



REPORT

Community Engagement

The story of a local community centre

Client: City of Kitchener

Location: Mill Courtland Community Centre

Project Type: Business Case (Hybrid Master Plan)

Community Engagement Type: Place-Based Storytelling

Developed by Jay Pitter Placemaking



August 2022

Public spaces and amenities are storied sites. The Jay Pitter Placemaking Storytelling Engagement Method positions community place-based stories as valuable design and development data. Using qualitative research approaches and building on oral traditions across cultures, the practice collects, analyzes and validates this data, which is then translated into tangible design interventions and policies.



Developed for the City of Kitchener

Project Background

Kitchener is a vibrant, mid-sized city with a distinct character, closely connected to the broader Tri-Cities region. It is sited on the Haldimand Tract in the Grand River Valley, which was purchased by the British from the Mississaugas, who were the original Indigenous stewards of the land. The city is lauded for its lush green spaces, its connectivity to a major innovation hub and its strong social networks amid rapid urbanization.

However, like all cities, Kitchener is experiencing growing pains. 12.2% of individuals who reside in Kitchener-Waterloo live below the poverty line and 24.9% of Kitchener-Waterloo households live on a mere \$40,000 or less after taxes. 34.9% of young adults reside in single parent-led households, while on the other end of the demographic spectrum, 14.5% of the Kitchener-Waterloo population is 65 years old or older. Demands for dignified and affordable housing are on the rise, along with predictable tensions pertaining to the intensification of the downtown core and long-standing neighbourhoods throughout the city.

Places such as the Mill Courtland Community Centre play an integral role in responding to these complex challenges, which is why the City of Kitchener identified it as one of its priority sites in its recently approved recreational master plan. Established in 1986, the centre's origin story is defined by a grassroots approach, co-led by dedicated City of Kitchener staff and volunteer members affiliated with local neighbourhood associations. Many of the centre's well-attended and beloved initiatives have emerged in response to community needs and aspirations. Today, the centre is bursting at its seams. The relatively small building envelope and site footprint are insufficient when contrasted to the large number of services and dynamic programs delivered, and the centre's distinct intergenerational legacy. The current Mill Courtland Community Centre and site configuration can no longer contain the community-building that has characterized this special place for over three decades.

Project Scope

Jay Pitter Placemaking has been retained to lead the first phase of the Mill Courtland Community Centre redesign and redevelopment process. The practice is developing a comprehensive business case containing master plan components to address the deeply grassroots placemaking history of the site. The scope of work includes but is not limited to the following: leading a series of story-based and broader community engagement initiatives; facilitating community design charrettes; developing high-level design guidelines and vignettes; conducting a site and neighbourhood analysis; and developing an economic and sustainability plan to guide the site expansion.

Jay Pitter Placemaking is deeply invested in the community centre's distinct grassroots history and future placemaking potential. All engagements are intended to reflect the concerns, needs and aspirations of both current and future community centre user groups. This invaluable information will be translated to and inform the Mill Courtland Community Centre Business Case, which will contain a master plan component.

Community Engagement Objectives

To truly understand the history, character and significance of a place, we must begin by listening to local stories. As such, phase one of the Mill Courtland Community Centre expansion was focused on place-based storytelling, which contributes to:

- » Mitigating power imbalances and inequities inherent in traditional community engagement processes by guiding a creative, democratic and accessible process for exploring the value and function of places;
- » Uncovering the intangible cultural heritage of the site, meaning the rituals, stories, celebrations, social networks, sites of significance etc. of the community centre;
- » Modelling the equitable placemaking practice of listening more than speaking, and acknowledging lived experiences as an important form of expertise.

Unpacking Our Team's Story-Based Approach

Activist author and historian Rebecca Solnit eloquently highlights the connection between place and storytelling, asserting, "A place is a story and stories are geography..." Specifically, within a professional urbanism context, as scholar Leonie Sandercock highlights, "stories are central to planning practice: to the knowledge it draws on from the social sciences and humanities; to the knowledge it produces about the city; and to ways of acting in the city." Again, place-based storytelling is an equitable and democratic community engagement approach that disrupts traditional planning processes driven by technocratic jargon and top-down approaches. In addition to centring local expertise, place-based storytelling builds empathy and understanding among stakeholder groups that often have competing interests while providing land use professionals with nuanced and invaluable insights that enhance the responsiveness of their design interventions.

Jay Pitter Placemaking has developed a specific place-based storytelling approach informed by both practice and research. This approach is aligned with thinkers exploring place and storytelling across multiple professional disciplines while incorporating qualitative research approaches pertaining to the codification and validation of everyday stories, treating them as data. Also, the practice recognizes that the storytelling processes within and beyond placemaking initiatives are not free from their own power imbalances and structural inequities between professionals collecting stories and community members sharing their stories.

For instance, some community members may feel pressured to perform despair or victimization to have their needs seriously considered, or a single story from a particular community member can be wrongly elevated as a common experience or perspective of individuals with similar identities. Sometimes professionals initiate storytelling processes that evoke place-based trauma without having the appropriate training or supports. To mitigate these and numerous other challenges, the Jay Pitter Placemaking team works alongside local community members to collect, codify and validate stories, and engages elders, youth peer leaders and/or social workers when leading especially sensitive place-based storytelling processes. To address these power imbalances and structural inequities, Ms. Pitter has received training in narrative therapy approaches, which has informed her Healthy Storytelling Boundaries Checklist on the following page.

Healthy Storytelling Boundaries Checklist

- ☒ I understand that I am courageous if I share my personal story and I am courageous if I choose not to share my personal story.
- ☒ I am sharing a personal story that I feel comfortable being repeated and/or widely disseminated.
- ☒ I am sharing a personal story that no longer brings me immense pain or distress.
- ☒ I am not sharing a personal story while experiencing a challenging time with my mental health.
- ☒ I am not sharing a story while exhausted or using substances.
- ☒ I do not feel pressured to perform a particular social identity or social location while sharing my personal story.
- ☒ I understand that I can't control how others respond to my story.
- ☒ I understand that I have the right to withdraw consent, and stop mid-way through sharing my personal story.
- ☒ I understand that I have the right to share analysis and insights along with my personal story.
- ☒ I understand when, and up to what point, I can withdraw consent to have my personal story disseminated.

Collaborative Story Collection Process

With the support of members of the Mill-Courtland Neighbourhood Association and the Highland-Stirling Community Group, Jay Pitter Placemaking led the practice's signature place-based storytelling engagement. Members of Ms. Pitter's community engagement team and volunteers from the aforementioned groups gathered stories using a simple template developed by the practice. By involving local volunteers and experts, community members had the option to share their stories, some of which were profoundly personal, with someone they were familiar with, which increased comfort and participation levels. After individuals and families shared their stories, a professional photographer captured their images while members from the cob oven group grilled hearty snacks including roasted breadfruit, a special Caribbean treat gifted to Ms. Pitter from a community member as a special welcome. Also, members of the music program, both youth and adult instructors, provided live music. Despite contending with COVID and hosting the event outdoors in chilly temperatures, 100+ individuals attended, and dozens of powerful and informative community stories were collected. In addition to this primary community engagement initiative, Jay Pitter Placemaking also led the following initiatives: one-on-one interviews with various stakeholders who lead independent programs within the community centre; an informal lunch with City of Kitchener staff and leaders to ascertain their expertise and broader vision for recreation centres across the city; and a neighbourhood walk organized by the neighbourhood association volunteers, which was attended by the local City councillor.



Photo Credit: Gelek Badheysang

Jay Pitter and Local Resident

Community Story Highlights

All of the community-based stories we gathered were equally valuable, moving and insightful. The following stories reflect the range of stories gathered.

■ The community centre has been an integral part of my family's life for the past 20 years. Both of my daughters pretty much grew up here, with my youngest starting out with Miss Chris at the nursery school. We've participated in all the fun events, whether it be the spooky Halloween party or the breakfast with Santa, and the centre has been a home away from home where there is always a friendly smile greeting you and making a point to know your name. As my family grew, so did our needs, and I needed to get out of the house more. I tried some of the adult classes and really loved doing Zumba and yoga and enjoyed being with the other adults.

It was very important for me that my kids got involved in supporting the centre too, and they have volunteered at Neighbours Day, donated toys, and run their own programs, like the hygiene drive and teaching Hip Hop. Joanne has been a great mentor to my girls over the years and has given them so many opportunities to grow and become role models themselves. The community centre is so much more than a place to go and do events, it is a place that teaches us to be kind to each other, gives us a sense of belonging, and offers us a place to be accepted. It humbles us.

~ Laurraine

■ I worked alongside Joanne & the neighbourhood associations for over 20 years until my retirement when I joined MCNA Board. One of the programs that I feel passionately about is the Community Angel, which the Mill-Courtland Neighbourhood Association started around 2000. We saw there was a real need around the holidays, and there were kids in the community who weren't going to get a Christmas celebration. We asked ourselves "what can we do," and came up with the Community Angel program where toys and food are given to families in the community. Some families are able to come to the centre to pick up, but we also deliver. The first year, we provided food and gifts for 15 families, and last year for 57 families. The program has also had a partnership with the local church, which provides a large quantity of food. I have been a volunteer & board member since my retirement because you never really leave this place. There is so much support here. We are like family and our children all grew up here together. Everyone just keeps jumping in wherever they are needed! The people are what keeps me coming back.

~ Cathy

■ I came to Canada from war-torn South Sudan during the winter of 1988. My father passed away early in my life. My mother thought that going to Canada with my uncle was the best opportunity at a better life for me, so I travelled here with my uncle who became my dad. I didn't speak English but my uncle/dad spoke a little bit and worked hard to get us settled. We lived in a tight-knit community, but I wasn't always surrounded by the right influences. When I arrived at the community centre, I was a difficult seventh grader struggling with identity issues, and carrying so much trauma from my journey and the things I'd witnessed during the civil war. I acted out on a regular basis but Joanne, the centre coordinator, just pulled me closer to her. She and others saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. I was given leadership opportunities and they did little things like celebrate my birthday, Christmas cards and access to playing basketball in my spare times. I began to feel safe and valuable, and I developed a sense of accountability. Because of everyone's faith in me and my own efforts, I went on to graduate with a Bachelor Degree in Communication Studies and Minor in Religious Studies from Wilfrid Laurier University. Today, I am working with newcomers who are predominantly Black and racialized youth, coaching football at the local university and raising my three children alongside my wife. In fact, when my son and daughter were born, I brought them to see Joanne who still holds a motherly role for me and nana role for my children. Although I no longer live in the neighbourhood, this is where I bring my children—I wouldn't consider going to a closer, fancier community centre. If you remove the community centre from my story, I wouldn't be the person I am today.

~ Nial

■ Every time I see pita bread, I think of the centre's cob oven. That whole project is a great memory where an amazing group of people came together with their own sets of skills to be part of a community project, including my sons. While building the cob oven, we learned about the lives of our neighbours and where they came from, and they provided mentorship for my boys. Alfred led the group, sharing his knowledge, and helped one to gain the confidence to build his own wooden table. Mark gave back to the centre by building the shelter for the oven. He went out of his way to make sure the design fit the space, protected the oven and all those that would cook in it. I've now watched my children go from participating in centre programs to volunteering, instructing, and even working at the centre. They have matured and developed life skills from working with people of all different walks of life, cultures and ages, and I have made connections with so many people I would never have met otherwise. I'm looking forward to another season of community connecting around food from the oven: pitas, pizza, corn and potatoes prepared by volunteers to share with our neighbours.

~ Julie

■ I've been coming to the centre with my children for a very long time. It's so welcoming, flexible, and accommodating. My kids feel like they belong here, mostly because of the drama program. They feel a responsibility for the space, and the community too. Now, I am a peer health worker at the centre, and I hear the families I support saying the same thing. When I run my Family Time Peer Program in the outdoor space behind the centre, people love it! We have one of the nicest outdoor community spaces in town, including the beautiful paths, benches, gardens, and cob oven we built. I also think about how meeting a variety of folks through this space, including unhoused people who use the centre, has helped me and my children develop compassion and empathy for a population we might not otherwise interact with.

~ Tamara

■ Growing up, I didn't have a lot of guidance so I could pretty much go anywhere I wanted. I went to a lot of recreational facilities to play basketball, but they would either charge a fee or kick youth out at the first sign of tension. I ended up coming to the Mill Courtland Community Centre twice a week because they didn't charge and when things went down, they communicated with us rather than kicking us out of the facility. The centre is known for its many excellent programs, including basketball, and for being a gathering place that brings people together across different cultures. I was viewed as a person here, not a stereotype, based on how I presented myself. That's what matters... acceptance. In addition to being accepted, I learned structure at the centre, developed skills and built relationships. I now work for the school board and with youth in the detention centre. It all started by running stuff here! I am so thankful for this place.

~ Jorge

■ This place is really meaningful to me because it was through the centre that I met my husband. Alex and I met when we were both working here, me as a coordinator, and Alex running a basketball program. Since then, we've spent the last 20 years building our family together and volunteering at the centre. Once my employment at the centre ended, I started volunteering. I also started bringing my kids here for programming. It's such a safe place for kids to be kids. There's a sense of accountability for them, but people at the centre don't hold things against them when they make mistakes. I don't worry about my kids when they are here because I know the community is raising them. Now we've come full circle and my daughter and son have each run their own basketball program. There's just something so special about the way this community treats people. There's a commitment to meeting people where they are.

~ Jen

■ Our family's first experience with the centre was through the preschool program with our two children, Rose and Jesse. We were over the moon with preschool. The instructors, the room and the program were all so great. That led to Joanne and Karen inviting Sam to lead the Lego Club. Sam ran the Lego Club with the high school student (it was the high school student's first job). We invited the University of Waterloo's Engineering Department and their Lego robotics team to teach robotics as part of Lego Club. Our family also gives back to the community through the Angel Tree, and during the COVID lockdown, we skated here at the outdoor rink every morning. Our Syrian neighbours speak English as a second language, so we helped to connect two of their children to the basketball program at the centre.

~ Sam

■ My strongest memory of the community centre is working on Shakespearian plays. Upwards of 25 kids aged four and up (and a few supporting adults) would be spread throughout the building working on acting, building sets, trying on costumes or discussing characters. Children were actively and enthusiastically engaged in a topic that scares most adults, in a building where they felt supported and could safely take risks and be themselves and where if they worked hard, they would succeed. The centre is all about meeting people where they are at and then getting them to take a step further along their journeys and I love being a part of that.

~ Erica

■ I first came to the centre in June 2017 to speak with Joanne about the Women's Program I coordinate. We needed a new location, and Joanne left a warm impression. We quickly completed the paperwork with centre staff, and were able to launch the program in September 2017, just three months later. We have an average of 19 participants in the program, including online programs. The group is a mix of beginners and long-time residents, and overall, it's a diverse group with Korean, Chinese, white Canadian and African nations represented. I don't feel racialized or awkward at the centre, and I notice the same sentiment amongst group participants. When our children come to play at the centre during our programs, they refer to the centre as "Auntie Fadhilah's House." They feel comfortable here, and they also see me as a leader at the centre who is being treated with proper respect.

~ Fadhilah

■ I can't sum up what the community centre means to me in just a couple of sentences. It is engagement over 16 years and three children, who are now 25, 15 and 10 years old. I've done Shakespeare plays for many years here, so that is close to my family's heart, but much closer to my heart is the pollinator perma-culture garden in the back. Through that garden, we have provided a lasagna garden for the little ones, a habitat for pollinators, and other biodiversity elements that could not be replicated with new landscaping. Over the last five years, the birds and other insects have come to know this to be a place for food and habitat in their migration paths. Together, we have created a biodiverse, safe space for us, and all our relations.

~ Nicola

■ The community centre is close to home for us, and the staff here are awesome. We started attending the community centre because of the programs they offer for kids. At first, I (Cindy) was shy and nervous because the centre was new to me, but I was soon overwhelmed by a sense of community and the energy of the youth through the Community Outreach Program. The centre keeps evolving and things are always being added, like the Little Library and art projects. It's an open-minded and reliable place. It's like going to mom's house. It was through participation in the Just for Girls program that I (Forrest) came to understand that I was transgender. I received support from staff and the program director as they grew in their understanding. There's always someone at the centre to talk to. It's a welcoming environment for people my age, and there's always new friends to make.

~ Cindy & Forrest

Key Themes and Correlating Recommendations

The sample stories above and numerous other gathered during the storytelling engagement process were organized and codified using a narrative research approach, resulting in the following key themes:

Responsive and Transitional Design Approach

Beautiful design is important but it must be functional and reflect the character of public facilities. To achieve this, careful consideration must be paid to the centre's social and environmental context. Respectful attention must be paid to the daily activities, collective values and aspirations of user groups. Specifically, the individuals involved and invested in the Mill Courtland Community Centre repeatedly expressed a desire to maintain the current "feel" of the centre, maintaining a mix of both open and private spaces. This would be best-articulated through an overarching, cohesive transitional design approach—a relaxed approach that mixes traditional and contemporary elements—while placing an emphasis on connectivity between the spaces and the people animating them. There is also a desire for transparency, and transition spaces that foster spatial opportunities for relationship-building or lingering outside the bounds of formal program areas. Also, given the unusually high number of programs, multi-use spaces, including storage areas, were also a priority, and a significant emphasis was placed on making both internal and external spaces accessible.

High Occurrence of Ethical Rule-Breaking

Institutional rules and policies are not always aligned with equitable placemaking and community engagement approaches, which is why Mill Courtland Community Centre volunteers and City staff, who run the centre have broken rules in the past to remove barriers for community members. While many rule breaches are understandable and have resulted in positive outcomes, they are also risky and have consequences related to liability and safety. The frequent occurrence of ethical rule-breaking suggests the need to revisit rules and guidelines that govern spaces to ensure that they are more flexible and responsive to community needs, while complying with critical aspects of municipal standards.

Maintaining Small Yet Significant Design Interventions

Minor design interventions co-created with community members have the power to profoundly enhance the quality of public spaces by fostering a sense of co-stewardship, increasing use and/or visits, and promoting healthy behaviours. The cob oven, perma-gardens, outdoor storage sheds and ice rink—all constructed by a diverse range of community members—are examples of this evidence-based and equitable approach to placemaking. While community members were open to changing both interior and exterior spaces at the centre, there was a strong sentiment in favour of leaving these particular design interventions intact. There are intergenerational relations, sweat equity and joy bound up in these small yet significant design interventions. While it could be argued that a more aesthetically pleasing design could be achieved by removing these design interventions, it would dishonour the effort that went into creating them and diminish their intangible cultural value. It is advisable to design around these elements rather than erasing them. Doing so will tangibly convey a regard for the centre's legacy while still creating a lot of opportunities for design enhancements.

A Strong Sense of Place and Participation

Whether serving as a neighbourhood association member, working as City of Kitchener staff or attending an exceptional program, the individuals invested and involved in the Mill Courtland Community Centre have a strong sense of place-based identity. Many community members credit their experiences at the centre for contributing to their sense of self-worth, purpose and increased capacity. The centre has become the nucleus for a community of individuals who've forged life-long bonds knitted together by births, newcomer journeys, graduations and hardships. There is a sense that this public space truly belongs to its people, which is beautiful. Moreover, many community members pointed to a garden they helped to plant, the cob oven they helped to construct, the kitchen they helped to renovate, and walls and art pieces they helped to create. It is paramount to maintain this strong sense of place and this culture of participation, while ensuring that new community members with varying viewpoints and approaches are able to meaningfully participate. Equitable places are dynamic and while change can be daunting, it is possible to honour the past while embracing the future.



Jay Pitter Placemaking is an award-winning, bi-national practice mitigating growing divides in cities across North America. The practice leads institutional city-building projects focused on public space design and policy, mobility equity, cultural planning, gender-responsive design, transformative public engagement and healing fraught sites. Additionally, Jay Pitter, Principal Placemaker, shapes urgent urbanism discourse through media platforms such as the Los Angeles Times and Canadian Architect. Ms. Pitter is a sought-after speaker who has delivered keynotes for organizations such as United Nations Women and the Canadian Urban Transit Association, and is also an urban planning lecturer who has engaged students at Cornell University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Princeton University and numerous other post-secondary institutions. Guided by Ms. Pitter's expertise, which is located at the nexus of urban design and social justice, the team translates community insights into the built environment and urban policy.

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