

Urban accessibility: Promoting inclusive environments

Community forum summary

January 2025



CIVIC INNOVATION LAB



Land acknowledgment

Burnaby is located on the ancestral, and unceded territory of the hən'qəmin'əm' and Skwxwú7mesh speaking peoples. Before Burnaby existed, its lands were home to the ancestors of several local Central Coast Salish Nations. Today, their descendants continue to live in Burnaby and the adjacent municipalities that developed within their traditional territories. Since time immemorial, each of these Nations has celebrated its own unique culture and history, while maintaining relations with the others by family, social life, traditions, protocols, and language.

hən'qəmin'əm' and Skwxwú7mesh speaking peoples remain deeply connected to Burnaby lands and waters today.

Introduction


Canada's population is aging while the prevalence of disability is also increasing, with [27% of Canadians reporting at least one disability in 2022](#)¹. It is estimated that by 2037 Canada's [seniors population \(ages 65 and older\) will grow by 68%](#)². As our cities continue to grow rapidly, it is important to create age-friendly and inclusive neighbourhoods that support mobility, access, and inclusion.

The ***Urban Accessibility: Promoting Inclusive Environments Experiential Pop-up and World Cafe*** explored how to build accessible communities that can support people of all ages and abilities. Community organizations, people with lived experience, city staff, and researchers joined the forum on Oct. 18, 2024 to learn, reflect, and provide feedback on how they move through their community through a world cafe and a public pop-up.

The World Cafe facilitated community dialogue and collaboration. Community members shared insight about how they move through their neighbourhoods, and how these spaces could be shaped to meet their needs. There was also a public pop-up, where the wider community was able to learn about accessibility issues through interactive learning, which included videos, play spaces, and learning activities. This report summarizes the input and key themes we heard from participants at the session.

¹ Statistics Canada, 2022

² Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2017



Community members taking part in the World Cafe forum, at Bonsor Recreation Complex, Burnaby, BC.

Collaborators

Collaborators & participants

The event was a collaborative effort between Happy Cities, SWAN-MAP Project, Project Sidewalk, City of Burnaby through the Civic Innovation Lab (CIL), the DemSCAPE Project, Simon Fraser University, and UBC.

Participants in the World Cafe were older adults and persons with disabilities living in the Lower Mainland who shared their lived experiences. Participants were offered honoraria for their time and expertise.

Thank you to all of the community members who took the time to visit the forum and to share their stories!

About the SWAN/MAP Project

Stakeholders Walkability/Wheelability Audit in Neighborhoods (SWAN) is a research project led by the Mobility Access Participation Project (MAP), and hosted at Simon Fraser University. The project aims to explore neighbourhood accessibility through user-led audits of the built environment. Partnering with municipalities and organizations in the Lower Mainland, older adults and persons with disabilities work with researchers to capture their perspectives using the SWAN Audit—which looks at the elements of streets and neighbourhoods, how the built form impacts the mobility and experiences of people with different disabilities.

For more information about the SWAN/MAP Project, please reach out to Dr. Atiya Mahmood, project lead and professor in the Department of Gerontology at Simon Fraser University (am Mahmood@sfu.ca)



Community members taking part in the World Cafe forum, at Bonsor Recreation Complex, Burnaby, BC.

Urban accessibility: Promoting inclusive environments

What we heard

The World Cafe created a space for dialogue and collaboration, where community members shared stories about how they navigate their neighbourhoods. Using flash cards as prompts that showed images of good and bad examples of different types of outdoor spaces and elements (sidewalks, crosswalks, bike paths, lighting, seating, public toilets, etc.), participants were encouraged to speak to the photos that resonated with them.

Thirty-two individuals shared their personal experiences about how they move through their communities. They offered feedback on what works in our streets and public spaces, and shared what could be improved to make their experiences more comfortable and safe.

After the community forum, the SWAN/ MAP team conducted an analysis on these discussions to identify key themes. The world cafe chats were recorded, and the audio files were analyzed with NVivo software to identify the key themes related to the experiences of individuals with disabilities in urban spaces.

Each theme addresses specific aspects of the challenges and needs faced by individuals with disabilities and older adults in urban environments. The themes are presented in order of how frequently the topic came up in the facilitated discussions.

Identified themes (ranked by frequency)

1

**Physical accessibility
and functionality of
the built environment**

2

**Navigation
and
wayfinding**

3

**Safety
and
security**

4

**Inclusiveness
and
social interaction**

5

**Aesthetics
and
maintenance**

Theme 1

Physical accessibility and functionality of the built environment

Community members strongly expressed a desire to improve the overall quality of design and accessibility of the built environment including:

- Clear signage
- Better sidewalks and road conditions (level unobstructed paths, proper widths and slopes to accommodate wheelchairs)
- Well-designed cross-walks
- Surface-level navigation aids



"I see sidewalks that are quite narrow, and when there are obstructions, someone using a walker or other mobility device would struggle to pass without stepping into the street."

Theme 2

Navigation and wayfinding

Participants shared the tools they currently used to navigate urban spaces, and the kinds of tools they feel are important in the built environment, which included:

- Surface cues (tactile markers, curbs, paving material change, etc.)
- Use of technology to guide
- Planning routes ahead of time
- Audible cues
- Signage

Participants also expressed that being familiar with their neighbourhood was important for navigation.

"For crossings, it's always good to have clear lines. You can see the line across, with markings at the beginning and end. That's helpful for people using a white cane, as they can feel the end of the sidewalk and know to stop, listen, and wait for cars to stop."



"In Surrey and Richmond, they have the audio at crossings that says, 'going north, going south'."

Theme 3

Safety & security

Community members shared which factors influence their sense of security in urban spaces, which included:

- Traffic
- Safety around other people
- Safety around other non-vehicular modes of transportation (bikes, scooters, etc.)
- Safety at different times of the day

Participants also raised concerns about specific areas in the Lower Mainland that felt unsafe.

"Sharing the pathway with cyclists can be a mixed experience; some ring their bell to let you know they're coming, while others don't, and you just hear a whoosh as they pass by, hoping you're not in their way."

"At bus stops, there's often a long line of people, which creates accessibility challenges. If you approach with a walker, stroller, or wheelchair, you sometimes have to ask people to move, as they can completely block the sidewalk."



Theme 4

Inclusiveness & social interactions

Participants expressed a desire to be more connected to their neighbours and wider community, and offered suggestions for how to make this possible:

- Interactive built spaces that facilitate social connection
- Incorporation of furnishings and physical support for users (spaces for rest, seating, etc.)
- Creating social spaces in buildings

"I'm saying you just live in town, and you don't know your neighbours, and they are there for six, seven years. They're just not interested in socializing. We just go in and out. But I don't know how you can change that."

"If an older person is living on their own on the 70th floor, where they don't know anyone, there could be a space on their floor to meet people."



Theme 5

Aesthetics & maintenance

Community members shared the kinds of sensory elements that were important to them in as they experienced urban spaces, which included:

- Access to greenery
- The overall visual appeal of a space
- General cleanliness of the site
- General maintenance of the site
- Access to arts and visuals
- Low noise levels

"Something I think is crucial in a densifying urban neighbourhood is access to green space. We really saw its importance during COVID, but it's essential to create green spaces that are accessible to everyone, regardless of ability."

"Colour is very important. You need to look at it from the point of view of easier to understand and design."



"They're removing the chairs from the seating area, because overnight people, homeless people, use it overnight, and it causes safety issues. But now you've eliminated a means for older adults to sit down like me, I need to sit down a lot."

Building an inclusive Burnaby

Accessible urban design benefits everyone. For older adults and people with disabilities, it ensures that people can stay connected, healthy, and engaged in their communities and visit neighbourhood spaces without experiencing barriers.

The World Cafe created a space for the community to share and learn from one another. Community members shared their priorities with the project team and City staff for ways to make their city accessible and inclusive.

As Burnaby continues to grow rapidly, it is important to create neighbourhoods that are safe, inclusive, and accessible. Most importantly, older adults and people living with disabilities need to be at the centre of these discussions.

For more information about the Urban Accessibility Forum, or the SWAN/MAP Project, please e-mail the team at amahmood@sfu.ca, or map_project@sfu.ca

The Urban Accessibility Team

Community members taking part in the World Cafe.



