

Rx for Social Connection

Public space as a strategy
to combat loneliness

the bentway

Gehl

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content

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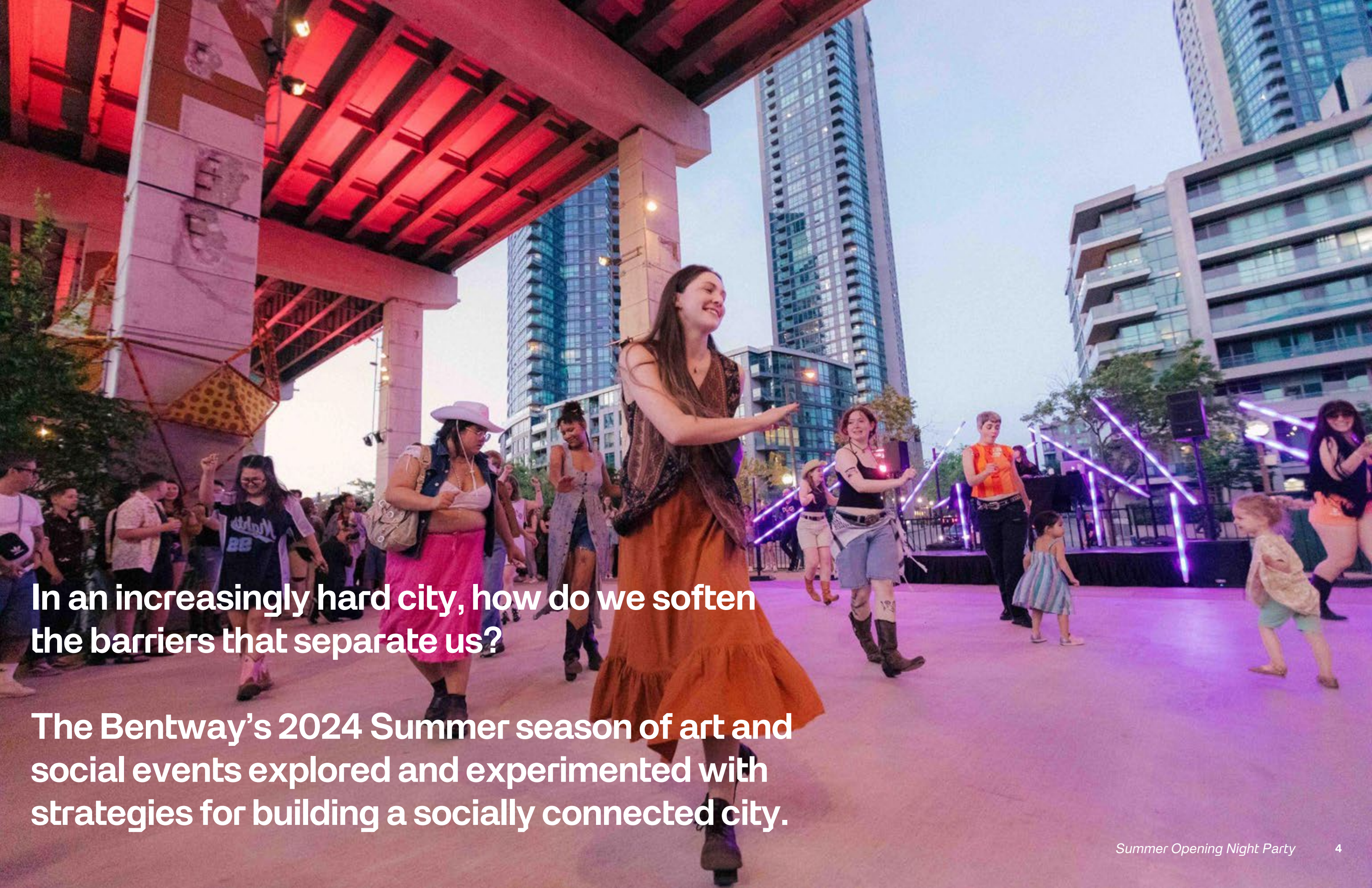
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In an increasingly hard city, how do we soften the barriers that separate us?

The Bentway's 2024 Summer season of art and social events explored and experimented with strategies for building a socially connected city.

foreword

In a large urban centre like Toronto, it can be a struggle to meet new people or even strike up a conversation with a neighbour. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated pre-existing loneliness trends and, though social distancing mandates have receded, isolation across the city continues to rise with many people going days without human interaction.

In 2024, Toronto was named the loneliest city in Canada. According to The Toronto Foundation's 2023 "Vital Signs" report (an annual issued by the Foundation that tracks the quality of life for city residents) 43% of Torontonians report never seeing their neighbours and 37% of us report feeling lonely at least three days a week.

This should be alarming, but it is unfortunately on-trend for cities everywhere. The U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, recently declared a widespread crisis of loneliness and isolation, noting a public health crisis on the scale of the opioid epidemic.

Our collective response to this crisis must consider a number of complex factors, including how we build neighbourhoods that enable authentic, meaningful, and barrier-free connections to those around us. Public spaces like The Bentway have long modelled ways to soften our cities. They play a unique but underappreciated role as critical public health tools that can counter this dangerous trend.

The following report brings together public space operators, urban strategists, public health practitioners, artists and designers to draw learnings from our public spaces and discover the necessary conditions for people to gather, meet, grow, and thrive.

The findings are surprising only in their simplicity - sticky public spaces support sociability; seating and natural features create the necessary conditions for connections; arts-led programming drives meaningful encounters with friends and strangers alike; and people take comfort from sharing space with other people. Though cities may have become harder places to live, the tools and tactics to foster social connection are luckily easy to action.

It's time to recognize that our parks, squares, sidewalks, and trails are not just places for leisure and recreation, but indeed vital parts of our health ecosystem. Strong communities, and the social connections we all need, are built in public space.

Are public spaces the antidote we need for urban loneliness?

1. state of social connection



loneliness

A subjective phenomenon that occurs when there is a mismatch between the social connections we have and the social connections we desire.¹

Loneliness is on the rise in cities across the world, with serious broader health impacts. While occasional loneliness can be normal – chronic loneliness has been associated with critical physical and mental health issues, including a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death. A study published in American Psychologist found that a lack of social connection is as harmful to mortality as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day and significantly more detrimental than alcohol, physical inactivity, obesity, and air pollution.²

What do we mean when we say 'loneliness'? In the public health field, the definition of loneliness is less about the quantity of social interactions we have, and more about the quality of our social connections. When we lack the social connections we desire, our quality of life is significantly impacted. This concept extends beyond social interactions to a deeper, more existential form of loneliness – the feeling that we matter to others and whether our connections feel meaningful. This could stem from experiences of social exclusion, discrimination, or a lack of recognition in the faceless bureaucracies and technocracies of modern life, particularly in big cities. Addressing this form of loneliness is central to approaches like social prescribing, which shift the focus from “what's the matter with you” to “what matters to you” and affirm that “you matter.”³

“ Social isolation and loneliness hurt our cardiovascular systems, our brains and our mental health; we’re at higher risk for dementia and heart attacks and strokes. And this is because we’re biologically designed to be in relationships with other people. When we don’t have relationships, we don’t have life.”

**Kate Mulligan, Assistant Professor,
University of Toronto Dalla Lana School of Public Health**

Loneliness is a global urban challenge.

Loneliness is a personal yet universal experience. The global increase in loneliness is deeply rooted in place design, social norms, and systemic injustices. A study surveying respondents from 101 countries found that regardless of culture or nationality, individuals with insufficient financial resources, poor physical or mental health, weak neighborhood connections, less than four years of residence in their neighborhood, or those living alone against their will had higher odds of experiencing severe or moderate loneliness.⁴

Recognizing the impact of loneliness, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it to be a pressing global health threat in 2023. In response, the organization launched an international commission on social connection to address loneliness as a critical health issue and accelerate the implementation of solutions across countries of all income levels.

Notably, even in densely populated urban areas, where we may be surrounded by people, loneliness remains prevalent. Studies have shown that feelings of loneliness are heightened by overcrowding and population density.⁵ They are alleviated by perceptions of social inclusivity and regular contact with nature.

Why is loneliness on the rise?

Technological Advancement

While there is no clear-cut explanation for the increase in urban loneliness, emerging research has identified several contributing factors. One significant factor is technological advancement, which has transformed how we live, work, and socialize in the 21st century. Technology has enabled us to enjoy the conveniences of community without direct human interaction. We now spend 90 fewer minutes a week socializing face-to-face than we did in 2003.⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic further normalized remote work, online connections, and virtual commerce, leading to greater time spent at home. However, these virtual interactions often mask a deeper desire for meaningful, in-person connections.

Socio Demographic Shifts

The prevalence of loneliness is also linked to socio demographic shifts that began in the late 20th century. Smaller family sizes, longer lifespans with higher rates of loss of significant others in older age, and a societal emphasis on independence and individual performance have made it more difficult to build and prioritize community, exacerbating the loneliness crisis in cities.⁷

Urban design

Urban design also contributes to social isolation and loneliness. As they grow, many modern cities have prioritized increasing housing density and infrastructure while neglecting the planning and design of local institutions that foster social capital. For example, higher population density and high-rise living are associated with increased loneliness, as residents of high-rise buildings are often more socially isolated and have fewer interactions with neighbors.⁸ The rise in solo living, particularly in major cities, is another factor contributing to loneliness.⁹ This doesn't mean density is bad – it means that housing needs to be supported by places where people can interact.

Cultural and Civic Engagement

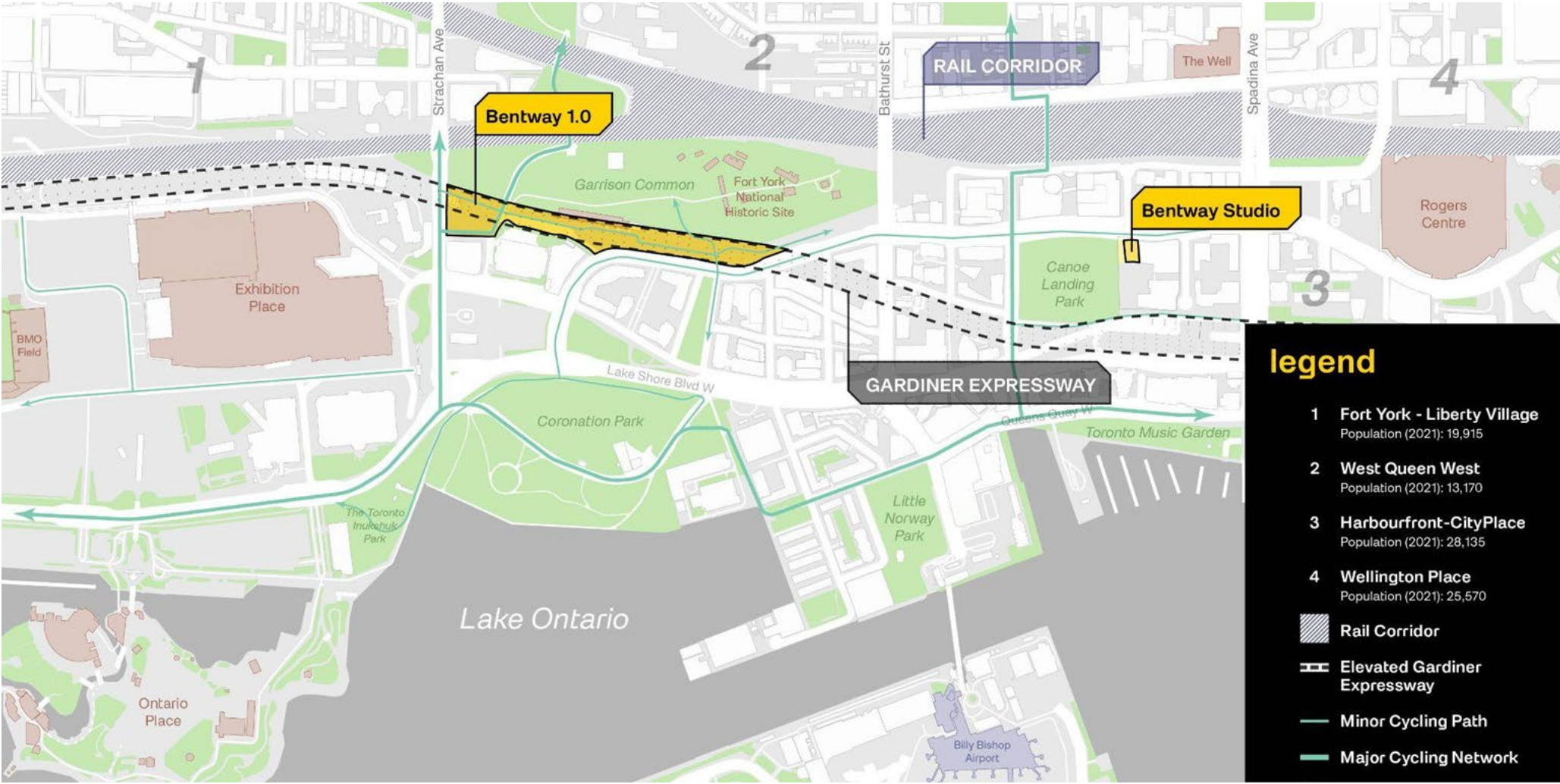
People who engage in group activities tend to experience higher life satisfaction, greater trust in society, stronger social connections, and broader social networks. However, rates of participation in groups, volunteering, and donations have significantly declined during the COVID-19 pandemic and have not yet recovered. In Toronto, for example, the volunteer rate dropped from 37% to 25% between 2018 and 2022, while the donation rate fell from 75% to 63%. This decline has resulted in a loss of approximately 300,000 volunteers and 300,000 donors.¹⁰ These reductions in group participation are concerning, as participation is linked to a range of positive social outcomes.

Toronto is one of the loneliest places in Canada. Public spaces offer a silver lining: they are critical social infrastructure that provide the foundations for stronger societal connections and cohesion.

According to Toronto's Vital Signs: 2023 Special Report, approximately 925,000 adults in Toronto (37%) reported feeling lonely on at least three or four days in the previous week – significantly more than the national average (28%), as well as other major regions and cities.¹⁰

Over the same period that loneliness and social connection have been rising the city has witnessed one of the largest development booms in modern history. However, the ways we have been building our city are not promoting social connection. Increased reliance on high-rise and solo living has led to less interactions between neighbours and the greater need for communal spaces and local institutions that foster social capital.

As our cities densify we must look for every opportunity to deliver shared amenities and public space. This means building urban infrastructure that can serve multiple purposes. In Toronto, legacy transportation infrastructure like the Gardiner Expressway acts as a major barrier between inland neighborhoods and the waterfront. The Bentway has begun to repair this longstanding gap by transforming a barrier at street level into a thriving public space and integrated part of the urban landscape. With over 100,000 people living within walking distance to the Bentway's Phase 1 site, the project is poised to exemplify how public space can not only bridge physical divides but combat loneliness and strengthen social bonds.



Around the world, cities are using public space design and programming to combat loneliness.

Cities around the world have implemented programming and design interventions in public spaces to foster social connections and combat loneliness. A 2023 study¹¹ focused on evaluating the effectiveness of a selection of these approaches identified the following key findings:

Programming: Regular programming contributes to place identity and positively impacts both regular visitors and passersby.

Physical Features: Quality seating, art, and greenery encourage people to linger and support meaningful interactions. For example, in the UK, a social connection initiative labels certain benches as 'The Chatty Bench' – to invite people who are interested in striking up a conversation with a stranger to sit there and do so.

Locality: Attention to local demographics and character helps cultivate a strong sense of community. Local visitors valued the nuances that reflect the local demographics, including events that celebrate local culture, programs that address neighborhood needs, and opportunities for intergenerational interactions in an age-diverse community.

Stewardship: Active stewardship and care for public spaces play a critical role in connecting local visitors. For example, community gardening has proven effective in reducing loneliness and isolation.

Top: Chinatown Night Market, New York City.
Bottom: The Chatty Bench, Yorkshire.



Top: Therapeutic Gardening, Essex.
Bottom: Face to Face / Tête-à-Tête, Toronto.

2. *Softer City:* a season of public art and social events





Holding Space

Softer City

As a significant civic driver in Toronto, The Bentway champions a creative movement to re-imagine the possibilities offered by the Gardiner Expressway and explores pressing urban issues through programming. Each year, the organization invites local, national and international artists, designers and community programmers to engage in work and research traditionally dominated by planners and policymakers.

In 2024 The Bentway turned its attention towards the growing epidemic of loneliness taking place in Toronto and in cities across the globe. Reflecting on the essential role public space plays in fostering and strengthening social connections, the *Softer City* season was curated with the goal of establishing a stronger correlation between public space, individual, and neighbourhood health.

How can we reimagine city-building based on new, softer strategies? How can public art and shared spaces contribute to the well-being of neighbourhoods?

Softer City featured public artworks and events that championed public intimacy and proximity; recovery, care and repair; and joyful acts of co-creation and collective action – a series of soft strategies for a more socially connected city. Additionally, and in true Bentway – fashion, the season showcased the ways in which public space and public art can be platforms for critical urban research, engaging experts and the public-alike in the development of new ideas and approaches to better our cities.

Softer City by the numbers

May 24 – October 6, 2024

164,000

Attendees

9

Art Installations

30+

Events

300+

Volunteers

40+

Artists and Facilitators

8,580

Dominoes Blocks

Softer City program

Chloë Bass' sculptural benches, formed from solid Ontario rock and engraved with poetic reflections, welcomed visitors to sit alongside a friend (or stranger) and consider the difficult but necessary work of softening our perspectives towards one another through empathy and care.



Perspective Alignment by Chloë Bass



Wind Ensemble by Heather Nicol

Brightly coloured windsocks danced overhead while windchimes echoed throughout The Bentway site, picking up the movement of the wind and the energy of the city. Toronto-based artist Heather Nicol's new work captured the act of co-creation and collective encounter through the marriage of sound and soft sculpture. The work invited members of the public to add their voice to an interactive chorus, to pause and connect to their surroundings and one another.

Nnenna Okore used scaffolding, pipe, and Ankara – a versatile and iconic African fabric that embodies a deep sense of identity and community – to create new intimate spaces within The Bentway site. Vibrant fabric in different hues was woven around the Gardiner's hard edges, softening the concrete infrastructure.



Holding Space by Nnenna Okore



Tracings by Nico Williams

Tracings expanded notions of care and repair from the perspective of Indigenous practices of healing. Inspired by the City of Toronto's annual maintenance of the Gardiner Expressway, Williams created a series of five sewn and appliqued patches, which presented a parallel offering of repair and community support to this piece of infrastructure.

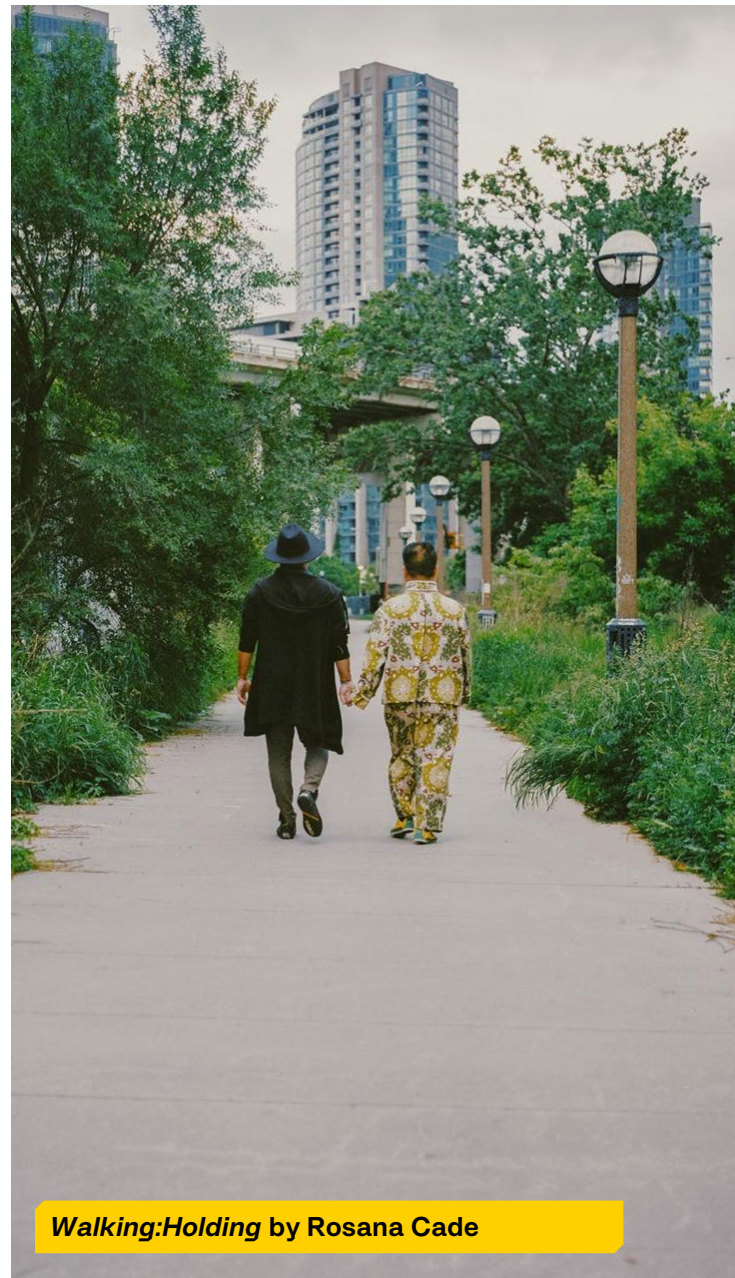
Softer City program



Soft Fits by WIP Collaborative

Soft Fits by WIP Collaborative created a playful lounge-scape for people of all ages to gather, hang out, explore, and connect in the heart of downtown Toronto. Situated under the trees at the edge of The Bentway Studio Terrace facing Canoe Landing Park, this site-specific installation blurs the boundaries between hard and soft public space.

Walking:Holding is a unique, experiential performance that invited audience members (one at a time) on a guided walk through the neighbourhood, where they encountered and held hands with a series of people along the way. Rosana Cade's project embraces social connections between strangers, illuminating how identity, intimacy, hypervisibility, and vulnerability intersect in public space.



***Walking:Holding* by Rosana Cade**



***The Space of Belonging* by Andrea Heimer**

Andrea Heimer's *The Space of Belonging* negotiates the tensions of a community living in close proximity to one another but where social isolation is still highly prevalent. Her work reminds us that loneliness is a subjective condition that can't be solved by proximity alone, but requires active engagement, participation, and inclusion.

Audiences further explored *Softer City* through free Weekly Drawing Socials hosted at The Bentway Studio with a Parkdale-based arts collective, Noble Space. Each week, participants met around tables with various art materials and celebrated socially-engaged, creative experiences.

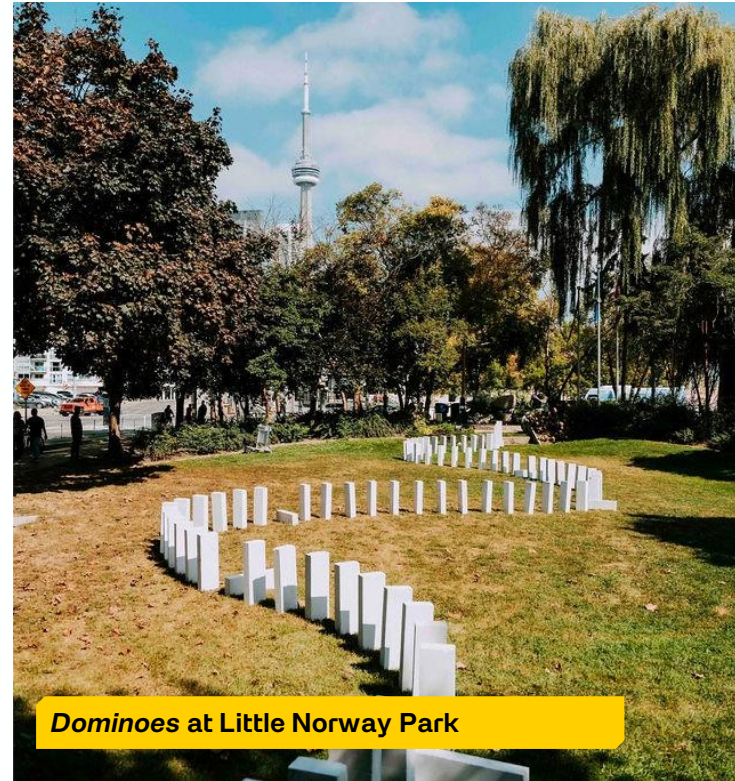


Studio Socials at The Bentway Studio

Softer City program

A cornerstone project of *Softer City* was designed to increase collective action and engagement across the Bentway neighbourhood. *Dominoes* – a larger-than-life, moving sculpture by artists Station House Opera – stretched across multiple downtown neighbourhoods and, over the course of a day-long epic event, united neighbours in a common cause: setting up and setting off over 2.7km of giant dominoes.

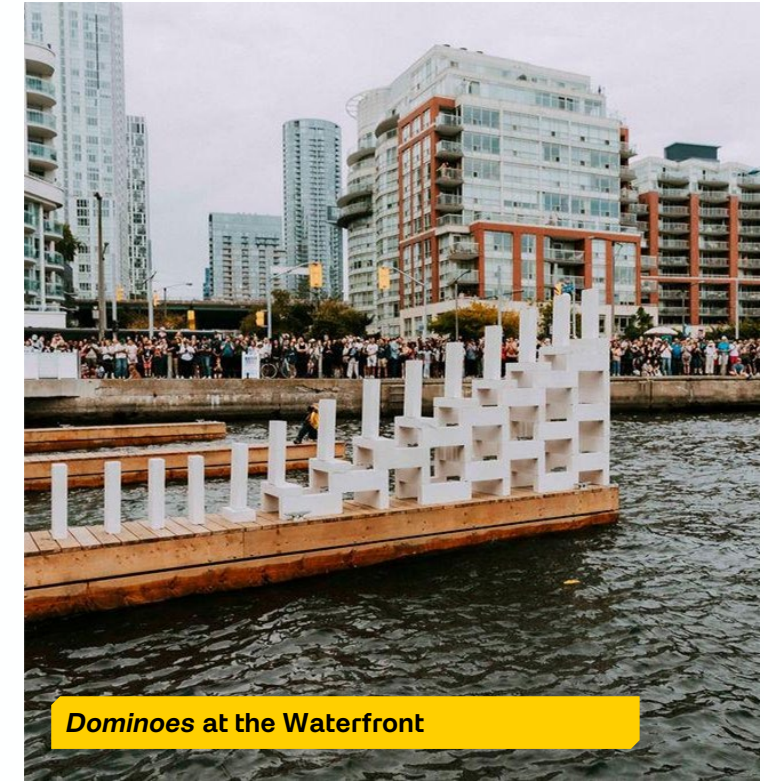
The event renewed community networks by bringing together close to 300 local volunteers and over 20,000 joyful spectators. Furthermore, it forged new grassroots partnerships with 20+ organizations connecting vital public spaces and the people who inhabit them.



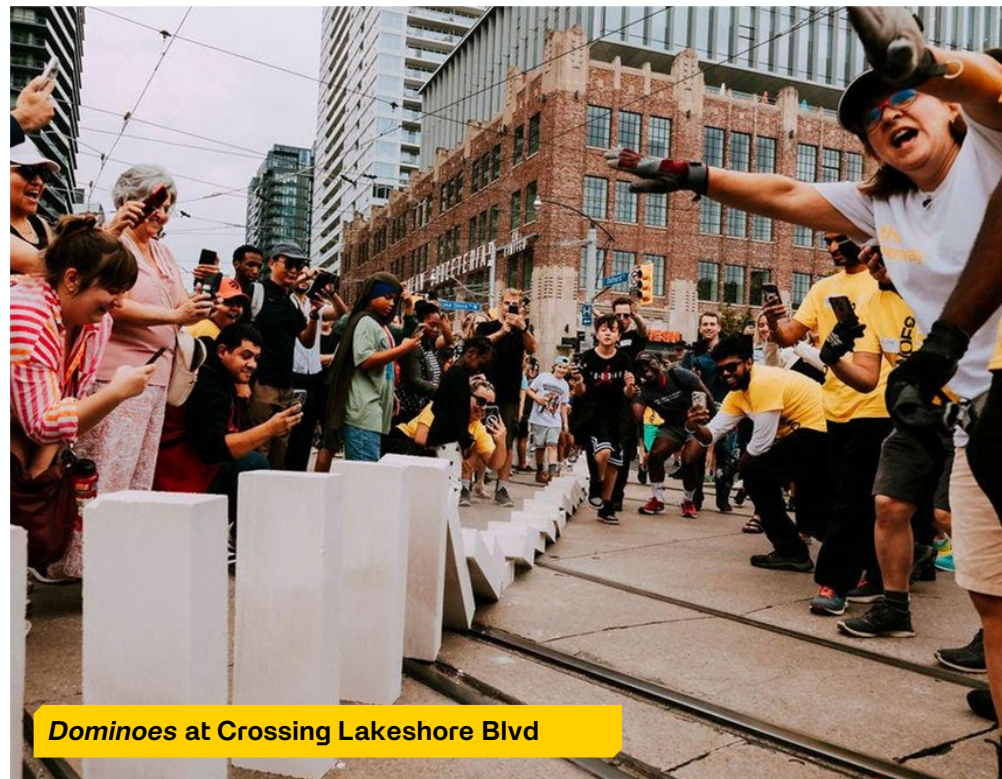
Dominoes at Little Norway Park



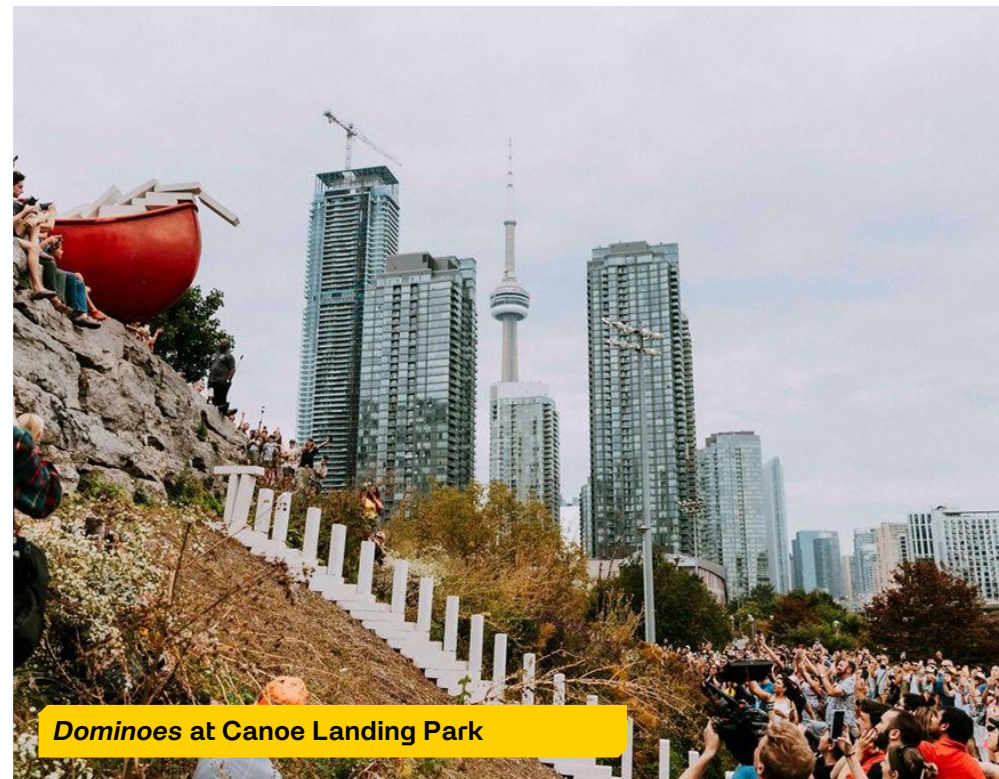
Dominoes Crossing at the Bathurst Street Bridge



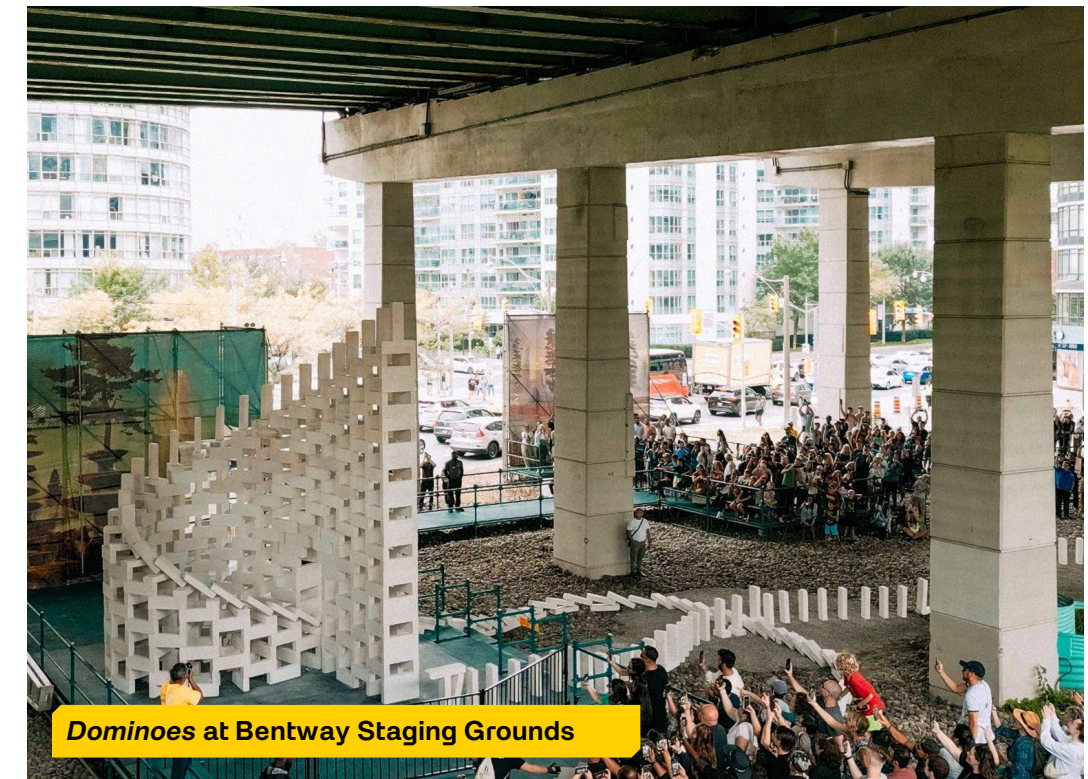
Dominoes at the Waterfront



Dominoes at Crossing Lakeshore Blvd



Dominoes at Canoe Landing Park



Dominoes at Bentway Staging Grounds

3. study findings



What role can public space design and programming play in fostering social connection and combating loneliness?

methodology

To examine the role of public space and programming in fostering social connection and reducing loneliness, a collaborative three-pronged data collection approach was used. See the Appendix for more details.*



Public Life Observation Study

led by Gehl Studio

What & How

Visitor movements and stationary activities were observed and recorded anonymously by trained volunteers using the Gehl Public Life App. Movement counts captured visitors' modes of travel, while stationary counts recorded visitors' locations, perceived age, gender, posture, social interactions, and activities.

When

August 16, 2024 (Friday) 12-8PM
August 23, 2024 (Friday) 12-8PM
August 24, 2024 (Saturday) 10AM-6PM
September 7, 2024 (Saturday) 10AM-6PM

Where

Data collection took place at 10 different locations within The Bentway Phase 1 site



Public Health Survey

led by Dr. Nadha Hassen & Dr. Kate Mulligan, Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto

What & How

Visitors to The Bentway site were asked to complete a short online survey on their experiences at the site and with The Bentway's programs. Six trained research assistants facilitated on-site data collection using tablets. Posters with QR codes to the survey were also printed and featured on site. Research assistants also invited site visitors to fill out the survey on their own devices by following the QR code.

When

June 22, 2024 (Saturday) 11AM-3PM
July 6, 2024 (Saturday) 8:45AM-12:45PM
July 12, 2024 (Friday) 5-9PM
August 16, 2024 (Friday) 5-9PM

Where

The Bentway Phase 1 site



Expert Interviews

led by The Bentway

What & How

Bentway staff met with a series of subject matter experts for 30-minute one-on-one interviews to explore their understanding of loneliness and the correlation between public space, health and social connection. Interviewees came from Toronto and beyond and represented a wide-range of professional backgrounds including urban design, public space management, social services, cultural services, recreation, arts, and mental health.

When

Through July and August, 2024

Where

Interviews conducted remotely

findings

Public spaces are critical health tools that reduce feelings of loneliness and promote well-being.

Public health interventions, such as immunization programs, awareness campaigns, and policy changes are designed to improve population health at scale. As societal health needs change, the thoughtful design and programming of public spaces should be recognized as part of this public health 'toolkit' – creating opportunities for people to connect and reducing the health effects of loneliness.

Public spaces need to employ explicit and implicit invitations to signal “you matter” and promote social gathering.

From thoughtful physical features to participatory programming, public spaces need to offer invitations that encourage people to linger and enjoy each other's company in order to foster a sense of sociability.

Above all, being around others makes people feel safe and less lonely. Curators of public space and public art should intentionally seek opportunities to enable this.

Human beings thrive on connection, and public spaces play a crucial role in facilitating these connections by providing opportunities for shared experiences, whether through direct interaction or simply being in the presence of others.

Public spaces are critical health tools that reduce feelings of loneliness and promote well-being.

Originally designed as a linear mobility corridor under the Gardiner Expressway, The Bentway has evolved far beyond its role as a space for movement. It has become a vibrant, sociable, and “sticky” gathering place that fosters health, well-being, and community connection.

“Stickiness” is a measure of how many people stop and spend time in a space compared to how many pass by, and The Bentway excels in this regard.

Spaces designed for movement, like the skate trail featuring public art such as *Holding Space* and the boardwalk with *Wind Ensemble*, demonstrate particularly high levels of stickiness. **Thanks to their large scale, bold colors, seating features, and interactive elements, these installations draw people in: for every four who pass through, one stays to engage.** They also serve as temporary landmarks, signaling natural points of congregation and attracting visitors to pause and connect.

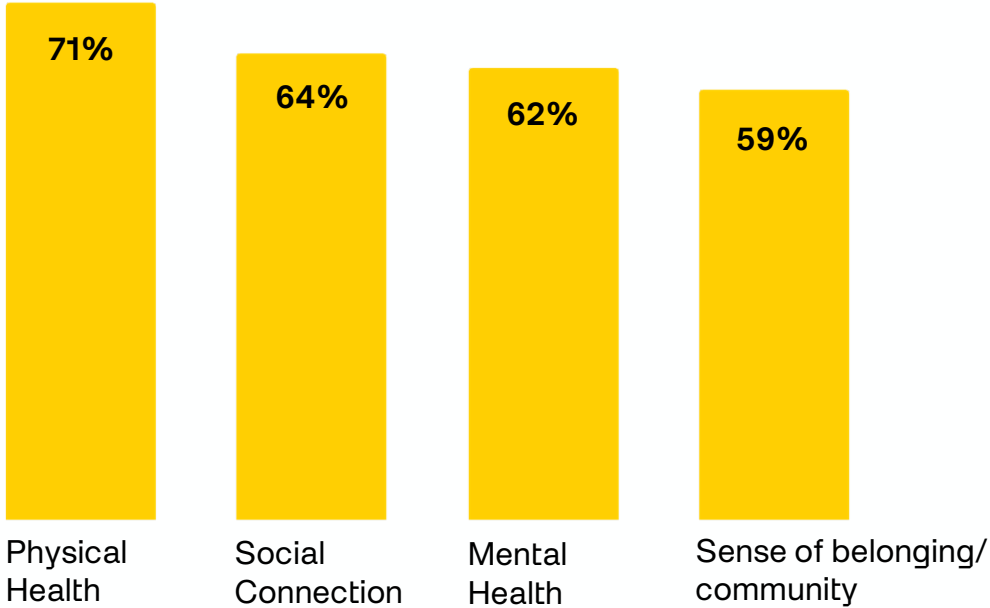
The Public Life Study also showed that The Bentway’s design and programming encourage social interaction, with 67% of visitors engaging with one another during their visit. Conversations were observed to be the most common activity, often spanning generations – 48% of visitors on surveyed days were children, youth, or seniors. This is notably higher than nearby neighborhoods (20%)¹² and even the broader city population (42%),¹³ highlighting The Bentway’s unique role in fostering inclusive, multigenerational interactions.

#1 “In conversation” is the top activity observed at The Bentway.



Holding Space

Visitors also reported that spending time at The Bentway made them feel healthier and less lonely. While most people surveyed don't feel extremely lonely in public, many (63% of respondents) do feel at least a little lonely in public spaces. However, 53% noted that visiting The Bentway helped alleviate this feeling. Many participants also shared that the space positively impacted their physical and mental well-being, as well as their sense of social connection and belonging.



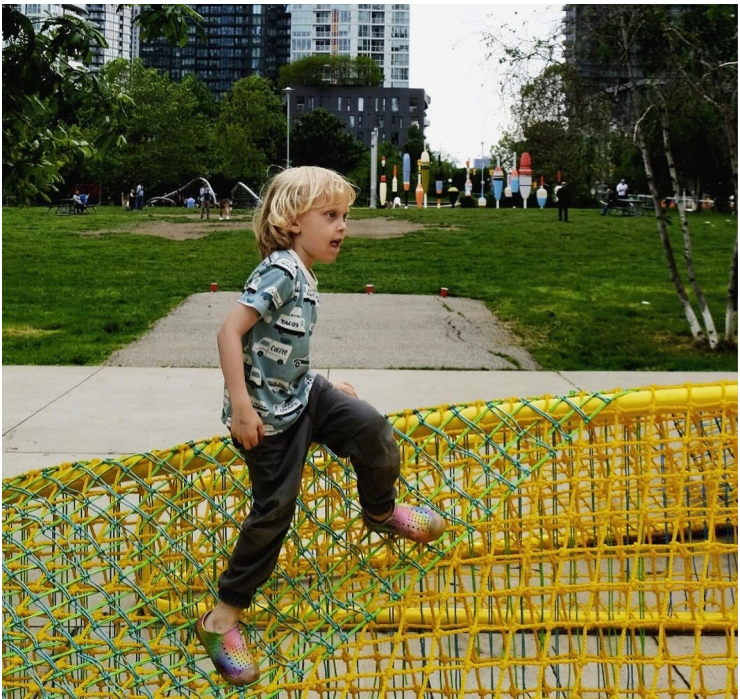
% of 365 total public health survey respondents who reported that The Bentway helped them feel healthier

“I really hope we can expand public spaces under the Gardiner. Reclaiming this unused space benefits the entire city physically, mentally and financially.”

Respondent, Public Health Survey



Public spaces need to employ explicit and implicit invitations to signal “you matter” and promote social gathering. Certain physical features, in particular, can play a key role in supporting sociability.



Art invites interactions

Areas featuring interactive public art installations saw an average of 20% more social interactions compared to areas without such installations at The Bentway.

Research shows that engaging in the arts supports mental health by providing both protective and rehabilitative benefits.¹⁴ This season’s art installations at The Bentway were thoughtfully curated to address the monumental scale of the highway and the Bentway and make it more approachable, which in turn encourages social connections. These site-specific public artworks, with their soft fabrics and flowing shapes, offer not just colorful, human-scale visual stimuli for passersby, but also invite interaction – both with the artwork and with each other. They create a shared space where strangers can connect, converse, or simply be present together.



Top: *Soft Fits*
Bottom: *Wind Ensemble*

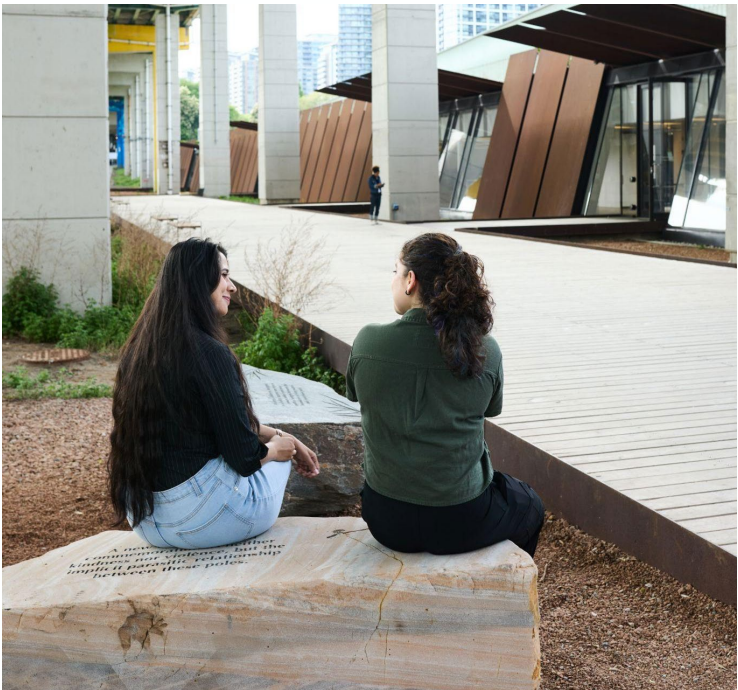


Seating promotes sociability

Numerous studies have long established that seating is integral to the social effectiveness of public spaces, as it encourages people to spend time and increases the opportunity for spontaneous social encounters.¹⁵ This season, three art projects – *Perspective Alignment*, *Soft Fits*, and *Holding Space* – intentionally used seating as a platform for creative experimentation. These installations recorded a high interaction rate, with an average of 70% of people in the area engaging with one another.

Additionally, a clear majority of respondents reported that their interactions at The Bentway were meaningful, with more than two-thirds stating that public seating enhanced these social experiences.

71% of respondents said that public seating enhanced their meaningful interactions



Top: *Soft Fits*
Bottom: *Perspective Alignment*

“Seating presents a wonderful opportunity to share space with strangers. You sit next to someone you don’t know, you take part in people watching. Just that device of the long bench has created a space of enormous sociability. That’s the key.”

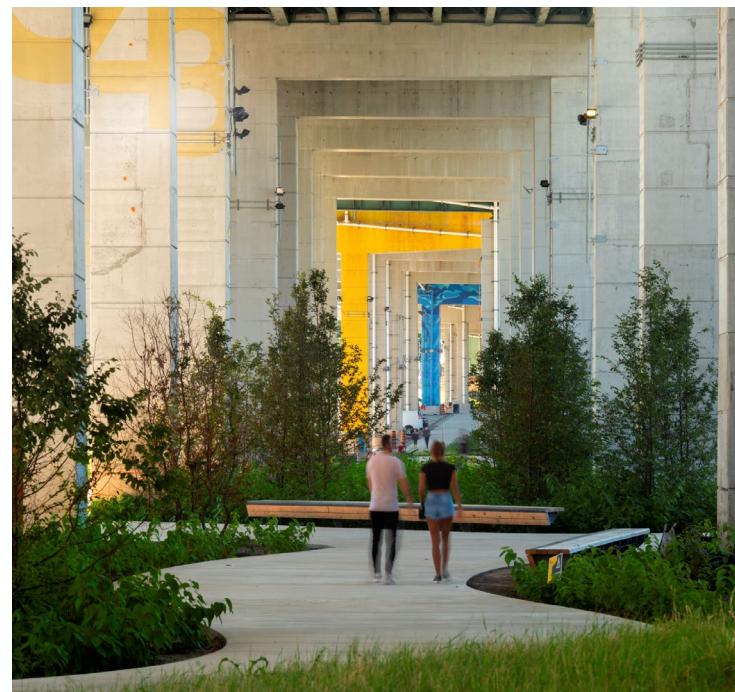
Ken Greenberg, Urban Designer,
co-founder of The Bentway

Landscape prompts lingering

Urban greenery plays a significant role in reducing social isolation and loneliness among city dwellers, as studies have shown.¹⁶ This holds true at The Bentway, where more than 40% of the public space is covered in softscape and greenways.

Our findings suggest that a little green space goes a long way in terms of self-reported well being and belonging. **For more than half of respondents, landscape features such as grass, trees, and plants, increase their sense of belonging and connection to the place.**

Top: *Holding Space*



Lighting is an attractor

Adequate nighttime lighting emerged as a key feature that signals a space is open at all times of day and night. When event programming is underway, dynamic lighting draws attention and attracts visitors. During quieter times, consistent and sufficient lighting fosters a sense of care, inviting people to stay and engage with the space. Further exploration is needed to understand how creative lighting strategies can enhance these impacts.



Top & Bottom: *Opening Night Party*

“Something isn’t happening here all the time, but you always feel it is a place that is cared for. Lighting, lack of litter, seating. You feel the invitation to spend time there.”

Local neighbourhood resident,
Interviewee

Participatory programming is a powerful tool for fostering social connections in public spaces.

Programming with intentionality

People increasingly need invitations to get together and intentional programming is an important call. Unlike traditional large-scale events, such as sports or musical performances, which tend to draw attention to the competition and performers, the *Softer City* programming was deliberately designed to foster social experiences that prioritize collective connections among participants.

Yoga with Adriene brought over 2,000 participants together for a communal outdoor yoga session, promoting softness and self-care. The event included thoughtful messaging and signages to encourage participant connection before the class and a sound experience by local artist Renelyn Quinicot to inspire mindfulness. Similarly, the monthly *Roller Skate Parties* attracted an average of 400 participants moving per hour, fostering collective joy, spontaneous conversations, experienced skaters helping beginners, and ultimately memorable social interactions.

When programming transforms “spectators” or “audience members” into active participants, interactions become more meaningful. This active participation is a form of empowerment which can foster self determination for individuals, combat loneliness, and strengthen community bonds.

“What an incredible morning I was lucky to share in. It may have been 2,000 people, but felt like a close community of loving yoga friends!”

Participant, *Yoga with Adriene*

“Roller blading is a very social activity. A great way to interact with people: we meet, we skate, we make videos, and we laugh!”

Participant, *Roller Skate Party*



Yoga with Adriene

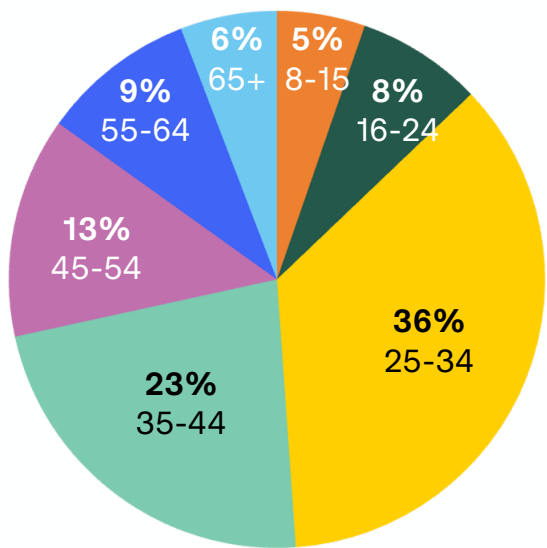
“Especially coming out of the pandemic and with social media, it can feel like we are less socially adept than we used to be. People are hesitant or nervous to get together without a goal in mind. Programming as a nucleus is a helpful way of getting people together. The Bentway is great for this...Socializing is a muscle and you need to flex it to make it stronger.”

Anthony Morgan, Artist, Social Science Researcher

Social benefits of volunteering

The impact of participation is further amplified when programs offer opportunities for volunteering. Volunteering can enhance our health, reduce feelings of loneliness, and expand our social networks, studies suggest.^{17,18}

At *Dominoes*, a day-long event that involved setting up and toppling over 8,000 human-sized dominoes across a 2.5 km route through downtown neighborhoods, close to 300 local volunteers of all ages – from teens to seniors – came together to create a temporary, alternative vision of the city. The event allowed participants to engage playfully with the city's architecture and momentarily reclaim the streets for the public. Volunteers shared how the experience led participants to work with others whom they had never met to meet a common goal, strengthening both personal relationships and the broader sense of community.



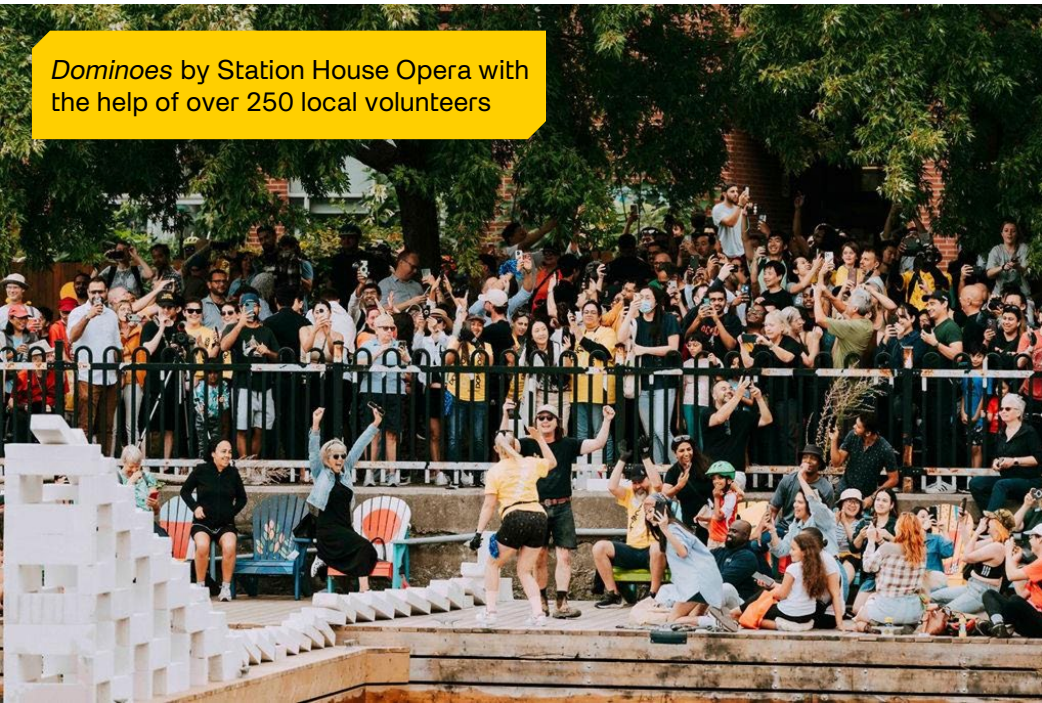
Volunteer age range, *Dominoes*



“Thank you so much for this opportunity. In addition to being part of fun and awesome public art, I was grateful for the opportunity for my kids to have a chance to do something that isn’t just for them. There aren’t a lot of ways for kids to volunteer and they love public art, so this was perfect.

For me as well, it was phenomenal to see so many people come together, to build and view. In these times that have felt so divided, I really loved this politically neutral, artful, joyful event for everyone. It was inspiring.”

Lisa, *Dominoes* volunteer



Above all, being around others makes people feel safe and less lonely. Curators of public space and public art should seek opportunities to enable this.



Communal Table (2019)

Humans Thrive on Connection

As social and emotional beings, humans rely on various connections to feel truly connected – intimate ties with family, bonds with friends, and community connections with neighbors, acquaintances, and strangers we share spaces with. From strong ties to weak ones, all forms of connection are vital for our well-being.

Public Spaces for Connection and Just To Be

In public spaces, the presence and visibility of others creates a shared experience. Social theorist Michael Warner describes this as “a concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in visible space... a sense of totality, bounded by the event or the shared physical space.”¹⁹ There is a sense of social connection through shared engagement with a space, even if that engagement is not necessarily with another person.

The Bentway is a haven for simply being in the presence of others. One in five visitors engage in people-watching, finding healing and connection just by being among others. More than half (55%) of respondents shared that “other people” enhance their sense of community and belonging.

Being around others also increases feelings of safety. Our survey revealed that only 3% of visitors report feeling unsafe at The Bentway, compared to 15% in public spaces across Toronto.

Feeling safe is crucial for people to feel a sense of connection in public spaces. As Danish architect and urban design pioneer Jan Gehl observes, “The presence of other people is always important for your feeling of safety,” in terms of both experienced and perceived security.²⁰

This summer, The Bentway showcased how public art, thoughtful design, and programming can transform the simple act of being near others into a healing and connective experience.

“I experience the Bentway through art and cultural activities and I love that. It makes me proud to live near a space that is elevating public art...The diversity of the programming makes me feel that the organization is thinking about different people and different approaches.”

Melika Saeeda, Neighbourhood Resident, Artist



4. call to action

We publish this report at a time of political, societal, and environmental uncertainty. What remains constant, however, is our need for connection.

Public spaces – and the people who program them – are the critical social infrastructure we need to find both daily joy and the resilience to weather the storms ahead.

How will you leverage public space programming and design to foster social connection and combat loneliness in your community?

Public Spaces for Connection Worksheet

Key Questions	Response
Overall	
Stickiness: How is the space designed for comfortable staying and moving? How sticky is it (measured by how many people stop and spend time compared to how many pass by)?	
Public Life: Who is the space designed for, and who is present? What are they doing on-site? Are they engaged in interactive activities such as in conversation or playing? Or just enjoying each other's presence like people-watching? Consider measuring by age, gender, activity.	
Activeness: Is the space active throughout different hours of the day, days of the week, and seasons of the year? Is the space designed for diverse functions, for example, affordable food and beverage vending during the day, music at night, roller skating in the summer, and ice skating in the winter?	
Experience: Is the space creating a pleasant sensory experience like street performances or visual stimuli at the eye level every four seconds, not a bland façade, and protecting visitors from unpleasant experiences such as harsh weather and noise?	
Physical Design Features	
Interactive Public Art Installation: Are there interactive public art installation(s)? Are they human-scale, colourful, or soft in shape or material? If designed for engagement, are the cues/prompts visible, easy-to-follow, and reflective of the surrounding communities and/or the place's history?	
Seating: Is there seating? Both formal (like fixed benches) and informal (like movable chairs)? Where is the seating located in relation to key zones of activity?	
Natural Landscapes: Are there natural landscapes? Are they well-maintained? What percentage of the site is covered in such softscape?	
Lighting: Is there adequate and creative lighting, particularly when there is no activation?	
Programming	
Intentional Participation: Is the programming designed to foster participation (rather than spectating) and social interactions? Are there prompts and opportunities for participants to connect and meet new friends?	
Volunteering: Are there opportunities to volunteer for the programming? What is the plan for organizing volunteers before and after events?	

+ Appendix



Authors

The Bentway

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The Bentway works to ignite the urban imagination, using the city as site, subject, and canvas.

Anchored under Toronto's Gardiner Expressway and guiding its complex future, The Bentway is a growing public space, and much more. The Bentway is a new type of civic organization: a not-for-profit, powered by vital partnerships with the City of Toronto, residents, supporters, artists, city-builders, and dreamers. The Bentway is a catalyst rooted in experimentation, leading a creative movement to re-imagine the opportunities of urban spaces.

Phase 1 of The Bentway opened in 2018 and is already a vital public space, backyard park, cultural platform, connector for the western Waterfront corridor and a demonstration of what is possible.

www.thebentway.ca

Gehl Studio

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Gehl is a networked urban strategy and design consultancy, with offices in Copenhagen, New York, and San Francisco, offering expertise in the fields of architecture, urban design, landscape architecture, and city planning.

Our approach is iterative and holistic, making cities for people and the planet using life-centered data, strategy, and design. We begin by working to understand the existing life of a space before we shape the built environment. It's these existing activities, user groups, and behavior patterns that inform future visions and designs that invite public life to flourish.

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The DLSPH is an internationally recognized community of scientists, teachers, students, practitioners, policy makers and citizens, creating new knowledge, educating change makers, advancing practice and guiding the way to better, more equitable outcomes in population health and health systems – locally, nationally and globally.

Dr. Kate Mulligan is the founder and Scientific Director of the Canadian Institute for Social Prescribing and an Assistant Professor in Social and Behavioural Health Sciences at DLSPH. Kate's work as a health geographer and policy expert advances community leadership in health, equity, and sustainability.

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Softer City Artists & Partners

Artists:

Wind Ensemble
by Heather Nicol (Toronto, Canada)

Soft Fits
by WIP Collaborative (Brooklyn, USA)

Holding Space
by Nnenna Okore (Chicago, USA)

Tracings
by Nico Williams (Montréal, Canada)

We Are Here
by HeART Lab (Toronto, Canada)

Perspective Alignment
by Chloë Bass (Brooklyn, USA)

Walking:Holding
by Rosana Cade (Glasgow, UK) with
photography by Kirk Lisaj (Toronto,
Canada)

Yoga with Adriene
by Adriene Mishler (Austin, USA)

Dominoes
by Station House Opera (London, UK)

The Space of Belonging
by Andrea Heimer (Bellingham, USA)

Partners:

Fort York National Historic Site

The Centre for Addiction and Mental
Health (CAMH) and HeART Lab

Buddies in Bad Times Theatre

Indigenous Curatorial Collective (ICCA)

Trust for Public Land

Toronto Region Conservation Authority

Toronto Public Library – Fort York Branch

Melanin Skate Crew

BEATS + SKATES

Freestyle Socials

Noble Space

Art Metropole

Toronto Domino Association

Acknowledgement

Public Life Observation Study Volunteers

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Anthony Morgan, TV Host, Social Science Researcher, <i>Softer City</i> Facilitator Toronto, Canada
Melika Saeeda, Neighbourhood Resident, Artist Toronto, Canada

Public Life Observation Study

Visitor movements and stationary activities were observed and recorded anonymously by 25 trained volunteers using the Gehl Public Life App.

Study Day & Time

- August 16, 2024 (Friday) 12-8PM
- August 23, 2024 (Friday) 12-8PM
- August 24, 2024 (Saturday) 10AM-6PM
- September 7, 2024 (Saturday) 10AM-6PM

Limitation

The study, conducted over four survey days during the *Softer City* program, offers a snapshot of public life at The Bentway. Longer-term data collection would provide a more complete picture, including during and off-season. Volunteers were trained with one hour-long session and recorded videos, but human errors, including observational biases in documenting perceived age and gender of participants, may still have occurred. To mitigate this, data is presented as aggregated percentages across the survey days.

Public Life App

Movement Count

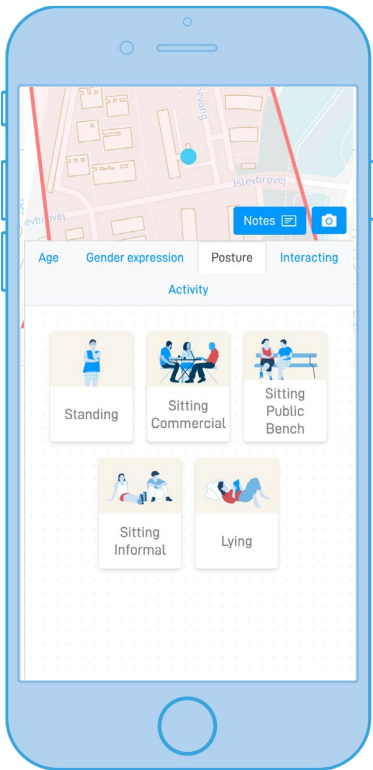
We observed who is moving through a given location, and what mode they're using.



Public Life App Interface

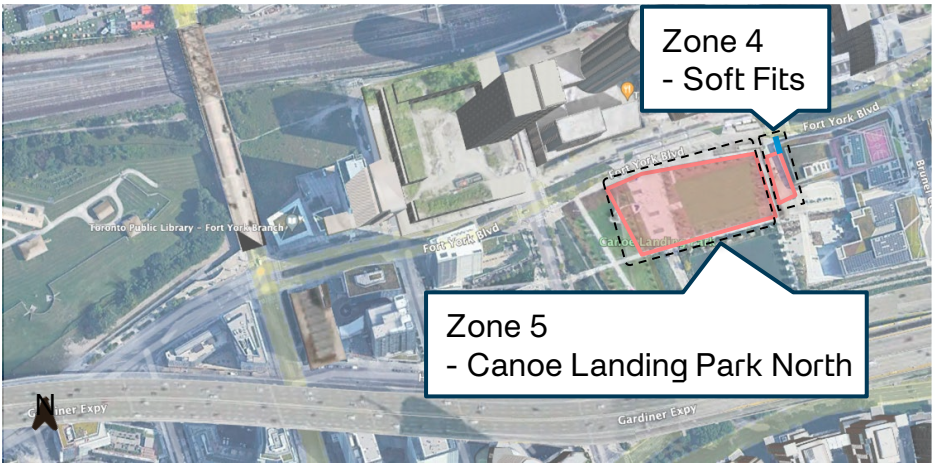
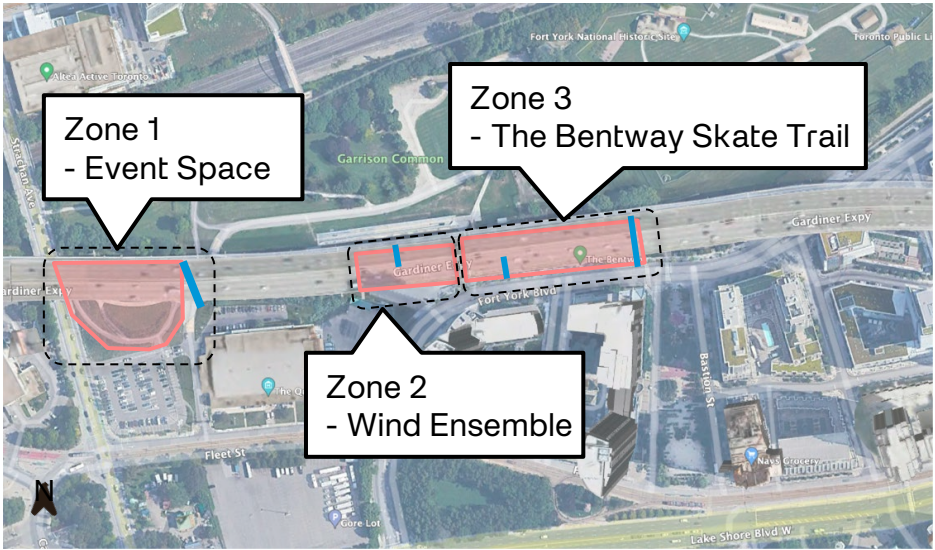
Stationary Count

We studied how people spend time at The Bentway by observing who is present, their posture, what they are doing, and whether they are interacting with others.



Study Locations

- Zone Area
- Movement Count
- Stationary Count



Public Health Survey

Visitors to the Bentway site were asked to complete a short online survey on their experiences at the site and with The Bentway's programs. Six trained research assistants facilitated on-site data collection using tablets. Posters with QR codes to the survey were also printed and featured on site. Research assistants also invited site visitors to fill out the survey on their own devices by following the QR code.

Survey Day & Time

June 22, 2024 (Saturday) 11AM-3PM
July 6, 2024 (Saturday) 8:45AM-12:45PM
July 12, 2024 (Friday) 5-9PM
August 16, 2024 (Friday) 5-9PM

Survey Response & Limitation

365 site visitors responded to the survey. The Bentway estimates that it receives about 156,000 site visitors per year (The Bentway, 2024). Our sample of 365 site visitors is likely representative of the site visitor population, with some caveats.

Data collection was facilitated on-site on four days, which were selected in conversation with The Bentway team, to align with programming. On one day (Saturday June 22, 2024) no special programming was taking place. Site visitors also likely responded to the QR codes on posters on other days and times. Respondents surveyed on programming days may have skewed the respondent population. For example, the “Yoga With Adrienne” event likely captured a higher-than-usual proportion of women, young-to-middle-aged people, able-bodied people, and visitors from outside Toronto.

Survey Questions

What attracts you to these places, and when are you typically spending time there?

- ☐ Green
- ☐ Beautiful
- ☐ Peaceful
- ☐ Serene
- ☐ Nice

What is the primary purpose of your visit to The Bentway? (select all that apply)

- ☐ To participate in a Bentway program or event
- ☐ To see the art installations
- ☐ To use the facilities (i.e. washroom, outlets, water fountain, etc.)
- ☐ For physical activity/exercise (e.g., walking, running, rolling)
- ☐ Walking dog/ pet
- ☐ Roller skating
- ☐ Photoshoot
- ☐ To meet other people
- ☐ To be alone
- ☐ To be outdoors
- ☐ To take children outside
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

Public Health Survey

Survey Questions (continued 1/3)

Which of the Bentway's programming (if any) are you participating in / have participated in? (select all that apply)

- ☐ Viewing art installations
- ☐ Recurring programs (e.g. Weekly Drawing Socials, SUSO Skate, Roller Skate Parties)
- ☐ One-off events
- ☐ Other (please specify)
- ☐ I am not/ have not participated in any programming

Was this your first time visiting The Bentway?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

How often do you visit The Bentway?

- ☐ Daily
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ A few times a year
- ☐ I've only been once
- ☐ Other (please specify)

In which ways, if any, has The Bentway helped you feel healthier (check all that apply)

- ☐ Physical health
- ☐ Mental health
- ☐ Sense of social connection
- ☐ Sense of belonging or sense of community
- ☐ None of the above

To what extent do you feel lonely when you are in public spaces?

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ Slightly
- ☐ Moderately
- ☐ Very much
- ☐ Extremely

Do your visits to The Bentway make you feel less lonely?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

How meaningful do you find the social interactions you have at The Bentway?

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ Slightly
- ☐ Moderately
- ☐ Very much
- ☐ Extremely

What design elements of The Bentway's site enhance meaningful social interactions? (select all that apply)

- ☐ Public seating areas, benches, furniture
- ☐ Water features / splashpad
- ☐ Art installations
- ☐ Landscape features (e.g. grass, trees, plants)
- ☐ Shared multi-use trail
- ☐ Nighttime lighting features
- ☐ Other (please specify)
- ☐ None of the above/ Not applicable

To what extent do you feel a sense of community and/or a sense of belonging at The Bentway?

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ Slightly
- ☐ Moderately
- ☐ Very much
- ☐ Extremely

Public Health Survey

Survey Questions (continued 2/3)

At The Bentway, which of the following help you feel a sense of community and/or a sense of belonging: (check all that apply)

- ☐ Other people
- ☐ Non-human living beings, including animals and plants
- ☐ The art installations
- ☐ The physical amenities (e.g. benches, seating, furniture)
- ☐ Natural features (e.g. landscaping, grass, trees, plants)
- ☐ Other (please specify)
- ☐ None of the above/ Not applicable

How safe do you feel when using public spaces in Toronto?

- ☐ Very unsafe
- ☐ Somewhat unsafe
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat safe
- ☐ Very safe

How safe do you feel when at The Bentway?

- ☐ Very unsafe
- ☐ Somewhat unsafe
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat safe
- ☐ Very safe

Is there anything else you would like to tell us?
Or is there a story you would like to share?

Demographics

If you feel comfortable doing so, please share some demographic information with us, which will help The Bentway better understand the audiences we serve. Answer as many or as few questions as you would like.

Please share the first 3 digits of your postal code.

How old are you?

- ☐ 18 and under
- ☐ 19-29
- ☐ 30-39
- ☐ 40-49
- ☐ 50-59
- ☐ 60-69
- ☐ 70 and over
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Do you identify as part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community? 2SLGBTQ+ is an umbrella term for persons who identify, for example, as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, trans, two-spirit, genderqueer, questioning, or who otherwise express gender or sexual diversity.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Do you identify as a person living with a disability? Persons with disabilities are those who have a long-term or recurring physical, mental, sensory, or learning condition(s) and whose everyday activities are limited or impacted because of this condition(s). This includes episodic, invisible, and chronic conditions.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Public Health Survey

Survey Questions (continued 3/3)

Do you identify as Black, Indigenous, and/or a Person of Colour and/or racialized?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to answer
- ☐ Unsure

With which gender identities do you most identify? (please check all that apply)

- ☐ Woman
- ☐ Man
- ☐ Gender non-binary/non-conforming/
Genderqueer
- ☐ Two-spirit
- ☐ Agender
- ☐ Prefer not to answer
- ☐ I identify as: _____

What is your approximate annual household income?

- ☐ Less than \$25,000
- ☐ Between \$25,000 and \$49,999
- ☐ Between \$50,000 and \$74,999
- ☐ Between \$75,000 and \$99,999
- ☐ Between \$100,000 and \$124,999
- ☐ Between \$125,000 and \$149,999
- ☐ Over \$150,000
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Expert Interviews

The Bentway met with a series of subject matter experts for 30 minutes 1:1 interviews to explore their understanding of loneliness and the correlation between public space, health and social connection. Interviewees came from Toronto and beyond and represented a wide-range of professional backgrounds including urban design, public space management, social services, cultural services, recreation, arts, and mental health.

Interview Timeframe

Through July and August, 2024

Interview Location

Interviews conducted remotely

Interview Questions

Tell us about yourselves

1. Who are you? Please tell us about yourself.
2. Where do you live? For how long? Who lives with you, if anybody?
3. If you live in or frequent the Bentway area, have you noticed any changes in the past few years?

About Public Space

1. How often do you visit public space? Do you typically visit alone or with others?
2. How do you navigate the space at the Bentway? *Why do you visit? How do you use it? When do you visit? What do you like about it?*
3. (If not the Bentway) Tell us about a public space you frequent often *Why do you visit? How do you use it? When do you visit? What do you like about it?* How do you typically use/experience ‘public space’? (libraries, community centres, parks, streets, The Bentway?)

Your perspectives on loneliness and social connection

For the purposes of this research effort our working definition of loneliness is:

Loneliness is a subjective feeling that takes place when there is a mismatch between the social connection we have and the social contract we want. It’s a subjective feeling so you can feel lonely even if surrounded by others. It can arise from various factors, including personal factors such as health and personality, social factors such as culture and social support, and environmental factors such as neighborhood characteristics, as well as broader societal factors such as technology and politics.

Does this align with you understanding of loneliness? If not, how does it differ?

Expert Interviews

Interview Questions (continued)

To what extent do you feel lonely when you are in public space? At the Bentway?

1. Has your experience(s) at the Bentway helped you to feel less lonely? More connected to your community? (If not the Bentway, can you name a public space that has helped you in this way?)
2. What features of the Bentway have helped you to feel a sense of community and/or a sense of belonging (Other people, Non-human living beings, including animals and plants, specific programming, The physical amenities (e.g. benches, seating, furniture), Natural features (e.g. landscaping, grass, trees, plants) (If not the Bentway, can you name a public space and its features?)
3. Can you tell us about a particular public program you participated in that helped you to feel a greater connection to your community and why?

For participating artists

1. Can you tell us more about your project for *Softer City* and what you were hoping to learn/achieve/share?
2. What does a *softer* city mean to you and how does softness help to address social isolation?
3. How were you hoping people would interact with your work? What kinds of behaviours were you hoping to see? Has there been anything that surprised you about the engagement to date?

Other

1. Is there anything else you would like to add?
2. Any advice on who else we should reach out to?

Demographic Information

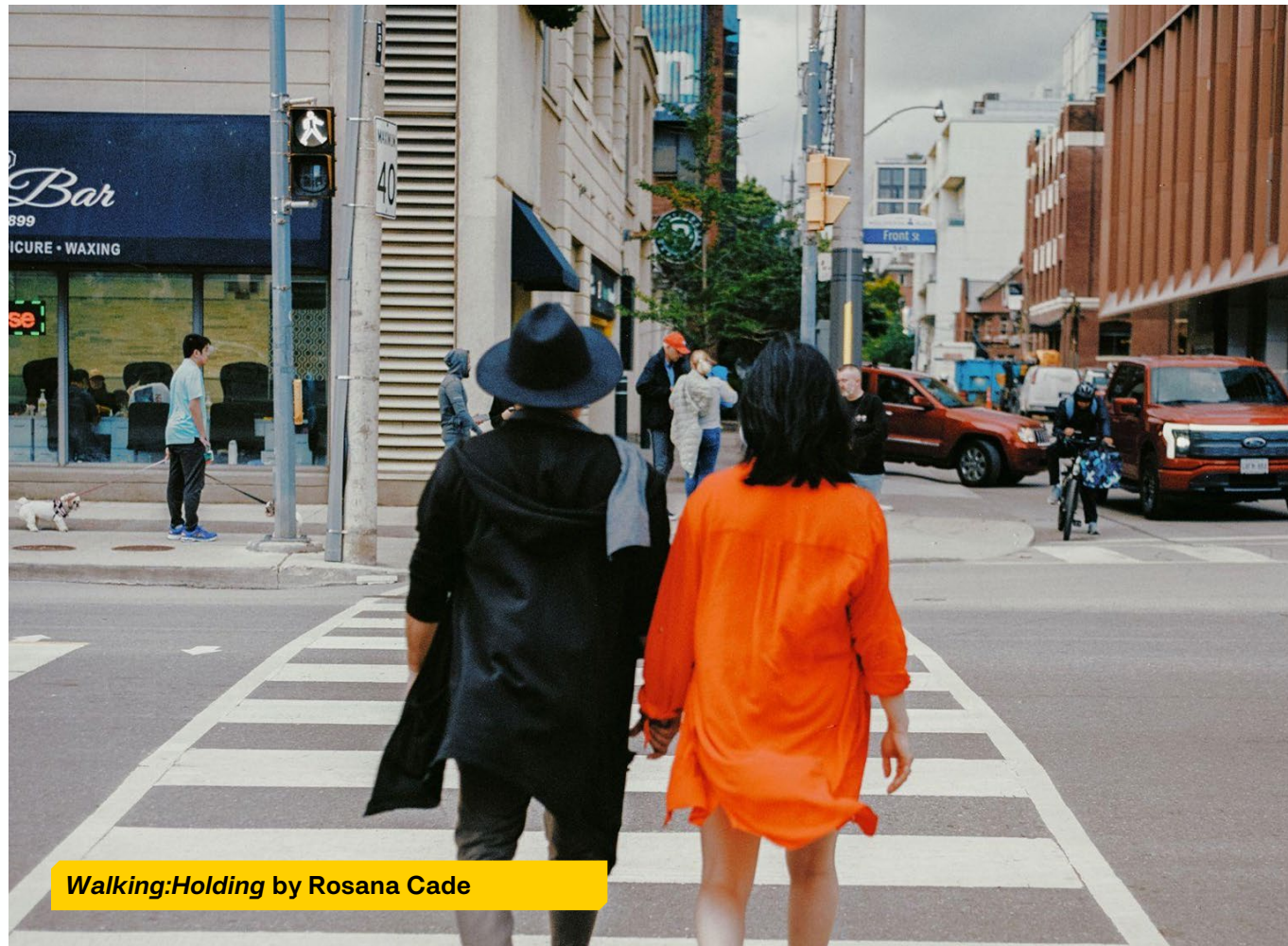
Are you comfortable if we ask you some demographic information, to help contextualize your responses?

1. Age range (ie: 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s)
2. Gender identity
3. Ethnic identity
4. Sexual orientation
5. Family/Household Composition (ie: # in household; how many of those are kids?)

Softer City Season Summary

Art as a Research Tool:

The Bentway's 2024 summer exhibition of free public art, *Softer City*, brought together artists, architects, and designers from Toronto, across Canada, and beyond, to explore softness as a means of combating social isolation, humanizing our cities, and creating space for collective repair.



Public Intimacy and Proximity:

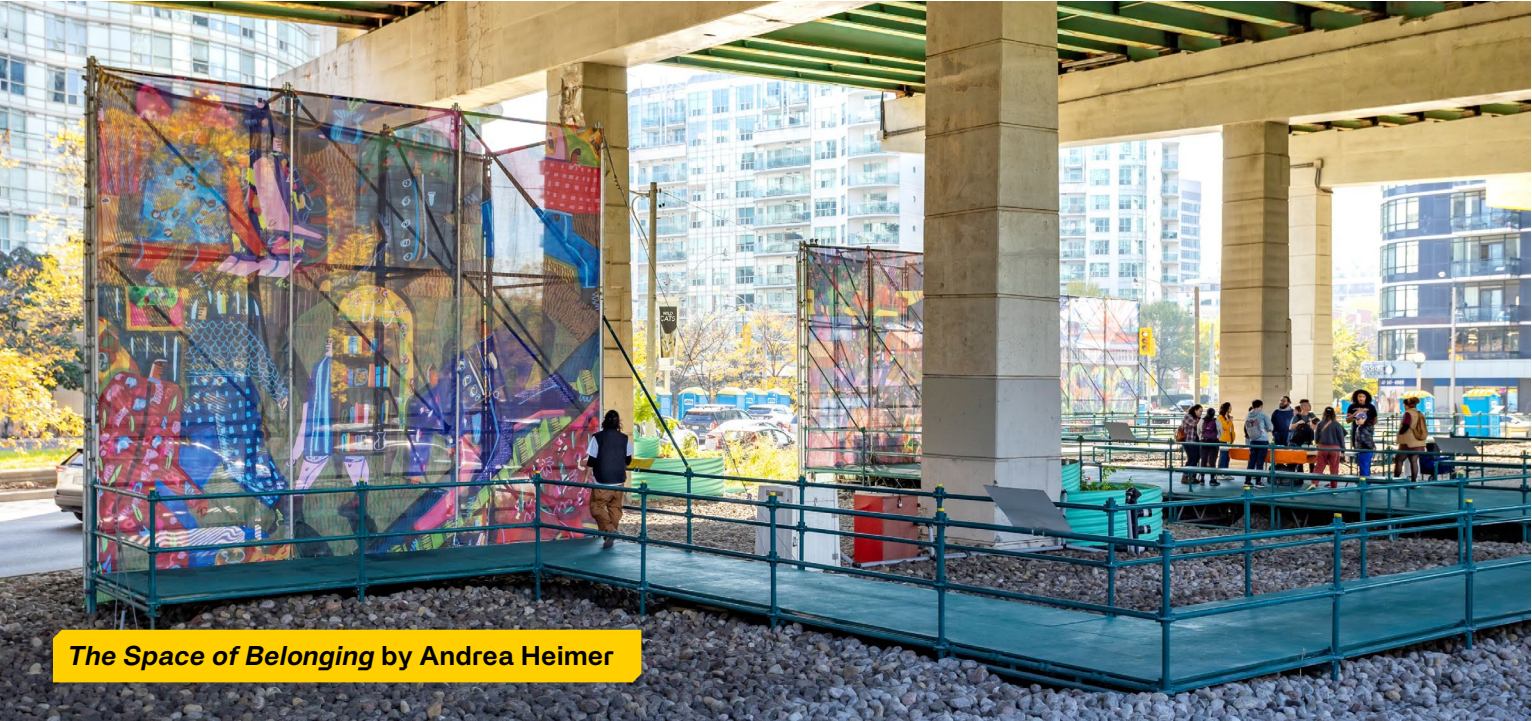
British artist Rosana Cade's *Walking:Holding* proposed the radical and intimate act of holding hands with a stranger in public. This unique, experiential performance invited audience members (one at a time) to participate in a guided walk through The Bentway neighbourhood, where they encountered and held hands with seven different strangers along the route. What transpired was a series of conversations which opened each person up to a new social connection. Of the 64 participants who took part, many commented on the fact that they found holding hands far more intimate than hugging. Across all feedback, the value of such a simple gesture of social connection, though small in scale, was certainly felt in a deep and profound way.

Similarly inspired by the idea of strangers finding new ways to gather together in public, Chicago-based Nigerian artist, Nnenna Okore’s dynamic installation *Holding Space* enveloped the permanent benches around The Bentway’s figure-eight skate trail. Using a mixture of hard and soft materials which are common to city-building, and Ankara, a versatile and iconic African fabric that embodies a deep sense of identity and community, Okore created a flowing, modular form that defined a new human-scaled space within a monumental, concrete landscape. Okore’s piece reminds us of the importance of creating “places within places” and moments for connection within a busy urban environment.

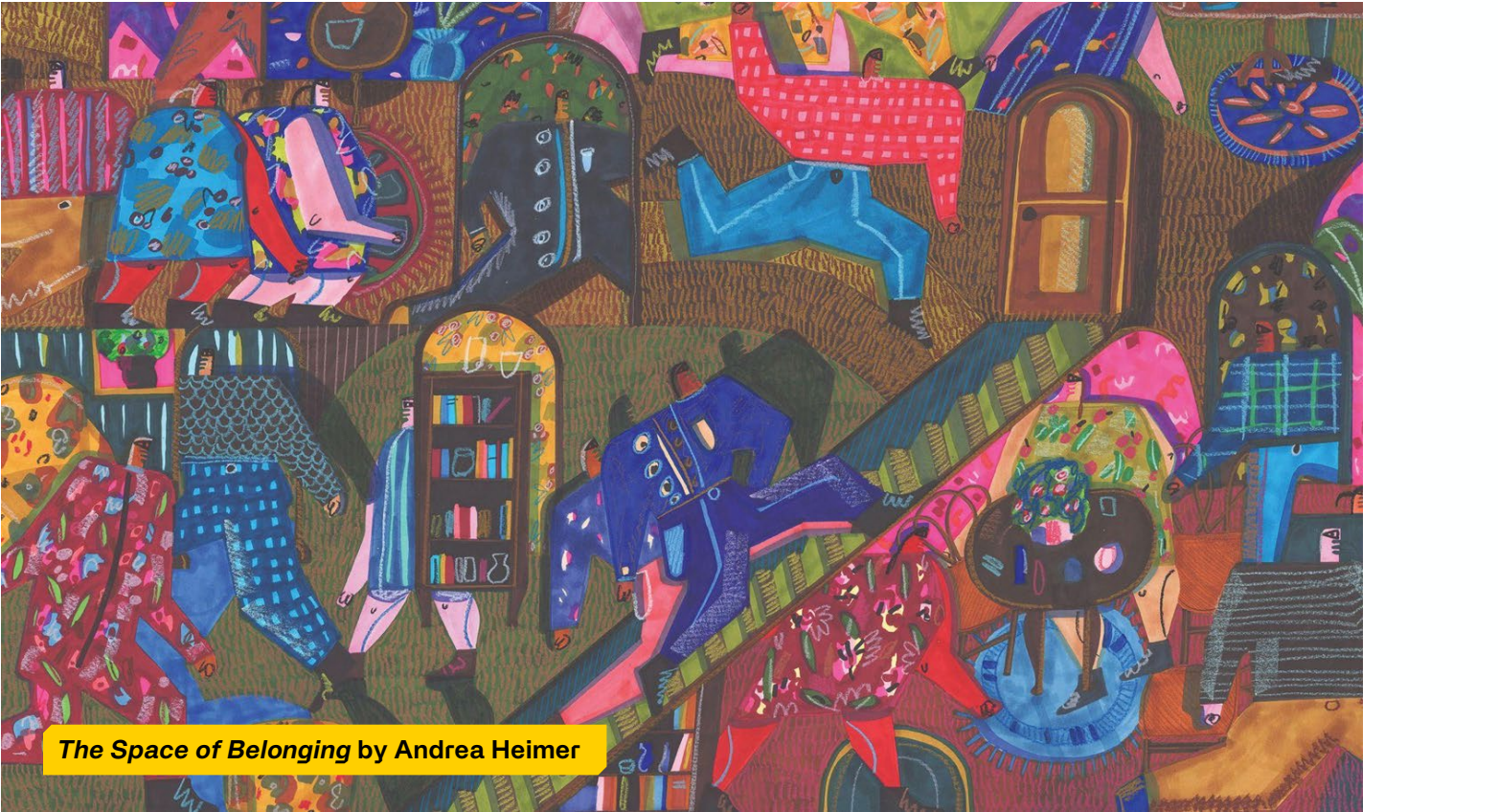
Andrea Heimer’s *The Space of Belonging* negotiates the tensions of a community living in close proximity to one another but where social isolation is still highly prevalent. Heimer’s pieces are displayed within CityPlace, a large-scale vertical community that borders the Gardiner Expressway and one of the densest neighbourhoods in Toronto with over 18,000 residents. Heimer’s drawings focus on a collection of anonymous figures engaged in the messy acts of urban living. Her work reminds us that loneliness is a subjective condition that can’t be solved by proximity alone, but requires active engagement, participation, and inclusion.



Holding Space by Nnenna Okore



The Space of Belonging by Andrea Heimer

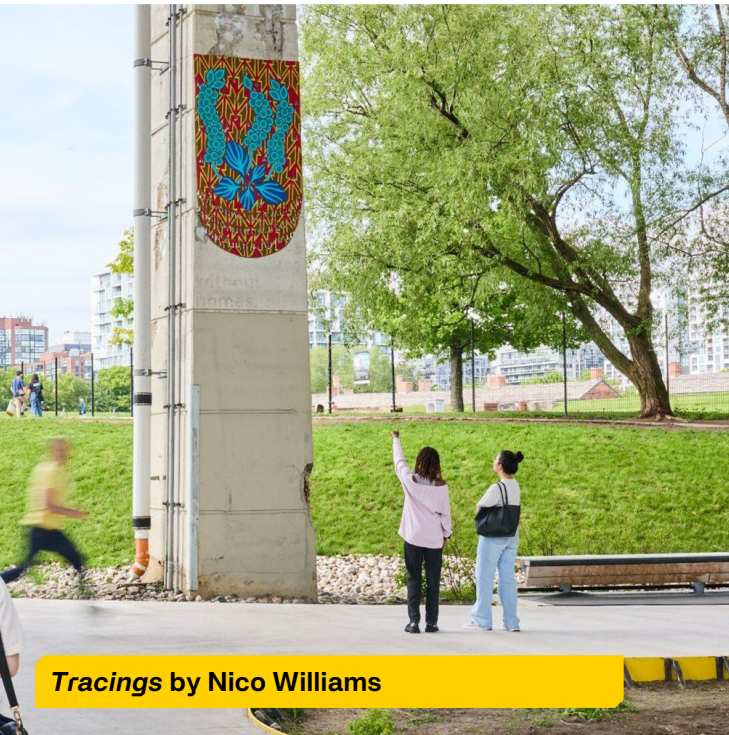


The Space of Belonging by Andrea Heimer

Recovery, Care and Repair:

Brooklyn-based artist Chloë Bass’ new work for The Bentway highlighted the vital role of public space for social recovery, care, and repair. The title of the work, “Perspective Alignment,” is a mental health term that emphasizes the importance of recovery in proximity to one’s community, and the sharing of social values and experiences that are crucial to that recovery. *Perspective Alignment* consisted of a series of nine sculptural benches hewn from Ontario rock and engraved with poetic phrases and imagery of plants from across time. The work invited visitors to sit alongside a friend or stranger and reflect on the ways that public spaces support healing.

The mural project *We Are Here* by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health’s HeART Lab, with art by Amanda Lederle, presented an emotional map of The Bentway, which charted the vital relationship between public space, mental health, and well-being. QR codes on the map provided access to the voices of artists, wellness practitioners, scientists, and mental health clinicians who offered reflections on their experiences in public space, and with loneliness. In creating this open and highly visible platform for storytelling, the piece offers a safe space for expressions of vulnerability and those seeking support.



Tracings by Nico Williams



We Are Here by Centre for Addiction and Mental Health’s HeART Lab. Art by Amanda Lederle



Perspective Alignment by Chloë Bass

Nico Williams’ new work *Tracings* expanded on notions of care and repair from the perspective of Indigenous practices of healing. Inspired by the City of Toronto’s annual maintenance of the Gardiner Expressway, which has crews preemptively identify structural risks and chip away at sections of the concrete, Williams created a series of five sewn and applied patches, which presented a parallel offering of repair and community support to this piece of infrastructure. These soft interventions incorporated traditional Indigenous regalia designs and were applied to the depressions left behind in the Gardiner’s columns. Williams’ work reminds us of the ongoing importance and responsibility to care for our infrastructure and, by extension, for our city.

Co-creation and Collective Action:

This summer showed that moving in proximity to others can be a healing act in and of itself. Adriene Mishler of *Yoga with Adriene* has long been known for her soft approach to yoga practice and her ability to reach people through her free YouTube channel. The Bentway welcomed Mishler to lead her first live practice since the pandemic, where she guided thousands of Torontonians in a communal outdoor yoga class promoting softness, self-care, and community connection. Visitors remarked on feeling immensely cared for throughout the experience and that it was transformative to be part of the collective practice.

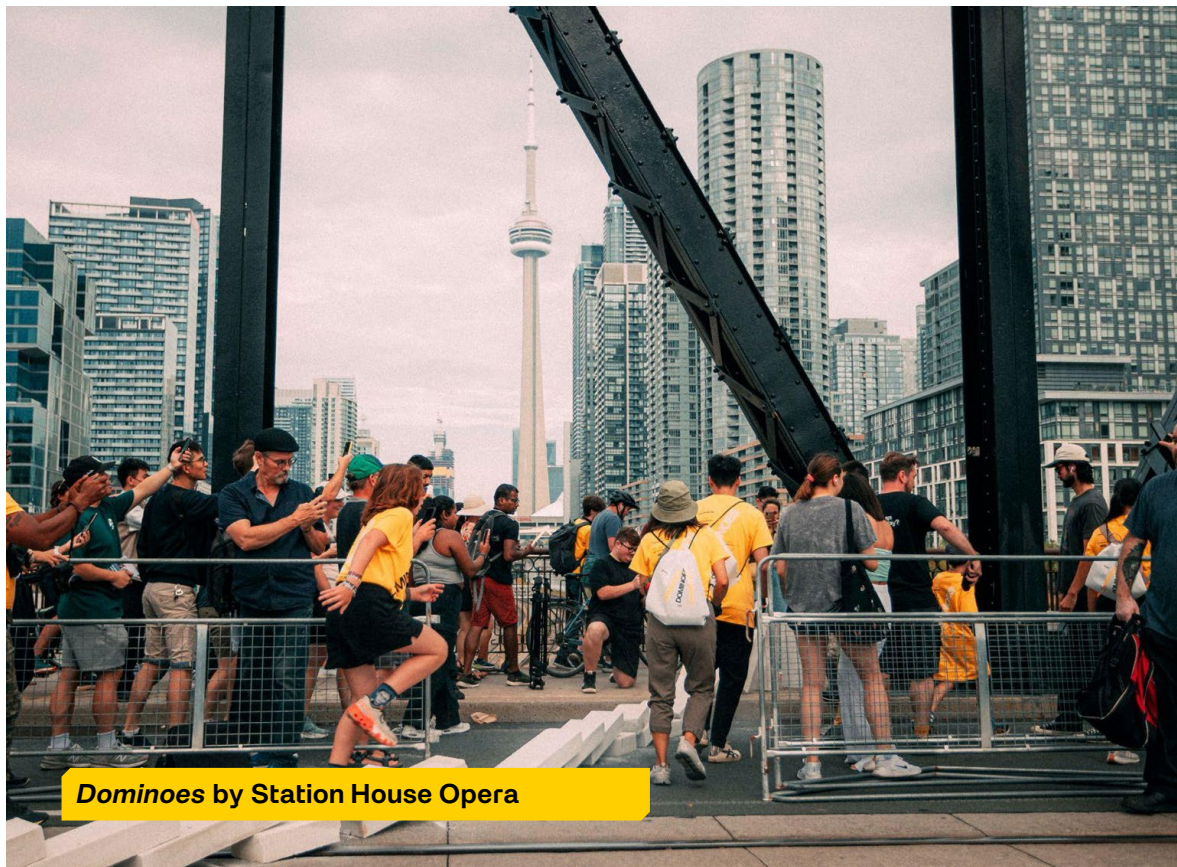
This summer, Bentway audiences further explored a *Softer City* through free Weekly Drawing Socials hosted at the nearby Bentway Studio with a Parkdale-based arts collective, Noble Space. Each week, participants met around tables with various art materials and celebrated socially-engaged, creative experiences. There is a vulnerability involved in trying new things, but the benefits of mindful drawing techniques were evident - fostering mental wellness across a broad range of participants.



Heather Nicol's new work *Wind Ensemble* also captured this act of co-creation and collective encounter through the marriage of sound and soft sculpture. This interactive and meditative project asked visitors to pause and connect to their surroundings and to one another through observation, active listening, and play. The work invited Torontonians to recognize their unique role in a larger community by adding their voices to a collective chorus. Strangers found joy as they witnessed the power of their contributions and the give-and-take that shaped the collective soundscape.

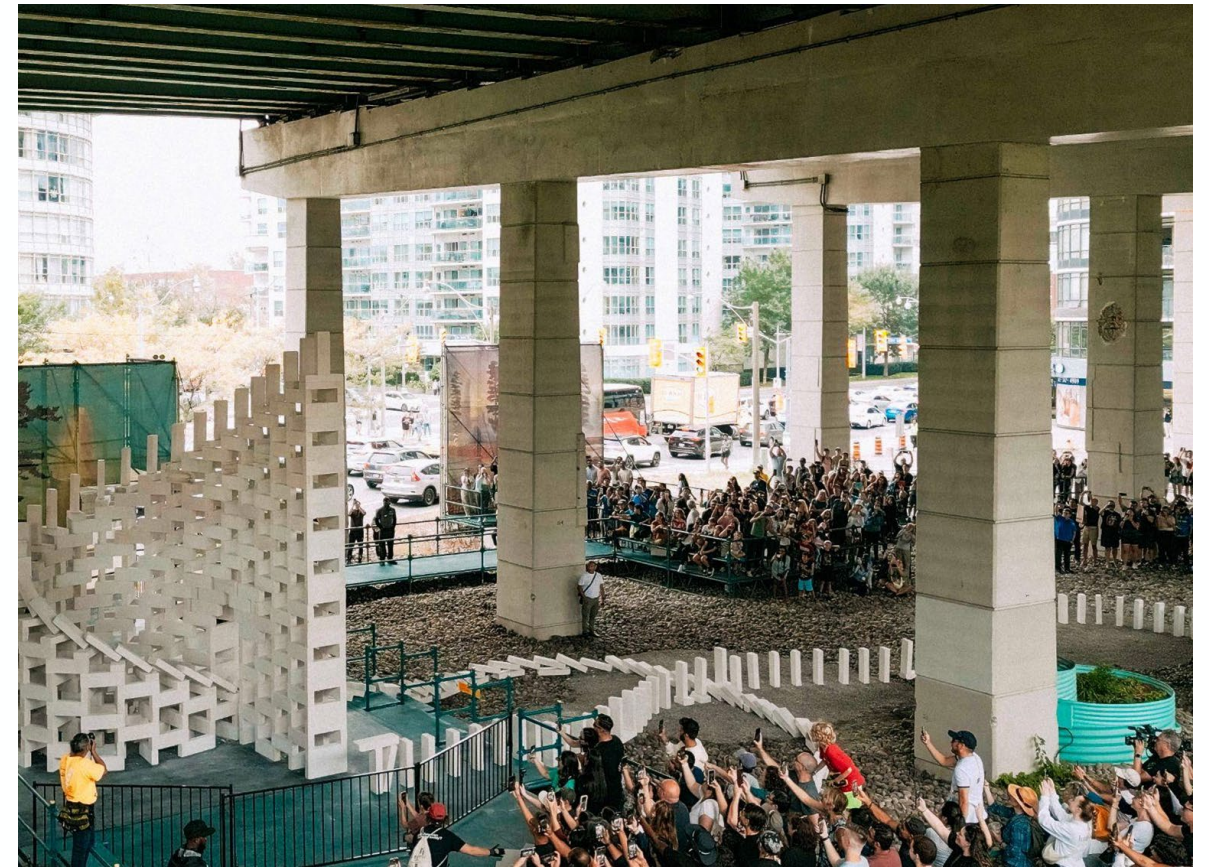


Shaped by feminist design principles and communal acts of weaving, WIP Collaborative created a welcoming playful lounge-scape for The Bentway Studio's terrace facing Canoe Landing Park. The project was co-built with teens who are often not reflected in the design of our public spaces. Over the course of the summer *Soft Fits* served multiple communities, acting as a jungle gym for young children, a space to rest for park-goers, and a contemplative space to lounge beneath the stars for late night visitors.



A cornerstone project of *Softer City* was designed to increase collective action and engagement across the Bentway neighbourhood. The Toronto Foundation’s 2023 “Vital Signs” report cites “rates of participation in groups and activities, donating and volunteering all declined significantly during the pandemic and have not yet improved significantly. The volunteer rate fell from 37% to 25% between 2018 and 2022, while the donation rate slipped from 75% to 63%, leading to a loss of about 300,000 donors and 300,000 volunteers.”

In response to these startling statistics, The Bentway presented *Dominoes* – a larger-than-life, moving sculpture by artists Station House Opera that stretched across multiple downtown neighbourhoods and, over the course of a day-long epic event, united neighbours in a common cause: setting up and setting off over 2.5 km of giant dominoes.



The event renewed community networks by bringing together close to 300 local volunteers and over 20,000 joyful spectators. Furthermore, it forged new grassroots partnerships with 20+ local organizations, 50 staff, and thousands of audience members, connecting vital public spaces and the people who inhabit them. *Dominoes* is a simple idea with large impact that illustrates the importance of The Bentway’s work to meaningfully connect the public spaces and residents adjacent to the Gardiner, while engaging people from across the city in the shared goal of advocacy, community, and city building.

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