhood that stands out, it may be larger, have multiple uses, or may be a large destination. Hospitals, colleges, government buildings, libraries, recreation centres, even your local shopping mall could be your focal point.
2. **Circle and label** your chosen focal point on the map.
3. Visit the site with your partner and **complete the checklist** on the next page.

Insert a map of your study area, so that participants can mark their focal points.



FOCAL POINT CHECKLIST

PROVISIONS FOR WALKING

- Wide, comfortable sidewalks
- Street trees, shade
- Pedestrian access to main entrance
- Accessible pathways
- Well-lit paths
- Public seating, benches
- Good access to transit
- Waste disposal
- Pedestrian paths have buffer from traffic

PROVISIONS FOR CYCLING

- Bike lanes, any type
- Bike parking, any type
- Secure bike parking, bike lockers etc.
- Signs of programming that encourages cycling
- Are bikes allowed indoors?
- Showers
- Connections to any public cycling route

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS
