

COMMUNITY ETHNOGRAPHY REPORT | 3.15.2018

# EDMONTON'S URBAN WELLNESS PLAN



# GOALS

Goals of community ethnography were two-fold:

1. Gain sufficient insights to help RECOVER team and committee participants to generate ideas for prototyping and testing within the 5 neighbourhoods. These insights were prepared as a Community Voices deck of over 100 quotes from community interviews. This deck was used to bring a broader set of voices into the room during the three February prototyping workshops.
2. Generate community profiles to frame opportunity areas for specific neighbourhoods. Community interviews were synthesized into key challenges and tensions that are grounded in the lived experiences of the people living, working and playing in those neighbourhoods.



# METHODOLOGY

Community interviews were conducted in two parts.

Part 1 took place from Dec. 5 - 8, 2017. The MaRS researchers visited the 5 neighbourhoods to engage with a range of stakeholders and identify contacts for more in-depth interviews as well as refine questions for further inquiry. This phase included participant observation both in immersive (embedding ourselves in social gatherings and walking alongside them during their work day) and non-immersive ways (watching people's interactions from street corners, restaurant tables, and council meetings).

MaRS researchers met with residents, business owners, and community volunteers to learn more about their perspectives on wellness.

# NEIGHBOURHOOD WALKS

## Activities included

- An evening walk with the City's neighbourhood coordinators from the new Rogers Place arena to the old Remand centre in Boyle and learnt about the transformative activities that are underway.
- A morning walk with the North Edge BIA liaisons through the neighbourhoods as they spread holiday cheer to citizens and reported issues using the 211 app.
- Visiting many chinatown businesses.
- Attending a City Council Budget Planning meeting and heard from various community groups including the: the Africa Centre, Edmonton Meals on Wheels, Kihciy Askiy, Edmonton Chinatown Revitalization Council, Health City, Abundant Communities Edmonton.
- An evening visit to the John A. McDougall School with a doctor from the Royal Alexandra hospital and Somali refugee women and children as they learnt about education savings plans and healthy eating.
- We had coffees with young professionals from the downtown Edmonton Public Library and the Action Lab and talked to them about what it is like to live in Edmonton.

# FOCUSED INTERVIEWS

Part 2 of the research took place from January 22 to February 9. The MaRS team conducted 1 hour interviews with key contacts from part 1 of the research phase. Additional contacts came through members of the three RECOVER committees and further referrals from initial interviews. Using qualitative interviewing methods we explored participants' connections to the five neighbourhoods, and issues related to wellness, safety, and social supports.

N=44 (10 informal and 34 formal interviews)

## Breakdown of formal interviews

McCauley 9, Boyle 7, Queen Mary Park 5, Central  
McDougall 8, Downtown 5\*

22 residents, 10 business owners, 12 community  
organizations\*

*\*Note these categories include some overlaps, these interviews are in addition to InWithForward Ethnographic Work*

# COMMUNITY VOICES

During February 16, 19 and 20 the three RECOVER committees participated in prototyping workshops. The data from community interviews was used to identify opportunity areas for action in the form of “What if” statements. We also shared the data with committee participants in the form of a “Community Voices” deck to help them generate further ideas for action.





# ASPIRATIONS + VALUES

In order to bring more “voices” of the community into the room, the MaRS team compiled a card deck of quotes taken from the interviews. The quotes were curated to share back the range of aspirations, values, and perceived supports, barriers or concerns.

Aspirations are important because they hint at a future direction or enhanced state that people desire; values help define how they want to get there; enablers help think about the nature of the support that might be provided, therefore something to maximize; and barriers, elements that need to be minimized.

Beyond the workshop setting the community voices deck can continue to be used as an ideation tool to generate potential solutions. Quotes may be reviewed by particular neighbourhood or they may be sorted by themes across various neighbourhoods.



# NEIGHBOURHOOD PRIORITIES

The MaRS team reviewed the community interviews to surface key challenges specific to each of the five core neighbourhoods. In doing so we also learned that “community” boundaries extend across and are divided within ward or formal neighbourhood boundaries. There are more natural community lines between parts of Queen Mary and Central McDougall, Boyle and McCauley, and Boyle and Downtown.

We also learned that each neighbourhood faced key challenges and tensions that emerged as focal points and priorities for that area. By no means are these the only challenges, issues and tensions that exist in each of these communities, nor are they necessarily unique to them. However, the challenges highlighted below are presented as promising points of action that align with the residents', business owners' and community organizers' lived experiences, common values and desires for something better.



# QUEEN MARY PARK



# QUEEN MARY PARK

This neighbourhood sits between the cheapest rental properties in Edmonton closest to Central McDougall, and the relatively well-to-do Oliver neighbourhood. It is a transitional community in more ways than one, parts of which are referred to as “Little Somalia,” and intersects with the Avenue of Nations where many different ethnic groups live and operate small businesses.

“Historically all the settlement agencies were on 107 street, the Avenue of Nations. It was the initial settlement-- transient, temporary settlement space for community groups. The other areas is where you would move to and stay. Queen Mary/McDougall's been where people come, and then they get support for temporary settlement and then move to other parts of the city. Not only, but a lot.” - A RESIDENT

# QUEEN MARY PARK

Many migrants from within Canada and around the world, land in this area “chasing the oil and gas dream”, yet many struggle to find jobs and settle in to Edmonton life, particularly in times of economic downturns.

“Uniqueness of this neighbourhood is that 60% of people that live in this area are new Canadians - and then a whole lot of the other chunk are internally displaced Canadians so they're coming from Ontario, Quebec, way more out East and they're coming to chase the Oil and Gas dream... and this is where they land. Predominantly this neighbourhood because it has the cheapest rent in all of Edmonton right now - you could get a 2 bedroom apartment for \$900. Most of these apartments have 5 or 6 people living in them. And these are predominantly with a lot of young women, or a lot of young men... they're all coming in for the same kind of jobs” - A BUSINESS OWNER

# QUEEN MARY PARK

In the past couple of years there seems to be an increase in need for settlement, housing and employment supports that are not being met by traditional service agencies. One resident observed that the problem of people needing to stay temporarily with friends and family due to prolonged unemployment, “has tripled in the past two years - it's the economy - lack of jobs - all the people thought they would find jobs are not - cost of living is not going any lower, it's going higher actually”. At the same time another resident observed, “...what's happened in the last few years is that the settlement agencies have been moving out- which is why all these businesses like Ahmed are stepping up, just because of desperation.”

# QUEEN MARY PARK

Ahmed and colleagues, who run a safety training business in the neighbourhood became “accidental social workers” as they began to simply respond to needs of their community which they personally could not ignore. Their responses have included simple things like providing basic breakfast, to helping people who can’t afford training to raise funds through crowd-sourced sponsorships, bridging barriers for people in their community with mainstream employment services and even investigating fraudulent activities of some employment services receiving government wage subsidies. They have also partnered with groups providing ESL and health and nutrition training programs for women and children in their community, to share space and resources, with an emphasis on integration into the broader community.

# CENTRAL MCDOUGALL





# CENTRAL MCDOUGALL

This neighbourhood, like parts of Queen Mary are filled with many migrants trying to settle into a life in Edmonton. Largely a residential neighbourhood, it is also home to many young families, who have made great efforts at grassroots organization of family friendly programming to help bring their neighbours together. The great strength of this community is that members value integration of these groups and collaborate well. Members include talented, skilled and committed individuals volunteering several hours of their already busy days to support engaging programming for families or helping to secure the resources to do so.

# CENTRAL MCDOUGALL

One family physician involved in health promotion initiative in the neighbourhood noted,

“There is certainly a passionate group of individuals that are really working hard to improve the health of the community. And that's a key plus. I know that the different organizations are interested in working collaboratively and working together because resources are limited and that certainly is a strength. I never feel that they're competing for dollars. There is a core group that have really started developing the community aspect of the neighbourhood. And its diversity, ethnic and cultural and language provides a real richness to experiences in the community so that is a strength. A lot of it is the parents that have students at the schools within the community, that are working to try and support it. Some are higher educated, health professionals or teachers, who have more skill set to navigate the system and advocate for the community.” - A FAMILY PHYSICIAN AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

# CENTRAL MCDOUGALL

When we spoke to one of these parents, they reflected,

“Coming in one of the things we've tried to engage with community league in the area, getting our own kids involved in activities. There's been a lack of really accessible spaces and planned activities to bring your children too. Around here there is a lot of the women that just take their kids to the park. There's a lot of separation and not a lot of organization. So we've just been trying to access spaces and build relationships with different people and connecting with different organizations, to find ways to offer things for people in the community to get together so that you're not so isolated.” - A PARENT AND RESIDENT

# CENTRAL MCDOUGALL

Another resident also shared how he draws on his background in musical training to volunteer engaging programming for children in the neighbourhood:

"I've done a lot of different things - music clinics here and there. I just want to do some volunteer work and that sort of thing. So the specific one that I did with John A. McDougall, I brought a marching snare drum that I own. Basically I wanted to get them thinking about all the different sounds you can make on things that you don't normally think of. So I had a stick, I had a brush. I had a twig bundle, called a broomstick. Had a mallet. So with each group at the end, I get each student to choose one of the things and hit it once and it's like, 'wow, okay that's my sound'. So it's really cool because it gets them thinking about all this stuff and I demonstrate all these things in an inquisitive manner - like I don't just say, 'This is a mallet and it sounds like this'. But it's like, 'Oh, what's this thing? It's made of ... it's kind of soft, like a shirt. What is that thing?' And it really helps to draw them in I think. So I do a lot of that kind of thing." - A RESIDENT

# CENTRAL MCDOUGALL

However, frustrations are mounting as these community members' energy and efforts have been increasingly met with barriers to accessing community resources (facilities and materials) which seem to be governed under an outdated model that is no longer responsive to the actual needs of the community today:

# CENTRAL MCDOUGALL

"One of things with the Community League is that the demographics of the community have changed over time. Because the way the city has the Community League is set up, they speak on behalf of the community no matter how many people you have associated, and funding as well. They're given an open door for funding and the trump card for the voice of the community, regardless of the actual representation. We actually went to the Federation and explained, this is the situation, and discussed the barriers - we put a lot of effort into articulating these problems and the message we got was, 'yes we know it's a problem' - not just our Community League but many - but just no willingness to actually address it. They're either really high functioning or they're not-- and around here you have a lot of the newcomers coming in so, you got language barriers, unemployment - so there's too much for them. Compared to somewhere like Oliver - they know the politics, the system. And when new people try and join, it's really hard to get your voice across." - PARENT AND RESIDENT



# CENTRAL MCDUGALL

Another community organizer put it this way:

"In particular the central McDougall area doesn't have a community hall. There's no community league building for people to use. But there are the schools and some of the infrastructure that's already there. And so having access to that can be difficult. It's used by people often across the city, and often in June it tends to be booked out, to different sorts of sports teams, things like that that then end up just renting out the gym. People come from wherever around the city to use the gym space. And so my feeling is it's really reserving that gym space and making that gym space available for the community that is there and for those community organizations that are working in the community." - COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

**McCAULEY**



# McCAULEY

A mixed neighbourhood of residential and commercial spaces, residents and business owners struggle to establish safe and inviting spaces for their families and patrons. The many East and South Asian restaurants in this area are attractive to people from around the city, yet many avoid visiting the area during evening hours due to safety concerns. Residents and business owners need more robust ways to prevent crime and effectively deal with aggressive and violent behaviours they are witness to on a recurring basis.

# McCAULEY

One resident and homeowner described the problem of crime in this neighbourhood in this way:

"I moved to McCauley 14 years ago. I bought a detached house for \$96K. The week that my son was born I learned of problem properties nearby. A member of the Red Alert [gang] was in front of my house grabbing his crotch and shouting obscenities. There's a notorious landlord that owns hundreds of properties in the neighbourhood. He slaps paint on it and leases to low income people with addictions issues. To cope with this problem the neighbourhood is trying to take a strong unified voice - to stand up to intimidating people acting aggressively. The City has been trying to take him down; he's been charged but no resolution yet. It's not unique to this neighbourhood - it's everywhere - having to interact with people like this - but McCauley does have a lot of violence, gang activities. The first 2017 murder was in my block."

# McCAULEY

Residents observed that vacant outdoor spaces pose a particular problem in this area, inviting criminal activity. One resident described their neighbourhood as, “a wasteland of parking lots” and voiced a need for “green spaces where everyone feels safe going so people can't hide their criminal activity.” He noted that parking lots largely sit empty and become an “open space for any kind of criminal activity” with people “hanging out” producing litter and garbage. Another resident noted that “parking lots - empty spaces - really get to be dead zones - especially at night and holidays and weekends - vacant spaces are major problem.”

# McCAULEY

One resident who lives in another downtown neighbourhood spoke about how much she loves the downtown core in terms of the shops and restaurants they offer - like a great Hot Pot spot in the west end of Boyle/McCauley area; yet she was adamant that she “would never walk there at night” by herself.



# McCAULEY

Business owners invest all they have into their operations and face high anxiety about the security of their assets as well as their customers' safety. One business owner in the neighbourhood shared that he "often sees shady people hanging around in the back parking lot, wearing dark clothing and a hood, looking for an opening; I see their tracks in the snow." He also noted, "one customer was from Saskatoon and they had left their bag in their car and forgot to lock one of their doors and it was gone, with all their ID and everything. I felt terrible about that." Other encounters have made him feel "unsafe at night, even inside the restaurant", such as the time someone came in and trashed his buffet for the evening rush and attacked him physically before his cousins could notice from the kitchen and come to help.

**BOYLE**



# BOYLE

This neighbourhood, just south of McCauley is together commonly referred to as the Quarters. The Boyle area has a rich history as one of the original neighbourhoods making up the town of Edmonton. It has some of the oldest buildings in the city, and is the site of the original Chinatown, as more recent development has moved north, closer to McCauley. Its history also includes some of the longest operating social agencies (some going back 30 to 150 years), serving some of the most vulnerable populations. Today Boyle is home to approximately 60 different social agencies including shelters, and serves a range of vulnerable people, many of them street involved, and many who identify as indigenous.

# BOYLE

Social agencies in the area are trying to manage a public health crisis regarding Fentanyl and opioids. One person working at a social agency shared,

“There's a crisis with Fentanyl right now - opiates. Each and every one of our organizations experience people overdosing on drugs - on Fentanyl, on opiates, on a regular basis. We've tried to provide the services to meet the needs of the community, in particular the health services. And most recently we've got the safe consumption sites happening. This is a health response to a health crisis.”

# BOYLE

At the same time, local businesses struggle to create a vibrant commercial district where many street involved people loiter in their entranceways, and the businesses face penalties for not cleaning up needles and other wastes. They fear the impact on the broader community in terms of how the harm reduction strategies are being implemented:

“A lot of the complaint would be the needles. They distribute needles to the people. That needs to inject themselves. And they got nowhere to go and they inject themselves in the open space and then they throw the needles all over. My view is, if your organization is given the funding to distribute, you should be responsible to do the clean up. Right? Just in the vicinity. Why is it they're not responsible for the cleanup? Why families and businesses have to put up with that - finding needles in the park, backyard. And it would attract a lot of drug dealers 'cause you know they know these people need drugs - it's a marketplace for them. And if they don't have the money to buy drugs, you know what they will do? They will start attacking the people in Chinatown and property damage - could be high. That's why we're so concerned. So that's why we say, one could be acceptable, can be manageable. But three? Within walking distance of 10 minutes of each other?.”

# BOYLE

Studies on the effectiveness of supervised injection sites have largely reported positive outcomes for service users, yet the impact on surrounding communities have been mixed. Many studies report reductions in public needle use and associated litter, and no increase in robbery, theft and drug-dealing. Some studies have found perceived increase in drug dealing in the vicinity of the facility and increased violence in the neighbourhood (OHTN, May 2014). Supervised injection sites do have an impact on the surrounding community yet the net positive and negative outcomes cannot be assumed without properly assessing them.

In the Boyle neighbourhood municipal and provincial harm reduction strategies are on the cusp of implementation with varying approaches (e.g., distributing clean needles only vs. also collecting them, providing drugs vs. bringing your own).

How could the city implement harm reduction strategies to curb the current crisis in a way that does not harm but rather improves the lives of the residents and businesses as well. How could they support residents and businesses to create a vibrant neighbourhood that will also bolster the harm reduction strategies of the social services?



# BOYLE

Another tension facing residents and business owners in this neighbourhood is how to revitalize the downtown core without the displacement effects of gentrification. One business owner explained,

"I'm against "gentrification" and for "integration and revitalization". To me gentrification may create aesthetically nicer places or buildings but it displaces people - if people can no longer afford to live in a neighbourhood they have to leave; if only big box stores or large corporations can afford the spaces, smaller local businesses are driven out; even with park benches, if they have guards put on them they make such spaces not welcome for whole groups of people. Integration and revitalization has to do with bridging - communities, ideas and people so that everyone feels welcomed."

# BOYLE

A further impact of gentrification is that it erases the hard earned legacy of the people that it displaces. While there has been much debate about the removal of the Chinatown gates since the development of Canada Place, the underlying value is really about losing the history of Chinese Canadians and what that has to offer future generations:

“If we lose Chinatown that means we have nothing to tell our children, grandchildren, down the road. Where your ancestors came from. How they suffered through those times and how they protect themselves by working together and supporting each other. That's how Chinatown started. That's why you have the gate that signifies the entrance into Chinatown. You're telling the history to whoever comes to visit that there's a China Town here - and how it flourished. At one point in time, even if you're a very successful business in China Town, you were not allowed to employ white people to work for you. So there's a lot of discrimination. So I think that the new generation, the descendants, needs to understand what the Chinese been through and how they elevate themselves and work hard and were successful.”

# BOYLE

Part of that success has been the ways in which they have supported the vulnerable members of their own community, whether through the housing and wellness centres they have developed for seniors, employment support programs for newcomers, or a unique bilingual school program that allows Chinese Canadians to compete in a global context.

Despite the high tensions between Chinatown and the social agencies in the Boyle neighbourhood today, they all share a rich history embedded in the values of supporting the less fortunate, helping them to overcome prejudice, discrimination and hardship, and ultimately integrate into a vibrant and healthy community. How could the city enable this neighbourhood to continue to do that today in a way that builds on and celebrates that legacy?

**DOWNTOWN**



# DOWNTOWN

The downtown is primarily a commercial district that includes large institutions such as municipal and provincial government offices. MacEwan University is also in close proximity. Recent developments in this neighbourhood have opened major cultural venues and attractions, including the new stadium. New commercial developments include large hotels.

This area has a lot to offer young professionals seeking like-minded people to pursue their life goals. Some feel that it doesn't do enough to create an inclusive community for the more vulnerable street involved or seniors.

How could this neighbourhood develop a vibrant downtown core that is inclusive; one that can help nurture social networks and provide enriching experiences for ambitious young professionals as well as elderly residents who live downtown for the convenience of a central location but need better low-key gathering places and opportunities to venture outside of the core?

# DOWNTOWN

One resident we spoke to told us what he loves about being downtown:

“What keeps me in Edmonton is that it’s progressive - when I get up in the morning and I look out the window I just wanna get out there and just continue to work on myself and achieve my goals. I like being around a vibrant group or vibrant environment and keeps me going - and pushes me to just go after what I want to achieve and goals and be abreast of what's going on. It's hard for me NOT to know what's going on. I know everything that's taking place in the city and it's perfect for me.”

# DOWNTOWN

However, some feel that recent downtown developments have largely benefited the 'haves' and very little for those who have less. One resident noted, "The city investment amongst the wealthy - we get every privilege served to us on a silver platter. We spent billions on the arena - and nothing on the vulnerable. We have good cultural and music and new theatre buildings. We have everything - we are so spoiled - can't for a second complain."

# DOWNTOWN

When we spoke with a senior living in a seniors residence in the area, he told us that he liked the convenience of being able to zip around in his scooter at least during the summer to get to everything he needs. Exceptions included a local family doctor for which he had to travel out of the neighbourhood, and affordable grocery options. Something he wishes for is a place that he can go with a group and enjoy themselves at a leisurely place at their own discretion:

“A family restaurant would be nice. We've got these fast food places and you know, coffee shops, but apart from that we don't have anything else...somewhere where you can take a group of people in sit down that's not a fast time... Sometimes we have a social [in the building] and one of the ladies does all the cooking and we go down there. Have a good chatter. Community supper. Yeah. That's good for getting to know your neighbours...”



# DOWNTOWN

Exploring his leisure options our conversation surfaced a need for more stimulating experiences beyond the day to day experiences of living in the city core:

*Do you miss work?*

Yeah, miss the mountains, working in the mountains where there's nobody around, but wildlife.

*Does this place have ever organize outings? Like to the mountains?*

To the mountains? No, we just talk about work or books or go to Ikea.

*What if there was a bus that allowed visits to the mountain?*

Yeah, if there was one I probably wouldn't come back.