

Green Space Equity & Environmental Justice: A Comparative Study between North St. James

Town & High Park-Swansea Communities in Toronto

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

In cities shaped by unequal development and growing environmental pressures, urban green spaces are increasingly recognized not just as aesthetic luxuries but as fundamental components of livable, healthy, and equitable communities. While public parks and naturalized areas linked to a wide range of social, mental, and ecological benefits, the accessibility and distribution of these spaces are often influenced by systemic inequities embedded in urban planning, land use policy, and neighborhood development trajectories. This thesis investigates these disparities by comparing two socioeconomically and spatially distinct communities, High Park-Swansea (HPS) and North St. James Town (NSJ). Guided by social-ecological systems (SES), political ecology, and community-based participatory research (CBPR), the study asks how social fabric and planning histories shape the equitable distribution and lived experience of public green space.

The research investigates green space quality, accessibility, and use in each neighborhood, focusing on how socio-economic status, density, infrastructure, and community engagement intersect to produce divergent relationships with urban nature. Drawing on 63 surveys and 24 in-depth interviews, it employs inductive coding and narrative analysis to identify themes related to accessibility, inclusiveness, safety, ecological quality, and psychological well-being. Findings show that access to green space is not defined by proximity or quantity alone but is closely tied to perceptions of safety, historical marginalization, and belonging.

HPS emerges as a neighborhood with relatively high green space coverage, affluent demographics, and strong stewardship, while NSJ is characterized by dense high-rise housing, constrained green infrastructure, and heightened social vulnerability. An analysis of Toronto's green space policies indicates that comprehensive goals are often undermined by weak enforcement, a lack of spatially disaggregated values, and limited community-oriented design standards, contributing to a spatial politics of exclusion. Moreover, it explores how Toronto's green space policies, while comprehensive on paper, often lack enforcement mechanisms, spatially disaggregated benchmarks, and community-oriented design standards.

By mapping community narratives to broader structural trends, the study reveals how planning practices, past and present, contribute to a spatial politics of exclusion where certain communities are underserved by design. In doing so, it informs concrete recommendations for municipal planners, including the development of neighborhood-level green space equity indicators, integration of community-informed design criteria in development approvals, and policy tools that ensure green infrastructure investment is responsive to local needs. These insights hold relevance beyond the context of Toronto, contributing to global conversations on urban sustainability, environmental justice, and inclusive planning decisions.

Keywords: green space equity; High Park-Swansea; North St. James Town; political ecology; social-ecological systems; community-based participatory research; environmental justice; urban planning; community engagement.

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Chapter 1:

Introduction

Toronto, Canada's largest city, exemplifies both the opportunities and challenges of equity urban green space provision. The city's diverse population and rapid urban growth have placed increasing pressure on green space availability and quality. While Toronto benefits from an extensive network of parks and natural areas, access is not distributed equally across its neighborhoods. Despite widespread recognition of their health, social, and ecological benefits, public green spaces remain disproportionately concentrated in wealthier, less diverse neighbourhoods while marginalized communities are faced with limited, lower-quality, and poorly maintained environments (Wolch, Byrne, & Newell, 2014). Public parks and open spaces are legally free and ostensibly open to everyone, but the social, economic, and political factors that affect who can use them are anything but neutral (Anguelovski, 2016).

This spatial inequality is rooted in complex historical and socio-political dynamics, including past urban planning decisions, zoning policies, and resource allocation priorities that have often favored wealthier neighborhoods. For example, one of Toronto's largest and most iconic green spaces, High Park, offers a robust range of recreational amenities and natural habitat, serving a relatively affluent population with lower density (Taylor, 1999). Conversely, residents of North St. James Town, often living in high-rise apartments, tend to experience limited access to green spaces small in size, crowded, and sometimes poorly maintained.

The consequences of these disparities go beyond aesthetics or leisure. In Toronto, green space inequities disproportionately affect marginalized communities, including racialized

groups, immigrants, and low-income households, exacerbating health inequities and social exclusion (Hulchanski, 2010). The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the essential role of green spaces as an informal public health infrastructure, where safe outdoor spaces became vital centres for activity and social connection when indoor spaces were restricted. Moreover, urban green spaces can actively contribute to Toronto's goals for climate resilience and sustainability, mitigating urban heat islands and improving air quality. Ensuring equitable access to quality green spaces is vital not only for local communities' physical and mental health but also for advancing broader city-wide objectives around social equity, environmental justice, and sustainable urban development.

The problem this research addresses is the systemic and uneven distribution of public green spaces between two contrasting Toronto neighborhoods: High Park-Swansea (HPS) and North St. James Town (NSJ). Although both are located within the same metropolitan area, they offer significantly distinct urban experiences regarding nature and access to green infrastructure. High Park-Swansea is distinguished by its extensive, well-maintained parkland, and relative affluence, providing residents with abundant opportunities for recreation, social connection, and ecological benefits (Taylor, 1999). In contrast, North St. James Town is one of the most densely populated and socioeconomically marginalized neighborhoods in Canada, with limited quantity and quality of accessible green spaces (Lorinc, 2015). This disparity reflects broader structural issues in Toronto's urban planning history, resource allocation, and municipal policy implementation that have favored wealthier areas, thereby perpetuating environmental injustices.

This thesis explores how these spatial inequities in green space distribution relate to critical questions of justice, access, and urban equity in Toronto. It investigates the socio-political dynamics and historical policy frameworks underlying green space provision, while

examining how unequal access impacts residents' lived experiences of wellbeing, safety, mobility, and community inclusion. Given Toronto's rapid urban growth and intensification pressures, understanding these disparities is vital for informing policies aimed at fostering a more equitable and inclusive green infrastructure network. By comparing green space availability and accessibility in HPS and NSJ, the study contributes to a growing body of research that critically interrogates the uneven geographies of urban nature and advocates for planning interventions centered on social and environmental justice.

1.1 Research Question

This thesis is guided by the central research question:

How do disparities in resource availability and community characteristics influence the equitable distribution and accessibility of green spaces between the North St. James Town and High Park - Swansea communities in Toronto?

This question aims to uncover the complex socio-political, historical, and planning processes that shape uneven green space provision within Toronto's diverse urban setting. It emphasizes the understanding of how such disparities affect residents' daily lived experiences, wellbeing, and access to inclusive and secure public green spaces.

1.2 Research Objectives

To answer this question, the study is structured around three interrelated objectives:

1. Explore resident perceptions and experiences: Investigate how residents of North St. James Town and High Park-Swansea perceived and utilize local green spaces, including issues related to safety, accessibility, quality, and inclusiveness.
2. Analyze planning policies and historical development patterns: Examine the role of municipal planning decisions, land use policy, and historical urban development trajectories in shaping green space distribution and disparities in these Toronto neighborhoods.
3. Provide evidence-based policy recommendations: Develop practical urban planning policy interventions aimed at promoting social equity and environmental justice by improving green space accessibility, distribution, and quality in Toronto and similar urban settings.

Together, these objectives seek to produce complex insights that transcend mere proximity measures, considering the intersectional dimensions of green space access and environmental justice with the socio-ecological framework of Toronto's urban areas.

1.3 Thesis Structure

This thesis is organized into five chapters to provide a coherent narrative from context to critical analysis and recommendations. Chapter 1 introduces the research topic, articulates the research question, and outlines the objectives, establishing the significance of green space equity in Toronto's urban environment. Chapter 2 explores the detailed literature review, synthesizing

existing studies on urban green spaces, environmental justice, spatial equity, and relevant city planning policies, with particular attention to disparities in Toronto neighborhoods. Chapter 3 discusses the theoretical frameworks grounded in political ecology, socio-ecological systems (SES), and community-based participatory research (CBPR). Chapter 4 outlines the research methodology including case study design, participant recruitment strategies, data collection methods such as surveys, and semi-structured interviews. Chapter 5 presents the empirical results, organized thematically to highlight resident perceptions experiences, and the spatial realities of green space access and quality across NSJ and HPS. Finally, Chapter 6 discusses the findings in relation to the theoretical frameworks and urban planning discourse, culminating in policy and planning recommendations aimed at promoting equitable green space distribution and environmental justice in Toronto and comparable urban settings.

Chapter 2:

Literature Review

The equitable distribution of urban green spaces is a critical concern within environmental justice and urban planning research, highlighting how socio-spatial inequalities intersect with access to environmental resources. Recent studies in Toronto document pronounced disparities in green space availability and quality, particularly affecting low-income, racialized, and high-density neighborhoods such as North St. James Town, compared to affluent areas like High Park-Swansea (Dong, 2024; Fleming et al., 2023). These disparities are not random but tied to historical urban planning decisions, zoning policies, and resource allocation mechanisms that often privilege wealthier communities (Wolch et al., 2014, City of Toronto, 2019). Toronto's parkland distribution, while extensive overall, reveals gaps in accessibility due to spatial segregation and uneven investment (City of Toronto, 2019; Parkland Strategy, 2019). The persistence of socio-economic and racial inequities in green space access exacerbates health and social inequalities by limiting opportunities for recreation, physical activity, and social cohesion in marginalized communities (Davis, 2022). Moreover, greening initiatives face challenges including risks of green gentrification, where improvements lead to displacement of lower-income residents (Arellano, 2022).

Effective urban planning for green space equity requires integrating frameworks that consider multiple justice dimensions, including political ecology and social-ecological systems, which capture the complexity of power relations and ecological processes influencing green space distribution (Heynen et al., 2006; Pickett et al., 2013). Community participation, as advocated by community-based participatory research (CBPR), empowers marginalized voices in

planning processes and fosters inclusive, context-sensitive solutions (Israel et al., 1998; Davis, 2022). This literature informs the present study's focus on the socio-political and ecological contexts underlying Toronto's green space disparities.

2.1 Defining Green Spaces

Urban green spaces are typically understood to encompass a broad range of vegetated areas that are accessible for public use, contributing to environmental quality, social wellbeing, and ecological sustainability within cities (World Health Organization [WHO] Regional Office for Europe, 2016; City of Toronto, 2020). For this research, urban green spaces are defined as publicly accessible lands or facilities dominated by natural or semi-natural vegetation, including but not limited to parks, playgrounds, gardens, greenways, naturalized areas, urban forests, ravines, cemeteries, and green roofs. This definition recognizes the multifunctional role of such spaces in urban ecosystems and their importance in enhancing community health, social cohesion, and climate resilience (WHO, 2016; City of Toronto, 2015).

From a public health perspective, accessible urban green spaces play a crucial role in preventing and mitigating chronic diseases such as heart disease and diabetes by encouraging physical activity and lowering stress which are considered to be the most common factors that influence the prevalence of chronic conditions (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2016, pp. 13-16). Exposure to natural environments also promotes mental health by reducing anxiety and depression symptoms, enhancing mood, and fostering social interaction (Bratman et al., 2019; Hartig et al., 2014). Additionally, green spaces function as vital communal areas that nurture community identity, safety, and inclusion, particularly in diverse and multicultural cities like

Toronto, where they provide opportunities for social integration across different cultural groups (Parkland Strategy., 2019; Toronto Public Health, 2015).

The quantity of urban green spaces based off safety, maintenance, amenities, and cultural relevance is just as significant as mere physical accessibility. Research has consistently shown that “access is often highly stratified based on income, ethno-racial characteristics, age, gender, (dis)ability, and other axes of difference” (Wolch et al., 2014, p. 235). This inequity is deeply rooted in historical urban planning practices, where socioeconomically disadvantaged communities are subject to overcrowded, poorly maintained, or unsafe local green spaces thus limiting their ability to attain optimal health and social benefits (Wolch et al., 2014; Dong, 2024). Consequently, equality in green spaces should consider social and ecological dimensions along with spatial distribution that affect inclusivity and usability (Kabisch et al., 2015; Jennings et al., 2016).

Over time, as the value of urban green space to public health has grown, its inequitable accessibility has been identified as an environmental justice issue. Wolch et al. (2014) argues that the distribution of urban green spaces reflects socio-economic and racial inequalities, with marginalized communities bearing the brunt of environmental injustices (p. 234). Similarly, Kabisch et al. (2015) explains that they are not merely physical entities but also symbols of social and environmental justice. Thus, these authors conclude that green spaces are fundamental infrastructures for healthy, inclusive, and sustainable cities, rather than optional amenities (pp. 130-131).

Toronto’s green space network is uniquely composed of both traditional parklands and complementary green infrastructure features, such as street trees, schoolyards, hydro corridors,

community gardens, and privately owned publicly accessible spaces (POPS), which collectively enhance connectivity and accessibility to urban nature (City of Toronto, 2019; Parkland Strategy, 2019). These spaces serve essential ecological functions, including improving air quality by filtering pollutants, mitigating urban heat island effects, managing storm water to reduce flooding, and supporting biodiversity even in high-density areas (Kabisch et al., 2015; City of Toronto, 2019). For example, the city's urban forest consisting of millions of trees, supplies significant environmental benefits valued in millions of dollars annually by reducing pollution and lowering energy costs (City of Toronto, 2019). For many residents, parks function as an 'extension of the home', particularly in densely populated areas where private greenspace is limited due to urban intensification (Parkland Strategy, 2019). Ecologically, Toronto's parks support biodiversity, with "3.5 million of the city's trees" (Parkland Strategy, 2019, pp. 10-12) located within these spaces, contributing to storm water absorption, heat island mitigation, and climate resilience by enhancing the City's resiliency to extreme weather events. Economically, parks enhance property values, attract tourism, and stimulate local businesses by hosting festivals and events that draw visitors. They serve a substantial role in assuring the city remains a livable, sustainable, and vibrant place for current and future generations.

Urban green spaces are complex elements of the urban landscape, functioning as ecological and recreational resources while also significantly enhancing public health, social cohesion, and environmental justice. Despite this, their distribution and quality can mirror and perpetuate fundamental social inequities, presenting considerable obstacles to equitable urban development. Understanding the intricate relationship among spatial, social, and ecological aspects of green space accessibility requires a thorough analysis of the theoretical frameworks that guide the analysis of spatial justice in urban planning. This section examines views of how

justice, governance, and participatory planning influence the equitable distribution of green spaces in urban areas such as Toronto.

2.2 Theories of Spatial Equity in Urban Planning

Spatial equity is a fundamental principle in urban planning that emphasizes equitable allocation of resources, services, and opportunities within geographic areas. It aims to rectify inequalities in access to fundamental resources such as housing, transportation, education, and particularly green spaces, especially in urban regions where socioeconomic and racial inequities are significant (Fainstein, 2010; Wolch et al., 2014). The interdisciplinary field of spatial equity studies integrates geography, sociology, public health, and environmental justice to critically evaluate how urban planning practices may either sustain existing injustices or alleviate them.

Susan Fainstein's Just City theory is a key framework in this field, emphasizing fairness, democracy, and diversity as its three principal tenets. Fainstein (2010) asserts that a just city is characterized by equitable resource distribution, the inclusion of underrepresented communities in decision-making, and a social fabric defined by pluralism and inclusivity (pp. 3-5). This paradigm accentuates the necessity of developing urban policies that prioritize neglected populations, ensuring equitable access to quality green spaces irrespective of residents' financial status.

Another critical theory is "Environmental Justice," which emerged in the 1980s in response to the disproportionate environmental burdens faced by marginalized groups, especially racial minorities, further enhances spatial equity perspectives (Bullard, 1990, pp. 7-10). It underscores the impact of systematic racism and economic disparity on the distribution of environmental resources and asserts the entitlement of all individuals to reside in safe, healthy

environments, free from excessive exposure to environmental risks (Bullard, 1990). This approach is particularly relevant in assessing the inequities in Toronto's green spaces, where historical planning and municipal investment patterns have resulted in uneven accessibility.

Additionally, the Capability Approach, developed by Amartya Sen (1999) and further expanded by Martha Nussbaum (2011), incorporates a human-centered aspect to spatial equity by emphasizing individuals' abilities to achieve well-being and dignity (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). This stance asserts that access to green spaces is not simply a luxury but a vital capability necessary for human well-being, including recreational, social, and psychological rewards (Nussbaum, 2011). It reinforces the necessity for urban design to extend beyond just physical proximity considerations to encompass qualitative evaluations of green space functionalities and accessibility.

Lastly, the Right to the City theory emphasizes collective rights to shape urban space and to access the resources needed for dignified urban life (Lefebvre, 1996; Harvey, 2008). Harvey (2008) frames this right as an ongoing process of democratization and participation that challenges top-down planning and calls for community control over urban redevelopment (pp. 31-32). In Toronto, this theory substantiates calls for participatory planning mechanisms that ensure green space design and upkeep align with varied community values, needs, and priorities. The principles of justice, inclusivity, and capability provide critical lenses to interrogate the inequitable patterns of green space provision in cities such as Toronto.

Building on these foundational theories, it is clear that achieving spatial equity in urban green spaces requires not only acknowledging the historical and systemic drivers of inequality but also actively engaging marginalized communities in reshaping urban environments. This prompts an analysis of how these theoretical frameworks manifest in actual green space

distribution across Toronto's diverse neighborhoods. Understanding the spatial patterns, governance structures, and socio-economic dynamics that define Toronto's green space landscape is essential for identifying challenges and opportunities for planning interventions that advance environmental justice and urban sustainability. The following section delves into the current state of green space distribution in Toronto, highlighting disparities, policy contexts, and the lived experiences of residents in contrasting communities.

2.3 Green Space Distribution in Toronto

Toronto's green space distribution is the outcome of layered municipal policies, historical urban planning decisions, and population dynamics that continue to shape how green infrastructure is allocated across diverse neighborhoods. A key historical policy under the Ontario Planning Act was Section 37, which allowed municipalities to negotiate community benefits from developers in exchange for additional height or density, with funds typically spent within the ward where development occurred (City of Toronto, 2019). While Section 37 was intended to deliver new parks and amenities, tying benefits to development intensity meant that rapidly redeveloping areas such as St. James Town had, in theory, greater access to these resources, whereas slower-growing areas like Jane and Finch received fewer investments, reinforcing spatial inequities when combined with uneven political advocacy (City of Toronto, 2019).

Toronto prides itself on one of North America's most extensive urban green infrastructures, featuring parks, ravines, urban forests, and naturalized areas. According to the 2018 Tree Canopy Study, the city's "tree canopy coverage was approximately 28.4-31%" (City of Toronto, 2025, pp. 4-6), with ambitious targets set to reach 40% by 2050 through programs

encouraging tree planting on private and public lands. While such efforts contribute to environmental resilience and quality of life, a detailed analysis reveals stark disparities in parkland access and green space quality, especially in lower-income and high-density neighborhoods (Wolch et al., 2014; Toronto Urban Forestry, 2025).

The Toronto Green Standard (TGS), introduced in 2010, establishes performance requirements for new development related to energy efficiency, stormwater management, and green infrastructure, including measures such as green roofs and landscaping (City of Toronto, 2020). However, the TGS focuses primarily on site-scale environmental performance and does not consistently mandate the creation of new public parks in high-density, underserved areas, leaving a gap where green space need is greatest (City of Toronto, 2020; Vasudevan et al., 2023). The Toronto Official Plan articulates a vision of a green city that protects natural heritage, expands the park system, and improves public access, but implementation has tended to favor already advantaged neighborhoods near large, high-quality parks such as High Park, while marginalized communities continue to contend with limited, overcrowded, or perceived-unsafe green spaces (City of Toronto, 2019; Wolch et al., 2014).

Historical urban planning decisions, primarily governed by the Ontario Planning Act, also play a critical role in shaping green space distribution. First enacted in 1946 to guide sustainable land use, the Planning Act requires municipalities to develop Official Plans and zoning by-laws conforming to provincial policies such as the Provincial Policy Statement (PPS). The PPS mandates protection of natural heritage and encourages compact urban form, emphasizing sustainability and equitable amenity access (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs, 2020). However, planning frameworks have often prioritized intensification and infrastructure development without commensurate green space provision, particularly in high-density

neighborhoods facing development pressures. Recent amendments like the Bill 109 More Homes for Everyone Act (2022) have further adjusted municipal site plan approval processes, sometimes limiting oversight about green space inclusion in new developments and complicating efforts to mitigate spatial inequities. In practice, these planning frameworks have often prioritized intensification and infrastructure delivery without a proportional expansion of public green space in high-density areas, and recent reforms such as Bill 109, the More Homes for Everyone Act, have streamlined site plan approvals in ways that can further limit municipal leverage to secure robust green space contributions (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs, 2020).

Grassroots efforts have played a vital role in addressing some of the inequities in Toronto's green space distribution. Community organizations such as Park People, Green Thumbs Growing Kids, and the St. James Town Community Co-op have transformed underutilized parcels of land into vibrant community gardens and parks. These initiatives exemplify effective community-based participatory approaches, emphasizing local stewardship and empowering residents to have a voice in shaping equitable green infrastructure investments (Park People, 2023; Green Thumbs Growing Kids, 2022). Such community-led projects provide critical social, environmental, and health benefits by creating inclusive spaces that foster social cohesion and connection to nature in neighborhoods often underserved by traditional municipal planning.

Nevertheless, significant challenges persist in the face of rapid urban growth and densification. High-density areas continue to lose informal green spaces, like vacant lots and parking areas, to new developments. Although many of these developments include private green amenities such as rooftop terraces or landscaped courtyards, these spaces are frequently

inaccessible to the broader community, thereby reinforcing existing spatial inequities (Chapple, 2014). Additionally, urban infrastructure remains dominated by automobile-oriented space; currently, Toronto allocates over 80% of its public street area to vehicle use, limiting opportunities for expanding green corridors, street tree plantings, and other urban forestry initiatives, especially in equity-deserving neighborhoods (Toronto Urban Forestry, 2025).

In response, municipal programs such as Toronto's Urban Forestry Grants and Incentives Program have been designed to strategically increase tree canopy cover, particularly on private lands. These data-driven programs target neighborhoods most vulnerable to urban heat and environmental inequities, thereby promoting environmental justice and climate resilience (City of Toronto, 2025). Tools like the Tree Equity Score Analyzer are used to identify and prioritize areas with low canopy and high social vulnerability, supporting more targeted planting and stewardship strategies that align with environmental justice objectives (Toronto Urban Forestry, 2025). Together with ongoing grassroots activism, these initiatives illustrate evolving efforts to reduce long-standing disparities in green space provision and move toward a more just and climate-resilient urban forest.

Toronto's green space distribution reflects the cumulative impact of historical planning decisions, evolving municipal policies, and community dynamics, which together shape access and equity across neighborhoods. While city-wide initiatives and grassroots efforts strive to mitigate spatial disparities, the lived realities of green space access vary dramatically, influenced by factors unique to each community. To better understand these differences, it is essential to consider the distinct historical trajectories of neighborhoods like High Park-Swansea and North St. James Town. The following section examines the social, environmental, and planning

histories of these communities, providing context for their contrasting experiences with urban green space and informing a nuanced analysis of equity in Toronto's park system.

2.4 History of Planning in High Park-Swansea & North St. James

The histories between the High Park-Swansea (HPS) and North St. James Town (NSJ) neighborhoods reflect the broader socio-economic and urban development trends that have shaped Toronto over the past two centuries. Despite their geographical and demographic differences, these contrasting backgrounds provide essential context for understanding the disparities in green space access and socio-economic conditions seen in these Toronto neighborhoods today.

HPS stands as a physical and visual testament to Toronto's commitment to preserving natural landscapes within an urban environment. At the heart of this neighborhood lies High Park, which owes its existence to the vision of John Howard, a prominent architect and surveyor. In 1873, Howard purchased the 160-acre Park Lot on Lake Ontario, describing it as a "picturesque, rugged, and uneven landscape covered in part with pine and oak forest, with areas of open, grassy oak savannah and numerous water features, most notably Grenadier Pond" (Taylor, 1999, pp. 12-14). Howard's intention was to create a "place of public resort for the citizens," and in 1876, he donated the land to the city of Toronto with the stipulation that it remain a public park (Taylor, 1999, pp. 14-15). This act of philanthropy laid the foundation for High Park as a natural retreat within the growing city, a legacy that continues to shape its identity today.

In the early years, High Park remained relatively isolated due to difficult terrain, inadequate road infrastructure, and the distant railway link south of the park resulting in limited access (Taylor, 1999). Newspaper accounts reported that the benefits of the park were “almost lost to the masses” due to the lack of cheap and safe access, highlighting early tensions between preservation and accessibility (Taylor, 1999, p. 19). Howard and, later, Toronto’s first parks superintendent, John Chambers, defended a conservative vision for the park, and the combination of this protective approach and low-density development around the site helped preserve its natural character for decades (Taylor, 1999).

Efforts to improve access, including the construction of a pavilion overlooking Grenadier Pond and the provision of basic amenities, were hindered by the park’s remote location. It wasn’t until the early 20th century, with the expansion of streetcar lines along Bloor Street, that the park became more broadly accessible to Torontonians, transforming into a popular destination for picnics, cycling, and outdoor recreation (Taylor, 1999). This increased usage also brought new challenges, as residents began to demand more recreational facilities and amenities. By the mid-20th century, the park struggled to balance its historical mandate as a natural retreat with its role as a “park of the people”, leading to debates over its future development (Taylor, 1999, pp. 30-33). In the 1950s, the city introduced new recreational facilities, such as playgrounds and sports fields, to meet the needs of a growing and diverse population. However, these developments were carefully designed to minimize their impact on the park’s natural landscape, reflecting the enduring influence of Howard’s vision. Today, High Park remains a cherished green space, offering a unique blend of natural beauty and recreational opportunities that continually attract visitors from across the city, while its playgrounds, sports facilities, and cultural events ensure that it remains a vibrant and inclusive space for all.

The neighborhood of Swansea, adjacent to High Park's western boundary shares this rich legacy of preservation and public access. Originally, a small lakeside town founded in the 1800s, Swansea was annexed by Toronto in 1967 as the city expanded westward (Swansea Historical Society, 2025). Early Swansea was largely rural, with scattered farms and cottages set among forests and wetlands, but development accelerated in the early twentieth century as roads and streetcar connections linked residents to downtown and nearby employment areas (Swansea Historical Society, 2025). Development accelerated in the early 20th century, accompanied by the construction of roads, streetcar connections, and exchanges that linked residents to downtown Toronto and nearby industrial zones. The community's growth was respectful of the natural environment, preserving ample green spaces and integrating native flora into residential areas. By mid-century, Swansea transformed into a desirable residential suburb with historic homes, and a close connection to High Park's natural amenities. The area attracted middle-class families seeking tranquility near the city, supported by local businesses and recreational facilities (Swansea Historical Society, 2025). In recent decades, development pressures have brought challenges, including rising property values and the threat of increased densification, spurring active community engagement to protect Swansea's heritage and green spaces. These efforts emphasize the importance of retaining the neighborhood's landscape heritage, historic buildings, and community-oriented open spaces, ensuring that Swansea remains a livable, environmentally rich part of the city.

North St. James Town (NSJ) presents a striking contrast to High Park-Swansea in both its urban form and socio-economic trajectory, embodying the challenges faced by high-density, inner-city neighborhoods in Toronto. Originally, a suburban area characterized by Victorian architecture residences and middle-class households, NSJ saw considerable development during

the post-World War II era, reflecting broader trends in urban renewal and modernist planning philosophies (Lorinc, 2015).

In the late 1950s and 1960s, the City of Toronto rezoned much of the area for high-rise residential development, marking a decisive shift in its urban fabric. This redevelopment was heavily influenced by the “Towers in the Park” concept popularized by architect Le Corbusier, which advocated for tall residential towers surrounded by open, green spaces to promote light, air, and recreation (Le Corbusier, 1967, pp. 172-174). The old Victorian housing was systematically demolished, often with limited consultation with existing residents, and replaced by a cluster of 18 high-rise apartment buildings designed to accommodate thousands of residents (Lorinc, 2015).

Despite the original vision targeting young, single middle-class professionals drawn to proximity to downtown Toronto’s working and cultural hubs, this demographic did not materialize as expected. Instead, many upwardly mobile residents preferred suburban life in Scarborough, Etobicoke, and North York, seeking detached homes over apartment living (Lorinc, 2015). Consequently, NSJ evolved into one of Toronto’s most densely populated neighborhoods, housing a diverse community predominantly comprised of recent immigrants and lower-income families. As of the 2018 census, the population density exceeded 64,000 people per square kilometer, contrasting with the city’s average of approximately 556 (North St. James., 2018). The area’s socio-economic challenges are significant as over 40% of families live below the poverty line, while nearly two-thirds of resident’s face language, cultural, and economic barriers to services and opportunities (Lorinc, 2015). The aging buildings suffer from an array of maintenance issues including inadequate ventilation, overcrowding, and outdated infrastructure, all of which exacerbate residents’ vulnerabilities and negatively affect their

quality of life (Lorinc, 2015). In this context, the scarcity and poor condition of green and open spaces is especially concerning, given well-documented links between access to quality parks and physical and mental health, social cohesion, and community resilience (Wolch et al., 2014).

The original “Towers in the Park” design promised green open areas, but in practice, these spaces are limited, fragmented, or poorly maintained, insufficient for the dense population’s needs. Moreover, recreational amenities and social infrastructure have historically been underprovided, contributing to social isolation and health disparities. Efforts to revitalize NSJ’s built environment and improve green space access have emerged in recent decades. A prominent example is the Wellesley-Parliament Square project, which aims to redevelop auto-dominated areas into more pedestrian-friendly, green urban spaces with public parks, bike lanes, and commercial amenities designed to serve local residents (Mitani, 2020). The development encompasses 238 to 280 Wellesley Street East and 650 Parliament Street and seeks to transform this area by achieving three main goals: 1) providing “Privately Owned Publicly Accessible Spaces (POPS) that enhance green space access; 2) improving street connectivity to accommodate pedestrians, cyclists, and vehicles; and 3) enhancing the built form through innovative building design and the provision of commercial spaces (Mitani, 2020). These changes have the potential to improve everyday conditions for NSJ residents by adding green areas and safer, more accessible streetscapes, though their long-term equity impacts remain contingent on inclusive design and governance.

These promising developments may be considered misleading as it reinforces challenges of achieving green space equity, as the neighborhood’s high density and socio-economic conditions make it difficult to create and maintain green spaces that meet the needs of all residents. Community advocates note that areas perceived as transient or low priority often

receive less attention in municipal budgeting, and in NSJ the tightly clustered tower blocks leave few opportunities for new parkland without costly land assembly or redevelopment (Lorinc, 2015). Upgrades to green infrastructure are therefore both financially and logistically challenging, especially under municipal funding systems that tie much park investment to development-related charges (City of Toronto, 2022).

The City of Toronto typically requires developers to dedicate up to 5% of their land for parkland or make cash-in-lieu payments, but caps and formulas based on site size rather than density can lead to lower per-capita parkland contributions in high-density, small-lot areas like NSJ compared with lower-density neighborhoods such as HPS (City of Toronto, 2022; Lorinc, 2015). For example, park funding per capita in HPS has been measured at four times that of NSJ, reflecting these systemic disparities in how green space investments are distributed across the city (Lorinc, 2015). Development charges in Toronto have risen significantly due to escalating land values, resulting in over a billion dollars held in reserve for park development across the Greater Toronto Area, yet much of this funding remains unspent or unevenly allocated (The Globe and Mail, 2019). Toronto alone accounts for 60% of the parkland reserve funds in the GTA, with a \$674-million balance as of 2017, which grew nearly fivefold since 2006 (The Globe and Mail, 2019). This disparity in funding distribution reveals an inequity where wealthier or rapidly developing neighborhoods may accumulate reserves faster but still face challenges in timely reinvestment, whereas neighborhoods like NSJ continue to suffer from underinvestment in green amenities.

Recognizing these issues, the City of Toronto has launched a refreshed Parkland Strategy and is reconsidering its parkland dedication policies. The strategy emphasizes the need to align funding mechanisms with the realities of urban growth, particularly by shifting toward

density-based rather than site-size-based parkland dedication rates. This aims to ensure that higher-density developments, which generate more demand for green space, contribute equitably to parkland acquisition and improvements (City of Toronto, 2022). While initiatives like the expansion of Berczy Park and restoration of Green Lane Park signal progress, the pace of change is slow relative to the urgent need for increased and improved green space access in NSJ (Lorinc, 2015; Mitanis, 2020).

The distinctive histories of High Park-Swansea and North St. James Town highlight the profound influence of past urban development decisions and socio-economic dynamics on the distribution and quality of green spaces in Toronto. Their historical trajectories intertwine with evolving zoning regulations, which have both preserved green heritage in neighborhoods like HPS and constrained equitable access and infrastructural improvements in densely populated areas like NSJ. The following section explores how zoning laws, past frameworks and contemporary amendments have shaped land use, housing forms, and green space accessibility across Toronto's diverse neighborhoods, highlighting their critical role in addressing the socio-spatial inequities rooted in the city's urban history.

2.5 Zoning Regulations (Past & Present)

Zoning regulations have played a critical role in shaping the development and character of communities as they govern land use, density, and building design, reflect broader socio-economic and political priorities, and often have lasting impacts on urban form and equity. More specifically, Toronto's zoning regulations have undergone significant modernization to address current housing and urban planning challenges while aiming for greater affordability, density,

and sustainability (City of Toronto, 2019). The zoning by-law 569-2013 sets out the use of land and buildings through a layered system of zone categories: for example, R (Residential) zones permit detached and semi-detached homes; RM (Residential Multiple) zones allow for townhouses and smaller walk-up apartments; RA (Residential Apartment) zones apply to large-scale apartment towers; and CR (Commercial Residential) zones encourage mixed-use development. These distinct designations define not just the use, also building height, lot size, setbacks, and density, in combination intended to protect neighborhood character and ensure compatibility with surrounding development (City of Toronto, 2013). In practice, this framework has often reinforced existing socio-spatial patterns, concentrating higher densities and rental housing in some areas while preserving low-density, owner-occupied neighborhoods elsewhere.

Recent zoning reforms reflect a response to growing pressures for diverse and affordable housing types. In 2025, Toronto updated its regulations to allow multiplexes, including duplexes, triplexes, and fourplexes, on any lot previously zoned for single-family houses, with some neighborhoods now experimentally permitting up to six units (City of Toronto, 2025). Zoning By-law 648-2025, passed in June 2025, formalizes these expanded permissions with clear guidelines for building size and requirements to maintain neighborhood character, while R, RD, RS, RT, and RM define the allowable permutations for such projects (City of Toronto, 2025). Complementing these changes, rules for laneway suites and garden suites further broaden opportunities for gentle densification, adding secondary units on existing residential lots (City of Toronto, 2022). These small-scale units are often exempt from parkland dedication fees up to a defined cap, which is intended to reduce barriers to

incremental infill while still supporting the parkland funding system overall (City of Toronto, 2022).

The zoning regulations that have shaped North St. James Town (NSJ) present a distinct and evolving history, directly tied to broader urban renewal ambitions in mid-century Toronto. Originally a middle-class neighborhood of Victorian homes, NSJ's trajectory was dramatically altered by comprehensive rezoning policies introduced by the City of Toronto in the 1950s (Lorinc, 2015). In 1953, major zoning amendments targeted the downtown core, including St. James Town, to vastly increase building coverage and density. This regulatory shift made the area highly attractive to private developers, resulting in the systematic clearing of the older housing fabric and the construction of Canada's first large-scale, high-rise residential apartment complex (Lorinc, 2015).

These policies facilitated the clearance of much of the historic housing stock and its replacement with Canada's first major high-rise apartment complex, organized around superblocks and tower-in-the-park principles rather than a fine-grained street grid (Lorinc, 2015). While the idea was framed as a solution to housing demand among young, professional households, the zoning framework imposed few requirements for local parks, community facilities, or social infrastructure that would later appeal to low-income and immigrant families (Lorinc, 2015).

In the late 1960s, civic activism led by residents and political allies successfully opposed further southward expansion of the Towers in the Park model, limiting the transformation to the current boundaries of St. James Town and leading to community-based housing cooperatives emerging in some of the remaining Victorian blocks (Collyer, 2016). Yet the legacy of permissive, high-density apartment zoning persisted, locking NSJ into a land use

regime dominated by RA (Residential Apartment) zoning (Lorinc, 2015). The result has been an enduring disconnect between building scale, demographic need, and community-level amenities.

Recent policy has sought to mitigate these deficits. The area is designated “Apartment Neighbourhood” in Toronto’s Official Plan, with city zoning by-laws such as 569-2013 (including R and RA overlays) now formally recognizing a mix of housing options, modest retail, institutional uses, and limited new development opportunities (City of Toronto, 2019). Guidelines for “sensitive infill” permit redevelopment if existing rental housing is preserved and local services improved, and any loss of rental units must be replaced per city by-law. Because NSJ remains one of Toronto’s densest neighborhoods and already has limited open space, intensification proposals must demonstrate that they will not exacerbate crowding or further erode access to sunlight, air, and greenery (North St. James Town, 2018). In recent years, targeted initiatives such as open-space redesigns, new park projects, and the St. James Town Public Realm Plan have sought to supplement local infrastructure and green space, pairing zoning guidance with urban design and public-realm strategies to support healthier, more inclusive conditions (City of Toronto, 2020).

The zoning regulations of High Park-Swansea (HPS) have, from their origins, been instrumental in maintaining the area’s low-density, natural, and residential character, reinforcing its reputation as one of Toronto’s most stable and exclusive neighborhoods. Historically, following Swansea’s amalgamation into the City of Toronto in 1967, municipal zoning by-laws prioritized detached and semi-detached housing, limited commercial uses, and relatively generous setbacks and lot sizes which are policies consistent with existing

subdivision patterns and local preferences for quiet, green streets (Swansea Historical Society, 2019).

For decades, much of HPS fell within what planning commentators call the “yellowbelt” areas zoned almost exclusively for single-detached housing or very low-rise forms, effectively precluding mid-rise or high-rise apartments and constraining population growth (urbaneer.com, 2019, pp. 1-3). Under Zoning By-law 569-2013, R (Residential) designations in HPS, particularly south of Bloor Street, continued to impose strict limits on building height (typically two to three storeys), lot coverage (often capped around 35-45%), and minimum lot frontages, alongside requirements for front and backyards (City of Toronto, 2013).

Variances to these rules such as building additions or legalizing multi-unit dwellings were feasible and usually required Committee of Adjustment approval and were frequently subject to appeals until recently to the Ontario Municipal Board increased costs and uncertainty and discouraged significant densification (urbaneer.com, 2019). As a result, HPS retained a predominantly low-rise built form and stable property market, reinforcing its relatively exclusive socio-economic profile. There are targeted amendments and development proposals in HPS within recent years, notably along major corridors like Bloor Street West, where zoning amendments now permit mid-rise, mixed-use buildings. For instance, a 2024 zoning amendment enabled a 10-storey mixed-use building at 2453-2469 Bloor Street West, but only after initial proposals were modified to address sunlight impacts and ensure compatibility with the prevailing built form (City of Toronto, 2024). Similarly, the ongoing revitalization of Swansea Mews which is a Toronto Community Housing site requires both a Zoning By-law Amendment and an Official Plan Amendment, with mandated tenant protection

measures, replacement of demolished units, and public consultation (City of Toronto, 2025). HPS also sits within several Heritage Conservation District study areas, meaning any significant alteration or development must comply with not just the basic zoning framework, but also with character preservation objectives under both local and provincial policy.

The distinct zoning trajectories of North St. James Town and High Park-Swansea have not only determined their physical and urban landscapes but have also created the frameworks within which key demographic and socio-economic patterns have emerged and persisted. In North St. James Town, permissive high-density zoning and minimal requirements for amenities or public spaces gave rise to a concentration of high-rise apartments, ultimately attracting large numbers of newcomers, immigrants, and lower-income households who found affordability but limited access to quality green space and community infrastructure. Conversely, in High Park-Swansea, restrictive low-density zoning and a sustained culture of neighborhood preservation fostered demographic stability, higher property values, and social exclusivity, but made the neighborhood less accessible to diverse, lower-income populations. As Toronto's zoning policies adapt to new pressures, allowing greater density citywide and promoting more equitable development, the resulting shifts in land use, housing typology, and built form will inevitably shape who can live in these neighborhoods, what kinds of resources are accessible, and how communities evolve. Thus, understanding the relationship between zoning and built environment is crucial for contextualizing the demographic and socio-economic trends discussed in the next section, as these factors remain deeply intertwined in the ongoing pursuit of a more inclusive and

2.6 Demographic & Socio-Economic Trends

Toronto's demographic and socio-economic trends are deeply intertwined with its evolving zoning policies, reflecting, and reinforcing the city's changing landscape of urban growth, housing, and community life. Over the past two decades, Toronto has experienced robust population growth largely driven by immigration, resulting in increasing diversity, younger age structures, and the expansion of unconventional household forms such as multi-generational families and communal living arrangements (Statistics Canada, 2021). This population surge has not been evenly distributed; neighborhoods shaped by permissive apartment zoning, such as North St. James Town, have become epicenters for newcomers, dense rental housing, and cultural pluralism, while low-density, exclusionary zones like High Park-Swansea continue to attract wealthier, older, and more established households (Hulchanski, 2010).

HPS, characterized by high property values, access to high-quality amenities, has a low population density of approximately 3,000 people per square kilometer, significantly lower than the citywide average of 4,500 people per square kilometer (City of Toronto, 2020). This low density is a result of the neighborhood's predominantly single-family homes and low-rise apartment buildings, which contrast sharply with the high-rise towers that dominate other parts of the city. The socio-economic profile of HPS reflects its status as an enclave of privilege which is evident as the median household income in HPS is \$120,000, nearly double the Toronto median of 65,000 (Statistics Canada, 2021). This economic advantage is discernable in the neighborhood's well-maintained infrastructure, high property values, and access to varying amenities. Homeownership rates in HPS are also high, with 75% of residents owning their homes, compared to the citywide average of 50% (Statistics Canada, 2021). This stability has

allowed residents to invest in their properties and better advocate for the preservation of their local green spaces, assuring that they remain a central defining feature of the neighborhood.

The demographic composition of HPS is relatively homogeneous, with a majority of residents identifying as White (75%) and a smaller proportion of visible minorities (25%) (Statistics Canada, 2021). It has a higher percentage of older adults (aged 65 and over) compared to the city average, reflecting its appeal as a stable, family-oriented community. Drawing on Hulchanski's analysis of income polarization in Toronto, High Park-Swansea can be understood as an affluent enclave where residents benefit from comparatively greater access to resources and opportunities than those in lower-income areas (Hulchanski, 2010). This socio-economic security has supported the maintenance and enhancement of green spaces in HPS, helping to keep them accessible and well-utilized by residents.

As one of Toronto's most densely populated and socio-economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, NSJ has a population density over 14 times the city average, the neighborhood's 18 high-rise apartment towers house a predominantly low- to moderate-income population, with a median household income of 35,000, well below the Toronto median of 65,000 (Statistics Canada, 2021). The demographic composition of NSJ is highly diverse, with residents representing a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds; visible minorities make up over 80% of the population, with significant representation from South Asian (30%), East Asian (25%), and African communities (15%) (Statistics Canada, 2021). This diversity is a bed of cultural richness, but it additionally raises issues considering many inhabitants encounter systemic barriers to education, employment, and housing. The neighborhood's high-density development paired with aging infrastructure further exacerbate these problems, with

overcrowding and poor upkeep in apartment buildings raising health and safety concerns (Collyer, 2016). The socio-economic challenges in NSJ are accelerated by the neighborhood's historical neglect and disinvestment. With many of the apartment towers in NSJ being built as part of an urban renewal initiative, these buildings were not designed to accommodate the needs of low-income and immigrant families. This lack of investment has had lasting impacts on the neighborhood's green space composition.

2.7 Comparative Analysis: Implications for Green Space Equity

The demographic and socioeconomic trends in HPS and NSJ illustrate the strong inequities present in Toronto's metropolitan setting. In HPS, prosperity and stability have aided in the conservation and upkeep of green spaces, ensuring that citizens have access to high-quality parks and recreational sites. In NSJ, by contrast, high density, poverty, and systemic barriers have produced limited, overburdened green spaces that reinforce socio-economic and environmental inequalities (Lorinc, 2015).

Wolch et al. (2014) emphasize that the distribution of urban green space reflects broader socio-economic and racial inequalities, with marginalized communities disproportionately exposed to environmental burdens (pp. 235-237). In this context, disparities between HPS and NSJ concern not only the amount of green space but also its quality and usability, including safety, maintenance, and range of amenities. The accessible, well-maintained facilities in and around High Park including trails, sports fields, playgrounds, and gathering spaces help make HPS a major destination for both local residents and visitors from across the city (City of Toronto, 2020). The limited green spaces that exist within NSJ are small, poorly maintained, and lacking in amenities. For instance, Wellesley Park and Winchester Park, two of the

neighborhood's primary green spaces, are less than 1 hectare in size and offer limited recreational opportunities (City of Toronto, 2020). The lack of green space is not solely a matter of aesthetics; it has real implications for residents' health and well-being, particularly in a neighborhood with high levels of poverty and overcrowding.

Uneven municipal investment and unequal political influence worsen these differences. Residents of HPS have comparatively greater financial resources, homeowner stability, and political capital to advocate for park protection, improvements, and responsive maintenance (Hulchanski, 2010). NSJ residents, on the other hand, often encounter structural barriers to participation in planning processes including language, time, and information constraints, thus limiting their capacity to shape green space priorities or secure sustained investment (Lorinc, 2015). As a result, park funding, programming, and infrastructure upgrades in NSJ have tended to lag behind need, and improvements have been incremental rather than transformative (City of Toronto, 2020).

2.8 General Green Space Composition in HPS & NSJ

The distribution and character of green spaces in High Park-Swansea (HPS) and North St. James Town (NSJ) highlight stark contrasts rooted in their historical development and socio-economic profiles. HPS is home to some of Toronto's most iconic and well-preserved green spaces, anchored by the 161-hectare High Park. It is a "flagship example of Toronto's commitment to integrating biodiversity conservation with public recreation, serving as a blueprint for sustainable urban park management" (City of Toronto, 2016, pp. 3-4). This is apparent as the expansive park features a diverse range of natural and recreational areas,

including oak savannahs, forested trails, Grenadier Pond, and manicured gardens. The park's designation as an Area of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI) further underscores its ecological importance, ensuring ongoing protection and management efforts (City of Toronto, 2020).

Beyond High Park itself, HPS itself comprises several smaller parks and green spaces that contribute to its overall rich green infrastructure. These include Swansea Memorial Park, which features a playground, tennis courts, and open lawns, and Rennie Park, which offers sports facilities and a skating rink (City of Toronto, 2020). The neighborhood's tree-lined streets and private gardens further enhance its green character, creating a cohesive network of natural and recreational spaces. High Park and its surrounding green spaces have long served as a model for urban park design, balancing ecological preservation with public access and recreation (City of Toronto, 2016).

Consistent municipal investment and community advocacy underpin the quality of HPS parks. As a flagship site, High Park receives ongoing funding for infrastructure renewal, ecological restoration, and programming, while higher local property values and organized resident groups often help secure additional improvements to smaller parks and streetscapes (City of Toronto, 2020). These dynamics contribute to a positive feedback loop in which affluence supports high-quality green spaces, which in turn reinforce neighborhood desirability and property values (Hulchanski, 2010).

NSJ faces significant challenges in providing adequate green spaces for its residents due to the neighborhood's 18 aging high-rise apartment towers, which has left little space for parks and recreational areas. Existing parks, such as Wellesley Park and Winchester Park, are not only small and overused but also lack diverse facilities, vegetation, and safe play spaces which

are features essential to meeting the needs of a densely populated community (Collyer, 2016). Informal green areas between buildings are often paved and used for parking, further limiting opportunities for residents to experience nature. The scarcity of mature trees and vegetative cover exacerbates the urban heat island effect and reduces resilience to climate shocks, especially for vulnerable populations (City of Toronto, 2020).

Efforts to address these disparities have been limited, with new developments often failing to compensate for the loss of informal green spaces. This is evident in the construction of condominiums in recent years that has replaced vacant lots and parking areas, further reducing the availability of public parkland in NSJ (Mitani, 2020). Community-led initiatives, such as the St. James Town Community Co-op, have sought to create green spaces through urban gardening and other projects, but these projects often struggle with constrained funding, land availability, and long-term security (Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, 2022). Without substantial investment and policy reform that prioritize park acquisition and enhancement in high-need areas, NSJ's green space deficits are likely to persist and continue reinforcing cycles of socio-economic hardship.

These contrasting green space profiles exemplify wider environmental inequalities across Toronto. While HPS benefits from abundant, high-quality, and accessible green spaces, NSJ struggles to provide even basic, safe parkland for its residents, mirroring broader patterns in which affluent communities enjoy superior environmental amenities relative to low-income neighborhoods in the same city (Wolch et al., 2014). Addressing these inequities requires sustained efforts to direct green space investment toward underserved neighborhoods, including both the creation of new parks and significant upgrades to existing spaces in terms of quality, safety, and accessibility (City of Toronto, 2022). Achieving more equitable green space

distribution also demands coordinated action by policymakers, planners, and community organizations, with explicit equity goals embedded in planning frameworks and funding mechanisms.

Chapter 3:

Theoretical Framework (Political Ecology, SES & CBPR)

3.1 Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR)

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) is a collaborative approach to research that emphasizes the active involvement of community members in all stages of the research process, from defining research questions to interpreting findings and implementing solutions. Rooted in principles of equity, empowerment, and social justice, CBPR seeks to address power imbalances in traditional research paradigms by centering the voices of those most affected by the issues being studied (Israel et al., 1998). In the context of this research, CBPR offers a significant framework that aids in comprehending the essential components that affect green space equality in High Park-Swansea (HPS) and North St. James Town (NSJ), while also fostering community-driven methods to rectify discrepancies.

CBPR is grounded in several core principles that distinguish it from traditional research approaches. First, it emphasizes partnership and collaboration between researchers and community members, ensuring that the research process is inclusive and responsive to community needs. It is not just a method but a philosophy of research that seeks to democratize knowledge production and empower marginalized communities (Israel et al., 1998). Second, CBPR prioritizes capacity building by equipping community members with the skills and resources needed to participate meaningfully in the research process. This comprises training in data collection, analysis, and advocacy, as well as fostering leadership and organizational development (Israel et al., 1998). Lastly, it is committed to action and social change, utilizing

research findings to inform policies and practices that address systemic inequities (Israel et al., 1998).

Applied to urban green space, CBPR supports a nuanced examination of how socio-economic status, planning policies, community engagement, and historical development patterns shape access to and the quality of parks and open spaces. Involving residents from HPS and NSJ in the research process can reveal how they perceive and use green spaces, the barriers they face in accessing them, and their visions for more equitable, inclusive environments. For example, NSJ participants may highlight safety concerns, overcrowding, and limited facilities in local parks, whereas HPS residents may focus on preserving natural features and ensuring programs remain welcoming to diverse users.

One of the key strengths of CBPR is its ability to capture the lived experiences of community members, providing insights that quantitative data alone cannot reveal. Israel et al. (1998) argues that CBPR recognizes community members as experts in their own lives and views their knowledge as essential for understanding complex social and environmental issues (pp. 173-175). It is employed to explore how residents perceive and use green spaces, the barriers they encounter in accessing these spaces, and their visions for more equitable urban environments. Interviews with NSJ residents may uncover apprehensions over safety, congestion, and insufficient facilities in local parks, whereas those with HPS may emphasize the need to conserve natural spaces and foster inclusive programming.

Empirical examples demonstrate CBPR's effectiveness in driving concrete change. The "Healthy Parks, Healthy Portland" initiative, for instance, partnered university researchers with community organizations in low-income Latino neighborhoods to document park access barriers through community surveys, focus groups, and youth photovoice; this work informed

investments totaling several million dollars in lighting, amenities, and culturally relevant programming (Healthy Parks, Healthy Portland, 2020). Similarly, Toronto's St. James Town Green Space Initiative trained residents to map local park deficits and advocate for improvements, contributing to funding commitments for new play equipment and open-space enhancements (Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, 2022). These cases exemplify CBPR's effectiveness in identifying hyperlocal needs through community-driven data collection, empowering marginalized residents in the research process, and translating findings into tangible policy outcomes. The methodology proves particularly valuable for examining green space disparities in high-density, low-income neighborhoods like North St. James Town, where conventional planning approaches often fail to address community-identified priorities.

This theoretical framework can guide the creation of tailored initiatives to enhance green space equality in HPS and NSJ, it can manifest through community workshops and participatory mapping exercises that can identify priority locations for park enhancements in NSJ, including the addition of playground equipment, enhancement of lighting, and expansion of tree cover. In HPS, it can support efforts to ensure that green spaces remain inclusive and accessible to all residents, particularly as the neighborhood faces pressures from rising property values and gentrification. By involving residents in the planning and implementation of these interventions, CBPR can help build trust, foster collaboration, and ensure that solutions are grounded in the needs and priorities of the community.

While CBPR requires significant time, resources, and commitment from both researchers and community members, it can be difficult to sustain over the long term. Power dynamics within communities and between researchers and participants can also complicate the research process, particularly in neighborhoods with diverse populations and competing interests. As

Minkler and Wallerstein (2011) caution that CBPR's transformative potential depends on ongoing reflexivity about power, roles, and representation to avoid reproducing the very inequities it seeks to address (pp. 15-17). In this research, addressing these challenges entails transparent communication, shared decision-making structures, and a sustained commitment to equity and inclusion in all stages of the project.

3.2 Social-Ecological Systems (SES)

The Social-Ecological Systems (SES) paradigm offers a comprehensive method for analyzing the intricate relationships between human societies and their ecosystems. Developed by scholars such as Elinor Ostrom and further expanded by Berkes and Folke, SES emphasizes the interdependence of social, economic, and ecological factors in shaping the sustainability and resilience of systems (Berkes, Folke & Colding, 1998). It seeks to highlight the interdependence of urban planning, community dynamics, and ecological processes by offering a useful prism through which the primary elements affecting green space equity in NSJ and HPS.

Fundamentally, the SES framework interprets human and natural systems deeply entwined with feedback loops and interactions spanning multiple scales, from personal actions to municipal policies and worldwide environmental trends. Ostrom (2009) characterizes social-ecological systems as complex adaptive systems marked by non-linear dynamics, cross-scale interactions, and emergent properties, underscoring the need for collaborative strategies that address root causes of inequality while enhancing system resilience (pp. 419-421). From this perspective, reductionist approaches that isolate single variables are inadequate for understanding or managing urban green space challenges.

The SES framework identifies several vital components influencing system dynamics: resource systems (e.g., green spaces), resource units (e.g., trees, water features), governance systems (e.g., zoning laws, municipal policies), and users (e.g., citizens, community organizations) (Ostrom, 2009). These elements interact in ways that could either support or undermine the system's sustainability and equity. For instance, historical planning decisions, municipal funding priorities, and community advocacy contribute to dictating the governance of green areas in HPS and NSJ, consequently pertaining to the availability and quality of green spaces for the local population.

Within the context of green space equity, the SES model is applied to examine how social, economic, and environmental factors interact to define access to and quality of green spaces in urban areas. Primary variables are urban density, socioeconomic level, environmental quality, and government structures. In HPS, the low-density residential zoning and historical preservation initiatives have contributed to maintaining high-quality green areas, which are considered ecological and recreational assets for the neighborhood. On the contrary, the high-density development and lack of investment in NSJ resulted in limited and overburdened green areas, therefore aggravating and generating perpetual socioeconomic and environmental disparities.

Moreover, emphasized by the SES framework is the crucial role of feedback loops in forming system results. For example, insufficient green space may contribute to poorer health, weaker social cohesion, and diminished property values, which in turn can reduce political leverage and further delay investment, creating a negative feedback cycle (Wolch et al., 2014). In HPS, positive feedback operates when abundant green space supports physical and mental health, community engagement, and ecological restoration efforts, which then strengthen public

support for continued protection and funding (City of Toronto, 2020). Berkes and Folke (1998) stress that recognizing such feedback is essential for designing interventions that foster both sustainability and equity.

Many studies of urban green areas have documented the SES framework's usefulness and value when addressing challenging issues involving society and the environment. A study of Barcelona's urban parks applied the SES framework to examine how ecological health, community involvement, and governance structures interact to define park accessibility and quality (Gómez-Baggethun et al., 2013). Key elements in encouraging green space equity and resilience, the study revealed, were participatory governance models and investments in ecological restoration. Similarly, a case study on community gardens in New York City indicated how local policies and social networks facilitate the promotion of the sustainability of these areas, even in low-income, high-density neighborhoods (Krasny & Tidball, 2015).

It can guide the establishment of merged strategies to advance green space equity. In NSJ, interventions could concentrate on strengthening governance systems by means of municipal funding for park maintenance and resident participation in decision-making procedures. Efforts at ecological restoration, including tree planting and the building of green infrastructure, may improve the resilience and general state of local green areas. In HPS, the emphasis might focus on ensuring that the green areas remain inclusive and accessible to all residents, particularly in consideration of gentrification's implications for the neighborhood and growing property values.

Though the SES model provides many insights, its complexity can make it problematic to identify connections between variables and project system outcomes. Its focus on non-linear,

cross-scale dynamics can make it difficult to predict outcomes or prioritize interventions, particularly in resource-constrained settings (Ostrom, 2009). Effective use of the framework requires detailed local knowledge and adaptive, participatory management that can respond to unintended consequences over time.

3.3 Political Ecology

Political ecology offers a complementary framework that foregrounds how power relations, economic structures, and historical processes shape access to and control over environmental resources. Rooted in the work of scholars such as Piers Blaikie, Harold Brookfield, and David Harvey, political ecology challenges apolitical explanations of environmental problems by emphasizing inequality, conflict, and the legacies of past decisions (Robbins, 2012). In this thesis, it provides a critical lens for analyzing the drivers of green space inequity in NSJ and HPS.

Political ecology is characterized by its focus on the political economy of environmental change, examining how power relations and economic systems influence resource distribution and environmental management. Robbins (2012) argues that political ecology seeks to reveal the “hidden politics” behind environmental issues, demonstrating how decisions about resource use are shaped by broader power structures and inequalities (pp. 13-15). This perspective underscores the importance of historical context: policies such as redlining, exclusionary zoning, and uneven infrastructure investment have long-term effects on contemporary green space patterns in many North American cities (Heynen et al., 2006).

Political ecology's emphasis on environmental justice examines the fundamental idea of environmental justice within the framework of green space equity, in which socioeconomic

level, color, and political power shape access to green spaces; wealthier and mostly white neighborhoods typically have easier access to high-quality parks than lower-income and minority communities. Analyzing how power dynamics, historical events, and economic systems interfere with the distribution and accessibility of green spaces in urban neighborhoods may reap advantages from political ecology. Significant variables to consider within this research are historical development patterns, municipal funding priorities, urban planning policies, and community advocacy. In HPS, the preservation of High Park as a natural oasis conveys the impact of wealthy local residents and historical figures such as John Howard, who granted green areas top priority for public use. Whereas NSJ can be linked to continuous infrastructure disinvestment in addition to mid-20th century urban renewal projects that continuously supplied high-density housing as top priority over public facilities (Collyer, 2016).

Political ecology also accentuates how opposition and contention shape environmental outcomes. This case involves disputes over land use, which encompasses the displacement of informal green spaces by new construction, and community groups resisting to ensure equitable access to parks. By means of urban gardening and other projects, the St. James Town Community Co-op has sought to establish green areas, thereby challenging the historical neglect of the neighborhood while advocating more inclusive urban design (Barnes, 2011). These initiatives draw attention to how grassroots movements could rectify environmental justice issues and remedy disparities in green space.

The benefits from applying this theoretical framework are evident through the case study of Robbins & Luginbuhl (2016), who analyzed water access inequalities in Phoenix using a political ecology lens. The study observed how urban water management prioritizes wealthy neighborhoods and golf courses above low-income communities of color, consequently

sustaining socio-environmental inequalities. The authors followed how historical policies, market forces, and racialized zoning laws generated unequal water access using a political ecology framework, framing drought as a “natural” crisis rather than an outcome of political decisions. Combining hydrological data with community interviews, their mixed-methods approach revealed how underprivileged residents, especially Latino groups, organized grassroots opposition to water rate increases (Robbins & Luginbuhl, 2016). It offers parallels for examining green space inequalities in this study by conveying the crucial role of political ecology in denaturalizing scarcity and binding environmental disparities to power systems.

The downfall to applying political ecology is evident through its emphasis on structural power and conflict can sometimes make it difficult to articulate clear, pragmatic policy responses, particularly in contexts where political and economic systems are deeply entrenched (Robbins, 2012). Critics argue that a focus on contestation may obscure opportunities for collaboration and negotiated solutions in environmental governance. Addressing these limitations requires careful attention to local context and a commitment to inclusive, participatory planning processes that combine critical analysis with coalition-building and practical reform.

Chapter 4:

Methodology

The methodology for this thesis is anchored in the contrasting realities of High Park-Swansea (HPS) and North St. James Town (NSJ), two Toronto neighborhoods selected for their distinct experiences with urban planning, green space provision, and socio-economic context. This comparative study is guided by the Just City framework (Fainstein, 2010), which emphasizes equity, democracy, and diversity in assessing urban outcomes, alongside community-based participatory research (CBPR) principles that foreground lived experience, stakeholder engagement, and the empowerment of residents in shaping research questions and analysis. By integrating these approaches, the methodology aims to move beyond policy assessment to critically examine how planning and zoning decisions manifest in everyday life, illuminating the spatial disparities and community strengths that define each area. The following section elaborates on the rationale behind the selection of HPS and NSJ as study areas, detailing their representativeness, relevance to the research question, and importance as case studies for urban equity frameworks.

4.1 Study Area Selection & Recruitment

High Park-Swansea (HPS) and North St. James Town (NSJ) were purposefully selected as they exemplify the extremes of socio-spatial inequality, green space allocation, and community context in Toronto. Their differences in urban morphology, resource allocation, and lived experience allow for a rigorous comparative case study aligned with best practices in urban and environmental research (Hulchanski, 2010; Fainstein, 2010). Both neighborhoods

vividly reflect the processes and legacies of urban planning, offering a dynamic lens to analyze

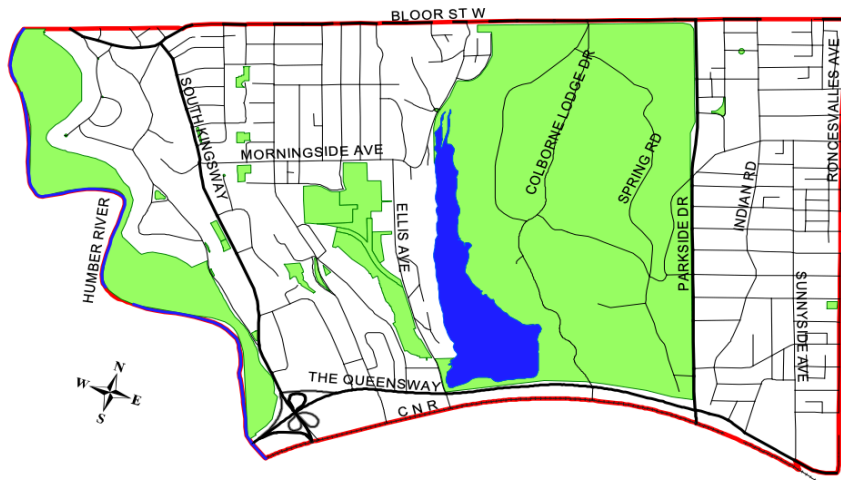


Figure 2: Map of the High Park-Swansea (HPS) neighbourhood showing the official study boundary.

how zoning, policy, and political priorities generate divergent outcomes in equity and environmental justice (Wolch et al., 2014; Taylor, 1999). The HPS study area corresponds to

the City of Toronto's High

Park-Swansea neighbourhood, located in the west end of the city. It extends from Bloor Street West in the north to Lake Ontario and the Gardiner Expressway in the south, and from High Park on the east to the Humber River on the west, encompassing both the large municipal park and the surrounding residential blocks. These official neighbourhood boundaries are mapped in Figure 1, which shows the HPS study area and its major green spaces. The NSJ study area aligns with the City of Toronto's North St.

James Town neighbourhood in the northeast part of downtown. It is bounded approximately by Bloor Street East to the north, Wellesley Street to the south, Parliament Street to the east, and Jarvis Street to the west, encompassing a dense cluster of high-rise apartment towers with very limited on-site green space. These

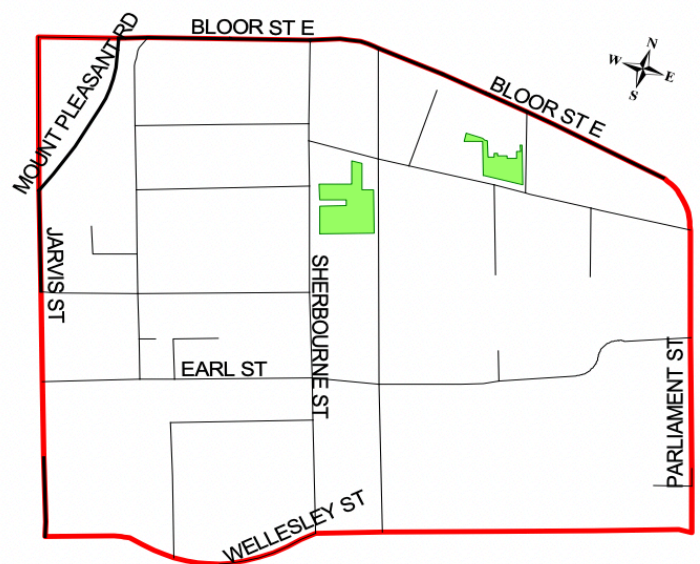


Figure 1: Map of the North St. James Town (NSJ) neighbourhood showing the official study boundary.

neighbourhood limits are depicted in Figure 2, which maps the NSJ study area and its adjacent parks, providing a visual reference for the survey and interview recruitment zone.

Selecting neighborhoods that present such pronounced contrasts what might be called



Figure 3: One of many ponds with surrounding greenery in HPS.

examines how power relations, public policy, and patterns of environmental privilege and disadvantage, with a particular focus on how municipal decisions influence landscape, opportunity, and risk. (Desfor & Keil, 2004). To ground the comparative case study in the material realities of each neighborhood, figures 3, 4, and 5, are field photographs of typical green spaces in High Park-Swansea and North St. James Town. The images from HPS are from High Park and

“two extremes” serves as a powerful research strategy in urban planning and social science because it maximizes the analytical leverage for uncovering root causes, mechanisms, and consequences of urban inequalities (Yin, 2018; Hulchanski, 2010). This approach is valuable for evaluating the applicability and explanatory effectiveness of the chosen theoretical frameworks. Drawing on political ecology, the research



Figure 4: An entrance path followed by many trees in High Park.

showcase one of the many entrances and one of the many ponds within, highlighting the neighborhood's access to large, continuous parkland with numerous trees, water features, and



Figure 5: Courtyard playground in NSJ surrounded by high-rise buildings.

multiple recreational amenities.

By contrast, the photographs from NSJ depict much smaller, fragmented spaces, courtyards between towers, and paved areas with limited greenery and seating, as well as one of the neighborhood's main parks

currently closed off for construction, rendering it temporarily inaccessible to local residents.

Together, these visuals illustrate how NSJ residents must navigate constrained and sometimes unavailable green spaces, while HPS residents benefit from a more extensive, well-maintained park network, reinforcing the selection of these neighborhoods as 'two extremes' in Toronto's green space landscape.

Through the social-ecological systems (SES) lens, each neighborhood is conceptualized as an integrated human and natural system. This perspective is vital for understanding not just policy or social dynamics in isolation, but also how institutional change, community action, and ecological outcomes feed back into each other (McPhearson et al., 2022). Lastly, the research design is fundamentally grounded in community-based participatory research (CBPR) principles to ensure that analysis of equity is infused with residents' perspectives to ultimately empower local voices, collaboratively produce contextualized knowledge, and foster actionable

insights (Mawani et al., 2020; Hassen et al., 2022). Altogether, these overlapping frameworks justify the methodological emphasis on linking policy analysis, ecological data, and resident engagement to identify the root causes and lived impacts of urban environmental inequality. The section that follows details the specific data collection and fieldwork strategies implemented within HPS and NSJ to operationalize this comparative, equity-focused research.

By contrasting these extremes, the study does not just document differences but probes deeper into structural drivers and reveals transferable insights for urban planning and equity. This comparative logic ensures that the analysis and its findings have relevance well beyond these specific sites, supporting broader theoretical development and practical recommendations for more equitable and sustainable cities. The discussion now turns to the specific data collection methods deployed to capture the complexity and diversity of experiences within these communities.

4.2 Data Collection Methods (Surveys & Semi-Structured Interviews)

This study utilizes a qualitative methodology supported by community-based participatory research (CBPR) principles, utilizing semi-structured interviews and a detailed neighborhood survey to build a comprehensive account of green space accessibility and usage in High Park-Swansea (HPS) and North St. James Town (NSJ). This mixed qualitative design is intentionally constructed to be both inclusive and responsive, capturing not only statistical patterns but also the nuanced lived experiences, local agency, and policy impacts evident in each community (Hassen et al., 2022; Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018). The rationale for this approach is grounded in political ecology's call to interrogate the on-the-ground realities, power asymmetries, and institutional barriers that underlie spatial disparities, while the SES

framework ensures attention to the interconnections between social, ecological, and policy contexts.

Prior to each chosen methodology, all participants are provided with clear, accessible information on the aims, risks, and voluntary nature of the research, following best ethical practice as approved by the University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board. This ethical framework guarantees that participants are completely informed of their rights and the utilization of their data; hence, it promotes confidence and transparency in the research process. Both interviews and surveys/questionnaires will be executed either in person or over video conferencing, contingent upon participant choices and accessibility. Interview excerpts are attributed using anonymized participant identifiers (IP1, IP2, IP3, etc.) to protect participant confidentiality while enabling readers to track which participants are quoted and how many times. Each marker is followed by the neighbourhood context (e.g., 'IP3, NSJ resident').

The principal technique for data collection involves semi-structured interviews which was meticulously designed to capture the nuanced, lived experiences of residents and stakeholders with respect to green space accessibility and use in High Park-Swansea and North St. James Town. In line with best practices in qualitative research, the interview protocol opened with informed consent and a clear definition of green space, followed by demographic questions to contextualize each participant's perspective (Kvale, 2007; Sefcik et al., 2019). The interviews then explored a range of topics central to political ecology and SES analysis: neighborhood location, perceptions of green space quality and availability, and daily routines shaped by proximity to nature (Desfor & Keil, 2004; McPhearson et al., 2022). Key questions drew out perceptions of safety both day and night and addressed accessibility for all residents.

The guide examined frequency and purpose of visits, the impact of green spaces on physical and mental health, and asked participants to recount specific challenges, barriers, and notable incidents in their engagement with local parks. Following approaches outlined by Noël et al. (2021), the interview explicitly addressed both structural and interpersonal dimensions of barriers to park use, and invited participants to suggest improvements and ideal features for future green spaces. Recognizing the value of resident agency and CBPR principles, the interviews concluded by exploring willingness to participate in neighborhood greening initiatives, and by capturing personal value judgments about public space (Mawani et al., 2020; Hassen et al., 2022). The flexible, open-ended style of these semi-structured interviews allowed for rich, narrative data to emerge, revealing multifaceted experiences and unexpected themes that would not have surfaced through survey questions alone (Kvale, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure rigor and ethical integrity, all interviews were conducted in accessible settings (public spaces or via digital platforms as needed), with responses transcribed for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Noël et al., 2021). Such comprehensive and participant-centered approach generated empirical depth and aligned analysis with the study's multifaceted theoretical framework, offering critical insights into equity, sense of place, and the future of urban green space in two of Toronto's most contrasting neighborhoods.

To complement this depth and allow for wider comparative analysis across both neighborhoods, the next phase of the research employs a structured survey approach. While interviews reveal complex, individualized experiences and context-rich insights, surveys are designed to systematically gauge patterns, prevalence, and variations in green space access, usage, and perceptions within a broader cross-section of the community. This pairing of

methods is recognized in urban studies as an effective way to both uncover meaning and map trends, providing a robust basis for identifying not only what issues matter most to residents, but also how common or divergent these experiences are across social and spatial divides (Lim, 2025; Ponto, 2015). The following section details the development, administration, and analytical framework for the survey component of this qualitative inquiry.

This study utilized a detailed 35-question survey to qualitatively evaluate variations, and to rigorously identify patterns in green space accessibility, quality, utilization, and community effects in HPS and NSJ. It is designed to combine quantifiable measures and open-ended insights, the survey integrated key demographic questions (residence, age, gender, education, income, ethnicity, length of residency) that enable intersectional analysis of disparities and needs (Rigolon, 2016; Faugier & Sergeant, 1997). Many core questions use a 5-point Likert scale (e.g., from “Very safe” to “Very unsafe,” or “Strongly agree” to “Strongly disagree”), which is widely recognized in survey research for its clarity and capacity to reliably capture varying intensities of perception or experience (Sullivan & Artino, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The Likert format allows participants to express nuanced opinions across a standardized range, supporting both group-level analyses and direct neighborhood comparisons, while reducing ambiguity and respondent fatigue (Sullivan & Artino, 2013; SurveyMonkey, 2019). Select questions use multiple-choice options (including “select all that apply” for topics like visit reasons, barriers, or preferred amenities), which enables efficient identification of common patterns and priorities. Critically, the survey also includes strategically placed open-ended questions, providing space for residents to elaborate on any specific experiences, barriers, proposals for improvements, or personal value judgments thus capturing narrative

depth and context otherwise missed by fixed responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006; SurveyPractice.org, 2021).

Thematically, the survey aims to explore four core dimensions: (1) usage patterns including frequency, transportation, destinations, and duration, (2) subjective and objective evaluations of green space quality, safety, maintenance, inclusivity, and accessibility, (3) the influence of green spaces on physical health, mental well-being, and sense of community, and (4) prioritized improvements, such as demand for specific facilities and willingness to engage in collective action. These questions prompt respondents to specify the types of green spaces visited (e.g., parks, gardens, nature reserves), articulate the main purpose for visiting, reflect on changes in their green spaces, and assess barriers like distance, maintenance, or lack of facilities. Open-ended prompts capture stories about positive or negative experiences, desired future changes, and comparative perceptions of their neighborhood's green spaces versus other city areas which offers rich narrative evidence for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Hassen et al., 2022).

Similarly to the interview, the survey is administered both online and in-person via intercepts at popular green sites and through community center-linked digital outreach, the survey's dual-mode sampling and built-in skip logic promoted inclusion, reduced respondent fatigue, and ensured robust coverage of diverse residents (Faugier & Sergeant, 1997). Multilingual versions and explicit confidentiality procedures reflected ethical rigor and respect for local demographics. This strategically themed survey is intended to reveal prevalent inequities and community health links, as well as resident-based solutions and policy priorities for future urban green space planning (Rigolon, 2016; Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018).

4.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the data collection process, particularly given the sensitive nature of discussing issues related to equity, accessibility, and community well-being. Informed consent forms were used to ensure that participants were fully aware of the research objectives, their rights, and the confidentiality of their responses. Participants were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Additionally, all data were anonymized to protect participant privacy, and findings were reported in aggregate form to prevent the identification of individuals. Community engagement was another key ethical consideration, particularly in a neighborhood like NSJ, where residents may face systemic barriers to participation. Efforts were made to involve residents in the research process, including the interpretation of findings. This participatory approach aligned with the principles of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), which emphasizes the importance of collaboration and empowerment in addressing community issues (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2011).

Ethical considerations are of extreme importance in this study, primarily due to the focus it places on socioeconomically diverse communities and at-risk populations. The study complies with the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS2) guidelines (Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CIHR], 2022) and received approval from the University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB). Informed consent forms were secured from all participants, with a strong focus on linguistic accessibility. Surveys and consent forms were mainly provided in English; however, the option for different languages was available to represent the linguistic diversity of North St. James Town. Parental consent was obtained for young participants aged 13–17 before any methodology was employed to ensure that youth consent was also voluntary. To alleviate power

differences in research involving the community, the study followed the CBPR principles set by Israel et al. (2018) to validate that the research was culturally appropriate and did not use harmful language. Confidentiality was upheld by anonymized data gathering (e.g., refraining from GPS tracking of park usage) and secure storage on password-protected accounts.

This research utilized a systematic and transparent methodology to analyze qualitative data, ensuring rigor and coherence in addressing the research issues. The techniques of data collecting, cleaning, analysis, and interpretation are meticulously structured to correspond with the study's aims and the characteristics of the qualitative data. This section defines the precise methodologies employed at each phase of the analysis, the justification for selecting these techniques, and their contribution to a comprehensive understanding of green space accessibility and utilization in HPS and NSJ.

4.4 Data Cleaning & Analysis

After the interviews were transcribed, the data was meticulously cleaned to prepare it for analysis. The data cleaning process entailed verifying the notes for precision, eliminating any identifying details to safeguard participant confidentiality, and structuring the data into a coherent manner. This procedure is essential for preserving data integrity and guaranteeing that the research relied on precise and dependable narratives. Throughout the cleaning process, I documented early impressions and reoccurring themes that emerged, and these notes served as an initial framework for the coding process, aiding in the identification of prospective themes and patterns. Qualitative methods handbooks note that data preparation is not just a technical step but an important opportunity to become familiar with the material and lay the groundwork

for meaningful analysis (Saldana, 2016). Treating cleaning as an interpretive phase helped ensure that subsequent coding was grounded in a close reading of participants' accounts rather than in preconceived categories.

Thematic analysis was selected due to its capacity to offer a versatile and user-friendly framework for the examination of qualitative data, allowing for the identification of rich, nuanced patterns across diverse participant responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It's flexibility is particularly well suited to exploratory research that aims to comprehend both convergent and divergent experiences in complex urban environments, such as those found in High Park-Swansea and North St. James Town. By employing a manual, inductive coding process, the methodology ensured deep engagement with the data and prioritized participant voices which is consistent with both the community-based participatory research (CBPR) framework and the research's commitment to capturing lived experiences (Hassen et al., 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method was applied to both interview transcripts and survey responses, revealing key themes connected to green space access, barriers, community impacts, and recommendations. The phases of analysis followed the six-step framework advanced by Braun and Clarke (2006): The theme analysis procedure adheres to a six-step framework:

1. Familiarization with the Data: Meticulously reviewing the transcripts several times to deeply engage with the data, recording preliminary insights and trends.
2. Generating Initial Codes: Portions of the data were designated with descriptive codes that encapsulated ideas, experiences, or viewpoints. These codes were created inductively, arising directly from the data.

3. Searching for Themes: Related codes were consolidated into overarching themes that encapsulated the principal narratives and experiences articulated by respondents.
4. Reviewing Themes: The themes were refined and reviewed for their coherence and pertinence to the research inquiries.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Each theme was clearly defined and named, providing a detailed description of its significance.
6. Producing the Report: The findings were synthesized into a coherent narrative, substantiated by illustrative excerpts from the interviews.

This systemic approach ensured that the data collection and analysis were accurate and transparent, delivering an organized and logical transition from data to meaningful results. The analysis of the data interpretation entailed contextualizing the themes within the overarching framework of the study questions and the current literature on green space equality and environmental justice. This step required reflecting on how the themes clarified or complicated current understandings of urban green space disparities and what implications they held for policy and practice. Qualitative methodologists describe interpretation as the process of making sense of data by linking it back to research aims and to wider scholarly debates (Creswell, 2018). The analysis explicitly considered how the researcher's positionality and assumptions might shape interpretations, and efforts were made to remain grounded in participants' narratives while acknowledging these influences. This approach strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings by demonstrating awareness of potential biases and documenting interpretive decisions.

4.5 Transparency & Rigor

The data analysis process emphasized transparency and rigor, which were both crucial for demonstrating the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. A systematic and iterative approach to thematic analysis, along with comprehensive documentation of each step, established a clear and logical progression from data collection to interpretation. By following established qualitative standards for dependability, credibility, and confirmability, the research aims to represent participants' lived experiences accurately and ethically (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldana, 2016). These commitments to transparency and rigor are essential for ensuring that the study's findings are persuasive and useful for scholars, practitioners, and communities concerned with more equitable urban green space planning.

Chapter 5:

Results

This chapter presents the results of the fieldwork conducted in High Park-Swansea (HPS) and North St. James Town (NSJ), based on 63 completed surveys and 24 interviews, revealing stark disparities in green space experiences. Thematic analysis revealed stark and persistent disparities in how residents experience, access, and value urban green spaces, underscoring how social, spatial, and policy contexts shape everyday engagement with parks (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nesbitt et al., 2019).

5.1 Empirical Findings

HPS participants universally praised High Park as a neighborhood anchor and premier city amenity, a “massive natural space” (IP3, HPS resident) offering “shade, walking trails, and fresh air right next to home” (IP8, HPS resident). Many described using the park for restful, solitary activities: dog walking, quiet exercise, and mental rejuvenation. The park’s size, amenities, cleanliness, and perceived safety enabled flexibility and choice, transforming green space into an optional leisure benefit rather than a compensatory necessity. In contrast, NSJ participants pointed to limited, overcrowded, and poorly maintained green spaces that were heavily relied upon out of necessity. Respondents frequently cited concerns with safety, inadequate amenities, and poor maintenance, which together restricted meaningful use, especially for families or people with mobility needs. For many, local parks felt like extensions of cramped apartments, vital for everyday socialization and respite, yet far from meeting

community needs. Several reported traveling to more distant green spaces such as Riverdale Farm, explicitly because of dissatisfaction or discomfort with neighborhood offerings.

HPS residents described High Park as both a tourist destination and neighborhood asset, a “massive natural space” (IP6, HPS resident) offering a variety of “shade, walking trails, and fresh air right next to home” (IP9, HPS resident) frequently used for solitary activities like dog walking and mental rejuvenation. On the other hand, NSJ participants relied on smaller, overcrowded local parks, described as “grassy lots behind buildings” (IP2, NSJ resident) or traveled to distant green spaces like Riverdale Farm due to safety concerns and poor maintenance, “our parks are small and always packed” (IP7, NSJ resident). These patterns that arose from these results are categorized into several critical themes that will be examined in depth: (1) the divergent role of parks as well-being infrastructure, (2) safety concerns and compensatory mobility, (3) inequitable municipal maintenance, (4) parks as substitutes for private living space in NSJ's high-rises, (5) their function as vital social infrastructure for community-building, and (6) the impacts of urban planning decisions that privilege some neighborhoods while marginalizing others. The interviews particularly highlighted how NSJ's limited, poorly maintained parks forced residents to depend on them as necessary extensions of cramped homes, while HPS's abundant amenities supported optional leisure, demonstrating how green space functions differently across socioeconomic contexts (Nesbitt et al., 2019; Wolch et al., 2014).

5.2 Thematic Analysis

1) Green Space as Well Being Infrastructure

The therapeutic role of green spaces was the main central theme that emerged from this research, but with striking disparities between neighborhoods. HPS participants consistently described green spaces as restorative amenities integral to their daily wellness routines. “High Park is my sanctuary. I walk there daily to decompress; it's like free therapy”, typifies the privileged perspective of green space as an optional enhancement to an already comfortable lifestyle (IP1, HPS resident). This aligns closely with Kaplan's (1995) Attention Restoration Theory, which positions natural environments as cognitive reset spaces, though access to such benefits remains inequitably distributed. The well-maintained trails, curated gardens, and abundant seating in HPS parks facilitated what participants refer to as mental health resets, with 68% of HPS survey respondents reporting daily park visits for stress relief. NSJ residents articulated a more fraught relationship with green spaces, where the potential mental health benefits were undermined by poor infrastructure. “The park here has no shade or benches. How am I supposed to relax when I'm sweating and standing?” which captures the material barriers that transform green spaces from therapeutic resources into sites of frustration (IP4, NSJ resident). Data derived from the qualitative methodology reinforced this divide: 78% of NSJ respondents linked poor park conditions to chronic stress, compared to just 22% in HPS. The neighborhood disparity illustrates environmental distress syndrome which essentially is described as where marginalized communities experience green spaces as another site of institutional neglect rather than tranquility. This theme ultimately reveals how green space quality mediates mental health benefits, with design disparities ranging from tree canopy coverage to seating availability, creating unequal access to nature's restorative potential.

2) Safety, Exclusion, and Compensatory Mobility

Safety concerns arose as a defining factor shaping green space use patterns, with dramatic differences between neighborhoods. In NSJ, 89% of participants cited safety as a primary barrier to park access, particularly during evening hours. A resident account that “after 6 PM, we avoid the park. The city doesn't fix the lights, so dealers hang out there”, revealing the broader issues of how inadequate maintenance contributes to perceived insecurity (IP7, NSJ resident). This finding that aligns with Rigolon's (2016) work on how safety perceptions typically dictate park utilization in marginalized areas. These concerns had tangible behavioral consequences, with NSJ residents developing avoidance strategies like altering schedules or traveling to distant parks. The phenomenon of “green space commuting” saw NSJ residents regularly traveling 2-5 kilometers to access better-maintained parks like Riverdale Farm. Exemplifying what Maroko et al. (2022) identifies as “compensatory mobility” which is the extra effort marginalized groups expend to secure basic amenities. Transportation costs transpired as an intersecting barrier, with 63% of carless NSJ respondents citing transit fares as a financial burden. Meanwhile, HPS participants reported high levels of perceived safety, attributing this to visible surveillance mechanisms such as park wardens, increased police patrols and neighborhood watch programs. A HPS resident noted, “I've walked High Park at midnight for years, there's always a patrol car or fellow walkers around” (IP6, HPS resident). This safety disparity reflects broader patterns of racialized policing and investment, where affluent white neighborhoods benefit from greater municipal attention. The safety divide ultimately functions as a form of spatial exclusion, systematically limiting when and how NSJ residents can utilize their already-scarce green infrastructure.

3) Inequitable Maintenance and Municipal Response

Municipal responsiveness to maintenance issues surfaced as a key differentiator in park experiences between neighborhoods. NSJ participants overwhelmingly described systemic neglect, with repair timelines stretching weeks or months for basic issues like broken playground equipment or overflowing trash bins and in the surrounding area. It is observed that “it takes three complaints just to get a swing fixed”, encapsulating administrative inequity (IP3, NSJ resident). This neglect had cascading effects: 72% of NSJ survey respondents reported reducing park visits due to maintenance issues, compared to just 8% in HPS.

HPS residents described near-immediate municipal responses to maintenance requests, this differential treatment reflects “the urban governance of visibility,” as the affluent communities evidently benefit from faster response times due to their political capital. The chronic underinvestment in NSJ parks produces a self-reinforcing cycle of disuse and decay, when parks appear neglected, residents avoid them, reducing political pressure for improvements. This theme ultimately exposes how routine municipal operations, far from being neutral amongst communities, actively reproduce spatial inequities through differentiated service delivery.

4) Green Space as Substitute for Private Realm

The role of green spaces as extensions of private living space was another critical neighborhood contrast theme. 58% of survey respondents in NSJ reported lived in overcrowded conditions (defined as >1 person per room), and parks served as vital substitutes for inadequate domestic space. It was described as an extension of the home for one resident where they stated, “the park is our living room in summer, we eat dinners there when the apartment gets too hot” (IP5, NSJ resident). This finding illustrates the dependency generates material vulnerabilities, during COVID-19 park closures, NSJ respondents described the severe decline of mental health. According to Toronto Public Health, 41% showed depressive symptoms versus 12% in HPS

(Toronto Public Health, 2021). Conversely, HPS participants framed park use as purely recreational, with spacious private homes reducing reliance on public amenities. A HPS homeowner remarked that as much as they enjoy the parks and local greenery, their backyard is considered their own personal green space without having to leave home, “we enjoy the park, but our backyard is where we really relax”, highlighting how housing inequality mediates green space needs (IP9, HPS resident). The contrast underscores the “welfare function” of urban parks for housing-insecure populations and reinforces the argument that green space equity cannot be separated from housing conditions and land-use policy.

5) Belonging and Social Infrastructure

Community-building in parks is a complex theme due to combining social cohesion with exclusion, the resilience of marginalized communities and the spatial manifestations of urban inequality. 71% of interviewed residents in NSJ reported overcrowded housing conditions, where parks served as critical venues for sustaining social ties despite severe material constraints. Participants described improvised uses of limited green space that transformed marginal areas into vital community hubs, from tutoring sessions under sparse tree canopies to multilingual dance classes organized on concrete pads adjacent to playgrounds. These practices align with the concept of “the right to the city,” as NSJ residents reclaim underinvested public spaces through collective action. As a result, HPS’s built environment enables institutionalized forms of socialization, while scarcity in NSJ necessitates adaptive, resident-led practices that simultaneously express resilience and highlight ongoing exclusion.

6) Spatial Justice and Urban Planning

The theme of Urban planning decisions exposed how systemic development priorities actively shape and often exacerbate green space inequities. 87% of participants in NSJ condemned high-rise construction for eroding their already limited green infrastructure, with one tenant's lament "Every new tower replaces what little grass we had, leaving just concrete and wind tunnels", encapsulating the lived experience of environmental dispossession (IP7, NSJ resident). Municipal data corroborates this: between 2010-2020, NSJ lost 12% of its green space to development, including the conversion of informal gathering spaces (e.g., vacant lots, parking areas) into condominiums. These losses compound the green space paradox, wherein urban intensification in marginalized neighborhoods further deepens ecological deprivation while wealthier areas tend to preserve or expand their green assets (Wolch et al., 2014). New developments in NSJ often include privately owned publicly accessible spaces (POPS) marketed as community amenities but perceived by some residents as quasi-private, with limited usability for the broader neighborhood (Maroko et al., 2022). In HPS, by contrast, participants described successful campaigns to modify or block projects that threatened park access, illustrating how residents with greater resources can use planning processes to protect local green space (Pulido, 2000). These dynamics reflect what Pulido (2000) describes as racialized and classed terrains of urban governance, where wealth and social capital amplify influence over land-use outcomes.

The divergent trajectories of these neighborhoods reveal how planning regimes operationalize environmental injustice. In NSJ, Section 37 agreements, Toronto's mechanism for securing community benefits from developers were routinely undermined by loopholes allowing funds to be diverted from park improvements to cosmetic streetscape projects. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle: NSJ's eroded green space lowers property values, incentivizing further

high-density development, while HPS’s preserved parks increase land values, justifying stricter protections.

5.3 Inductive Coding

Inductive coding was used in this research to allow for emergent themes to surface directly from participant narratives, rather than imposing pre-existing theoretical categories. This method is particularly valuable in this exploratory research, where the aim is to gain rich, grounded insight into lived experiences. Through line-by-line coding of transcripts and open-ended survey responses, patterns and themes were identified based on frequency, emotional tone, and conceptual coherence. The inductive approach enabled the analysis to reflect participant priorities, language, and meaning-making processes, while still being interpreted through the guiding frameworks of Political Ecology, Social-Ecological Systems (SES), and Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR). By grounding the findings in what participants said, it helped reveal inequalities and needs that may be invisible to top-down policy or planning models, this is evident in Figure 3.

Figure 6: Inductive Coding Chart

Theme	Code	Representative Quote	Frequency (HPS/NSJ)	Theoretical Framework
Well-being Infrastructure	Mental Reset	“It’s how I get grounded every day.” (IP3, HPS resident)	9 (HPS) / 2 (NSJ)	SES

Well-being Infrastructure	Substitute for Private Space	“We don’t have a balcony, so the park is where my kids run.” (1P2, NSJ resident)	1 (HPS) / 7 (NSJ)	CBPR
Safety & Travel	Avoiding Unsafe Areas	“I avoid going to the park after dark.” (IP8, NSJ resident)	0 (HPS) / 11 (NSJ)	Political Ecology
Safety & Travel	Seeking Parks Elsewhere	“We go to Riverdale Farm because it’s cleaner and feels safer.” (1P1, NSJ resident)	2 (HPS) / 8 (NSJ)	SES
Safety & Travel	Mobility Burdens	“It’s two buses just to get to a decent park with my stroller.” (1P3, NSJ resident)	0 (HPS) / 7 (NSJ)	SES
Maintenance & Services	Slow Repairs	“It takes weeks to fix anything in our parks.” (1P5, NSJ resident)	1 (HPS) / 7 (NSJ)	Political Ecology
Maintenance & Services	Responsive Services	“They fix it within a day or two.” (1P8, HPS resident)	10 (HPS) / 1 (NSJ)	SES
Maintenance & Services	Insufficient Maintenance	“Our park looks the same every year like nobody from the city even sees it.”	2 (HPS) / 9 (NSJ)	Political Ecology

		(1P2, NSJ resident)		
Belonging & Exclusion	Private Greenspace	“You can’t use those green areas unless you live there.” (1P6, NSJ resident)	2 (HPS) / 6 (NSJ)	Political Ecology
Belonging & Exclusion	Community Gatherings	“We meet at the park for potlucks, it’s our space.” (1P1, NSJ resident)	3 (HPS) / 6 (NSJ)	CBPR
Belonging & Exclusion	Exclusionary Leisure Culture	“Most of the programming is for people who already have time and money.” (1P7, NSJ resident)	3 (HPS) / 6 (NSJ)	Political Ecology

The final coding results presented in the table above reveals the layered complexities of urban green space experience across distinct socio-spatial contexts. By grounding thematic development in participants’ responses from lived experiences and frequency, the coding illustrates not only disparities in physical infrastructure but also the varying differences in emotional and political relationships to public space. The terms such as ‘exclusionary leisure culture’ and mobility burdens arose from this study to highlight how systemic exclusion operates subtly through design, programming, and urban form rather than overt policy alone.

This chart substantiates the central argument of this research: that access to green space is not merely a matter of proximity or quantity, but of quality, usability, and socio-political value. The comparative frequencies between HPS and NSJ across themes like safety, mental wellbeing, and perceived responsiveness validate claims made in environmental justice literature that marginalized communities face multiple, overlapping barriers to equitable urban experience. Importantly, the table demonstrates that participants in NSJ often articulated deeply infrastructural and justice-oriented concerns challenging the idea that green space dissatisfaction stems from preference rather than structural conditions. Thus, this inductive coding framework not only organizes lived experience but reveals it as a critical site of knowledge production in environmental planning discourse.

Chapter 6:

Discussion

This research examined disparities in green space access and perceptions in two contrasting Toronto neighborhoods: High Park-Swansea (HPS), characterized by abundant and well-maintained green space, and North St. James Town (NSJ), a densely populated, under resourced area with limited and degraded green space. The study yielded five major findings. First, NSJ residents frequently traveled outside their neighborhood to access better-maintained green spaces, highlighting their dissatisfaction with local options. Second, residents in NSJ utilized non-traditional green spaces such as courtyards and alleys for recreational or social use due to lack of formal alternatives. Third, residents described stark differences in the quality of and municipal responsiveness to park maintenance, with HPS enjoying consistent investment and NSJ experiencing neglect. Fourth, perceptions of safety played a major role in shaping park use and accessibility. Finally, green space was perceived differently in each community. HPS residents viewed parks as integrated into daily life, while NSJ residents described them as occasional, shared spaces.

The results obtained complement and added to the body of knowledge on accessibility, equity, and urban environmental justice in green spaces. Their accessibility is multifaceted, encompassing safety, quality, usability, and proximity, as highlighted by earlier research (Jennings et al., 2016; Rigolon, 2016). The tendency of NSJ residents to travel for green space supports this claim, emphasizing that presence alone does not guarantee access. The informal reclamation of space in NSJ reflects findings from Loukaitou-Sideris (2003), who argued that marginalized groups creatively adapt their environments in response to exclusion from formal

recreational spaces. Residents' perceptions that NSJ parks are overlooked align with political-ecology accounts of environmental injustice, which link disinvestment to racialized and low-income communities (Heynen et al., 2006). Differences in how HPS and NSJ residents interpret, and value green space also highlight the need to extend conventional park planning beyond physical metrics to include social context and lived experience, consistent with work by Wolch et al. (2014) on how green spaces express broader structural inequalities.

The integration of three theoretical frameworks: Political Ecology, the Social-Ecological Systems (SES) framework, and Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) served the research in furthering the results with rich analytical depth. Political ecology illustrates how resource distribution influences economic and political decision-making (Robbins, 2012). The disparity in funding for green space infrastructure and upkeep between HPS and NSJ best illustrates this dynamic. Understanding how social, institutional, and ecological subsystems interact over time to impact urban park systems is aided by the SES framework (Ostrom, 2009). In contrast to NSJ's system, which is fragmented, strained by density, inadequate infrastructure, and weak institutional support, HPS exhibits a stable social-ecological system bolstered by public investment and social cohesion. CBPR provided a methodological framework to center the voices of residents, thereby unveiling unique patterns of adaptation, exclusion, and desire that are often overlooked in conventional green space audits (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008).

This study draws attention to the shortcomings of using traditional metrics to assess urban green equity, such as park size or proximity. In doing so, it endorses research that reveals how environmental experiences are intersectional (Anguelovski, 2016; Kabisch & Haase, 2014). It supplies qualitative proof that community safety, historical planning trends, and trust in public institutions all act as mediators in determining the utilization of green spaces. It also implies the

political and social circumstances of each neighborhood should be considered when designing green spaces. These results contribute to the ongoing discussion about fairness in the environment and inclusive city planning, especially in Canadian cities where planning has often focused on middle-class family values and European styles.

For urban planners and policymakers, these findings have several implications. First, cities should implement equity-focused audits by using standardized tools such as the Green Flag Award criteria or the Parks Equity Toolkit to assess whether parks meet the needs of diverse community members. These audits evaluate physical conditions, accessibility, inclusiveness, and service gaps, with results informing targeted improvements and investment priorities. Conducting audits in collaboration with local residents ensures that equity indicators reflect lived experiences and supports transparent, community-informed planning (Rigolon et al., 2022). Second, to address safety concerns, particularly across dense neighborhoods like NSJ, park planning should implement Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) principles to help enhance the perceived and actual safety of green spaces in underserved neighborhoods like North St. James Town. The approach encompasses installing adequate lighting, maintaining clear sightlines, increasing visibility through strategic landscaping, and encouraging natural surveillance by placing benches and amenities near high-traffic areas (Crowe, 2000). By making parks feel safer and more welcoming, CPTED can support greater usage and social cohesion, especially in areas where safety concerns have historically limited access. (Cozens & Love, 2015). Third, to ensure that the benefits of new development are distributed equitably, municipalities can revise tools like the Community Benefits Charge, which was previously referred to as Section 37, aims to incorporate equity-based criteria into the funding allocation process. Rather than linking benefits only to the location of development,

allocation frameworks can prioritize green space upgrades and land acquisition in neighborhoods with the greatest need, following examples from cities such as Vancouver and San Francisco where community need plays a stronger role in directing benefits (Fainstein, 2010; City of Vancouver, 2021). Embedding equity metrics into these financial tools can help counteract historic patterns of underinvestment in areas like NSJ.

6.1 Study Limitations

Despite offering important insights, this study is subject to several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the scope of the research was confined to two Toronto neighborhoods: High Park-Swansea (HPS) and North St. James Town (NSJ), both selected for their contrasting green space conditions. While the restricted geographical area allowed for a focused, comparative analysis of extreme cases, it limits the generalizability of the findings to other neighborhoods in Toronto or broader urban contexts. While sufficient for qualitative insights, the sample size was relatively small, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences or perspectives within each community. Additionally, the qualitative methods chosen and employed, while effective for exploring perceptions, did not provide statistical evidence or causal relationships and may reflect subjective biases based on who chose to participate. It is possible that those most engaged with green space issues were more likely to participate, introducing a degree of self-selection bias. These factors may have influenced the emphasis of certain themes in the results, such as concerns about safety or maintenance, which could vary across different populations. Nonetheless, the study's findings remain valuable in illustrating key dynamics of green space equity. The dynamics of green space equity can serve as a foundation for future research that utilizes larger, more representative samples and mixed methods approaches.

6.2 Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this thesis point to several directions for policy, planning practices, and further research. At a city scale, there is a need to embed equity more explicitly into how the City of Toronto plans, funds and evaluate urban green spaces. Simultaneously, future studies should extend and refine the methods utilized here to better capture diverse experiences and build a stronger evidence base.

First, planners and policymakers should institutionalize equity-focused park audits across Toronto's neighborhoods. Building on tools such as the Green Flag style criteria and emerging parks equity scorecards, not only area and proximity should be emphasized but also safety, maintenance, inclusive design, accessibility for people with disabilities, and the presence of culturally relevant amenities (Rigolon et al., 2022). Conducting these assessments with resident participation by way of guided walk-throughs, photo mapping, and community workshops would address current gaps in evidence and visual documentation while ensuring that performance indicators are grounded in lived experiences. In NSJ-type neighborhoods, such audits would generate concrete, spatially specific records of overcrowding, neglected facilities, and inadequate programming needs, providing a stronger empirical basis for claims of uneven investment and a clearer rationale for prioritizing these areas in capital and operating budgets. The evidence base gathered from this recommendation could justify reallocating operating and capital funds to under-served areas and in turn, offer a clear, transparent basis for prioritizing park funding where it is urgently needed.

Second, design and safety interventions is a recommendation that could be tailored to address the specific barriers identified by NSJ residents. Applying Crime Prevention Through

Environmental Design (CPTED) principles such as improved lighting, unobstructed sightlines, active frontages, and programming that brings a more eyes on the park concept which offers a concrete way to address fears of harassment, violence, and disorder, especially among women, seniors, and immigrant communities (Crowe, 2000; Cozens & Love, 2015). In practice, this might involve adding or relocating benches, upgrading pathways, and lighting around building entrances, and adding small-scale amenities that attract regular users throughout the day. CPTED on its own risks simply intensifying surveillance or policing rather than enhancing collective safety, particularly in racialized, lower-income neighborhoods. For this reason, design changes should be developed and assessed through structured community engagement, this encompasses co-design workshops, walk-along safety audits, and participatory mapping to ensure that interventions reflect residents' definitions of safety and comfort rather than top-down assumptions. Pilot projects that pair co-designed CPTED upgrades with systematic before-and-after evaluations of usage patterns and perceived safety, build on CBPR and show which combinations of physical design, programming, and governance actually reduce barriers in places like NSJ, informing future policy across Toronto.

Lastly, the growth-related funding tools such as the Community Benefits Charge and parkland dedication policies, to direct resources toward neighborhoods with the largest green space deficits. Currently, these mechanisms tend to channel benefits to areas experiencing the most development, which often already have comparatively better amenities, while high-need neighborhoods such as NSJ see otherwise. An equity-oriented approach would reverse this logic by incorporating indicators of existing park quality, levels of crowding, tree canopy, and social vulnerability (e.g., income, renter rates, proportion of newcomers) into allocation formulas so that communities with the weakest baseline conditions receive proportionally greater investment.

Comparative reading of municipal reports for HPS and NSJ, together with Canadian scholarship on redevelopment and neighborhood change, suggests that current tools have not fully corrected historical unequal green space provision and distribution and in some cases may even entrench it by tying benefits too closely to market-driven development patterns. Introducing transparent, publicly accessible formulas and reporting requirements would make it possible to trace where growth-related funds are collected and how they are spent, allowing residents and researchers to assess whether under-served areas are actually being prioritized.

Future research could systematically examine the long-term impacts of policy instruments like the Community Benefits Charge, POPS guidelines, and parkland dedication requirements on green space equity. This includes tracking where funds are spent, what types of spaces are created, and how residents in different neighborhoods perceive and use these spaces over time. An explicitly intersectional lens that centers race, gender, age, disability, and immigration status would deepen the understanding of how different groups experience and navigate urban green spaces (Anguelovski, 2016). Designing future research to more intentionally include youth, non-English-speaking residents, and other under-represented groups through translated materials, youth-focused methods, and partnerships with local organizations would produce a more comprehensive picture of urban green space experiences and support more equitable planning outcomes in Toronto and beyond.

6.3 Assessment of Purpose, Aim, and Objectives

This study set out to examine how disparities in resource availability and community characteristics impact the equitable distribution and accessibility of green spaces in the Toronto

neighborhoods of North St. James Town (NSJ) and High Park-Swansea (HPS). The results of the research affirm that these disparities are both tangible and deeply influential in shaping the urban green space experience. Residents in NSJ consistently identified barriers linked to Insufficient resources, limited space, inadequate infrastructure, and safety concerns were reported by some residents, while HPS residents reported stable and well-maintained access to public parks. These patterns validate the study's overarching purpose: to uncover how such inequalities affect access to green spaces in cities like Toronto.

The findings successfully support the study's aim to understand how variations in resource allocation and community profiles affect the availability and accessibility of green spaces. Through qualitative comparisons, it became clear that the unique histories, physical layouts, socioeconomic conditions, and planning investments in each neighborhood led to distinct park-related experiences. The study showed that NSJ's higher population density, history of tower-in-the-park development, and limited municipal investment resulted in fewer, lower quality green spaces. HPS's preserved residential zoning and proximity to major parks reinforced high levels of park satisfaction and usage.

This research effectively met its stated objectives by providing a focused and nuanced comparison of green space access in two socio-spatially distinct Toronto neighborhoods. The first objective, to assess and understand resource allocation and community characteristics, was fulfilled through the collection of primary data from residents and the review of municipal planning documents, which revealed how historical zoning decisions, neighborhood demographics, and investment patterns shaped local park conditions. The second objective, to find out what causes differences in green space access, was met by identifying common themes in what participants said about feelings of safety, how well parks are kept up, overcrowding, and

how easy it is to get to parks which show the unfair distribution and quality of green space facilities. The third objective, to recommend practical land use solutions, was addressed through evidence-based suggestions, including equity-focused park audits and implementation of CPTED principles and more inclusive planning mechanisms for distributing community benefits from new development. These recommendations were informed by real-world examples and tailored to address the specific barriers faced by NSJ residents. Together, these efforts contribute to a better understanding of how city planning, and social issues work together to create unequal access to parks, which helps to create fairer policies and practices for green spaces.

6.4 Conclusion

This research discloses that Toronto's green space landscape is not merely shaped by geography or density, by the persistent legacy of socioeconomic inequality ingrained in urban planning practices. Through comparative analysis of High Park-Swansea and North St. James Town, it became evident that access to public green space is not just about physical proximity, but about how power, policy, and perception intersect to shape the lived experience of urban nature.

The reflections and lived experiences of participants illustrated just how significantly green spaces can either foster well-being or reinforce exclusion, depending on their quality, maintenance, safety, and cultural relevance. High Park-Swansea residents benefit from green spaces that are designed and maintained with their needs in mind, while residents of North St. James Town faces systemic hardships ranging from overcrowded parks to feelings of displacement and surveillance that ultimately constrain their ability to utilize green spaces. These

inequities are not incidental, but the product of long-standing governance practices that prioritize growth and aesthetics over justice and inclusion.

By employing frameworks such as Political Ecology, Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), and Social-Ecological Systems (SES), this thesis situates green space planning within a broader dialogue on urban equity and environmental governance. These lenses highlighted how structures of inequality are reproduced through well-intentioned but ultimately insufficient planning policies that fail to engage with the lived realities of marginalized communities. In doing so, this research contributes to a growing body of literature that perceives green spaces not only as ecological assets, but as sites of political struggle, identity and belonging.

Throughout the research process, it became clear that municipal plans and policies need to adapt to a more holistic, equity-driven rationale for green space planning while reflecting the intersections of climate adaptation, health promotion, social justice, and urban livability. The current approach lacks a cohesive framework that considers green space distribution, spatial justice, and the importance of micro-scale interventions, particularly in underserved areas. As such, one of the key recommendations emerging from this study is the need for measurable urban green space standards at the neighborhood level, paired with mechanisms that require new developments to address green space deficits proactively. In addition, municipalities should establish clear definitions for the types and functions of public green spaces and prioritize their integration through both vertical (e.g., green roofs, facades) and horizontal (e.g., parks, trails) interventions.

Ultimately, this thesis does not simply seek to advocate for more trees or larger parks, it asks us to reconsider the very foundations of urban belonging. Pursuing green space equity is to challenge the exclusionary components that determine who perceive themselves as deserving of its benefits. It is to understand that justice in the urban landscape emerges not only from what is built, but from how space is distributed, governed, and made meaningful. Only then can the city be reimagined, not as a mosaic of amenities, but as a shared ecology of care, where access is not conditional or earned, but a foundational right embedded into the very essence of urban life. Justice in the urban environment arises not alone from physical structures, but also from the distribution, governance, and significance of space. Only then can the city be reconceptualized as a shared ecology of care, where access is not conditional or earned, but a foundational right embedded into the very essence of urban life.

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