

# **ENVISIONING AND PROMOTING THE CORNER 2.0:**

## **INSIGHTS & DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR A TRANSFORMATIVE COMMUNITY HUB FUTURE**

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## **WHAT IS THE CORNER?**

The Corner is as much a philosophy as it is a unique set of shared health, social service and community programming spaces in Toronto's St. James Town neighbourhood. At the core of this philosophy is a dedication to the idea that The Corner is owned by no one and everyone all at once. The Corner presents a unique commitment to the constantly shifting needs, experiences and expectations of the people who live, work and play in one of Toronto's most diverse, densely populated and underserved communities. As of the publication of this report, the population of St. James Town stands at more than 20,000 residents, a population that spans every bracket of age, cultural and religious background, and socioeconomic standing. Due to its dense population, large number of high rise buildings and relative lack of public green spaces, St. James Town presents a unique combination of challenges for those dedicated to health, social welfare, newcomer integration and environmental activism. The Corner currently has two dedicated sites, the original The Corner@200 and the newly opened Corner@240, to meet these challenges. Corner@200 is dedicated to health, social services and recreational programs for people of all ages and cultural backgrounds. The new site, The Corner@240, focuses on issues of local sustainability and environmental responsibility. Across these sites a range of agencies, residents and local partners run programs that challenge what it means to build urban communities from the ground up. The Corner provides a vital point for residents to gain access to services and opportunities. However, The Corner is much more than a physical point of service. That is what this report is about: the always changing challenges, opportunities and areas of improvement necessary to develop a model of community-building that can keep up with the neverending flux of 21st century urban life.





*tout est  
possible*



## **INTRODUCTION:**

This report includes initial findings from research conducted with the St. James Town Community Corner (The Corner) from April 2019 to February 2020. The goal was to understand how healthcare workers, social workers, volunteers and residents come together to make The Corner what it is today, and what it could be in the future. This report is intended for a wide audience, including those who might want to bring their unique talents and resources to The Corner's service and program offerings. This report is intended to provoke conversations with other GTA community hub projects, conversations that might inspire new models of community building that can better address the ever-changing challenges of diverse urban populations.

The research that informs this report was the culmination of a series of consultations with key members of The Corner's operations team and steering committee. The goal was to capture the challenges and opportunities facing an organization that knows it has to grow and reimagine its core vision while remaining faithful to what makes it a captivating case study in resident-centered social, cultural, and health service provision.

The methodology that shapes this report comes from the field of anthropology, a field that uses observations and interviews to reveal the nuances of human stories. Simply put, I initially hung out at The Corner's 200 Wellesley location as much as possible, taking in the sights and vibrant sounds of this bustling community hub. Between April and June of 2019, I conducted ethnographic interviews with over 15 employees, residents and volunteers. These conversations were supplemented by immersive observations all over St. James Town, as well as participation in a variety of programs with The Corner's residents and service providers. This work has recently been supported by a month of additional research at The Corner's new location at 240 Wellesley St. E, a site with a unique focus on environmental sustainability that has already inspired a surprising and exciting model of resident-driven, cross-cultural collaboration.



My approach to research allows the people I am working with to speak on their own terms, making them comfortable telling and showing me the richness of their experiences. At the same time, my work at The Corner has been a personally life-changing experience. As an anthropologist, activist, and Toronto resident, I feel lucky getting a chance to spend so much time at this truly special place. I hope that what comes from this collaboration is an ongoing excitement over taking The Corner, and the incredible people who have made it what it is, into an even more impactful future.

## **The Challenge of Truly Bottom-Up Community Hubs**

There is a serious disconnect that emerges when community hubs are in their infancy. Those spearheading a new center of community health, recreation and/or social services struggle to balance their assumptions, ambitions and areas of expertise with the needs and lived experiences of local residents and service providers.

Since 2015, Ontario's strategic community hub framework and action plan has emphasized the importance of local, resident-driven needs and services. Despite this, hubs tend to be built from the top-down. In many cases, predetermined programs and services are imposed onto a particular neighbourhood and housed in a central location. This single location becomes the "hub," and resident feedback is provided around a narrow selection of services, programs and outreach initiatives. These hubs are built on a model that privileges high-level categories of health, social welfare, financial and recreational needs and service areas. There is an underlying hesitation to embrace the complexity of addressing the nuanced needs of a specific neighbourhood, and having multiple voices and perspectives shape where, how, and under what conditions new programs, spaces and services should be provided.

The Corner emerges from a much different history. When it opened its doors in 2011, The Corner was the result of five years of on-the-ground work between local residents, service providers and both public and private funding sources. The Corner initially emerged when residents and service providers saw an opportunity to take over space at the base of 200 Wellesley St. E., a residential building operated by Toronto Community Housing (TCH). The space had previously served as a community health clinic run by Wellesley Hospital and then merged with St. Michael's Hospital. Residents and service providers wanted to take advantage of existing facilities, including spaces for private consultations with medical, mental health, and social service providers. At the same time, they were inspired by the blank canvases provided by 200 Wellesley's larger, open rooms.



With TCH's support, a steering committee was established, one that from the very beginning was driven by the unique needs of St. James Town's residents and service providers. The governance structure that emerged provides proof of The Corner's early and ongoing bottom-up bona fides. A steering committee of 13 members oversees The Corner's operations, and consists of:

- 8 community residents, including both TCH tenants and residents from the broader St. James Town Community.
- 5 representatives from agencies that deliver services within St. James Town.

More than paying lip service to resident involvement, every step of program and service development has been driven by an appreciation of local needs and experiences, and a recognition that these evolve fairly rapidly as new residents, businesses, and infrastructures change the identity of St. James Town.

What distinguishes The Corner from other community hub initiatives is that, from the very beginning, it has embraced the messiness of its core mission. The Corner does not shy away from the complexity of ever-shifting needs and experiences and has intentionally baked this into its model of service and program delivery. This model is inherently flexible, driven by a humble appreciation that community hubs necessarily exist on unstable foundations. This is especially true for St. James Town, one of the most diverse neighbourhoods in Canada. With an always fluctuating population, St. James Town constantly reveals new and unexpected social, economic, and cross-cultural needs and challenges.

The management of The Corner is a collaborative undertaking between its two anchor organizations. The operations team comprises of The Corner staff as well as staff from partner organizations. This removes organizational hegemony & monopoly and places partnership at the crux of The Corner operations. Residents and service providers lean into disagreements and diverse perspectives before making decisions about how to proceed with new programs, spaces, and services. This is a model built on the idea that The Corner is owned by every-

one and no one in St. James Town. The real story of The Corner is how a place so hectic and disorienting can feel so comfortable, welcoming, and safe. This is something that cannot, and should not, be lost as we challenge ourselves to develop The Corner 2.0. For the next iteration of The Corner, we must continue to open doors to an even greater diversity of programs and services that can help those who might have yet to benefit from the collaborative, grassroots work of The Corner.

## How to Read this Document

The purpose of this document is to provide some initial insights and design principles that speak to the challenges and opportunities facing The Corner in its current state, and how these can be addressed as it evolves in the near and long-term future. The goal, ultimately, is to use this material to begin facilitating more meaningful and focused conversations about moving towards The Corner 2.0. Key to this will be determining how best to reach out to residents and potential funding partners, and how to develop approaches to build more dynamic models of programming and service provision to shape the next chapter in The Corner's story.

This is about so much more than flashier marketing and promotional materials. It is about telling a better and richer story about The Corner, so that needs and challenges can be more meaningfully identified. This work is about figuring out how best to tell the world what The Corner wants, what it needs, and how it proposes to get there.

What distinguishes The Corner from other community hub initiatives is that, from the very beginning, it has embraced the messiness of its core mission.













## INSIGHTS

Insights capture major themes and observations from research, framing human experiences from a perspective that is both practical and theoretical. The insights offered here call out some of the most common yet provocative ideas that came out of my work with The Corner's staff, volunteers, and residents. They push beyond the limits of current models of community health and social service provision, models that too often see community health and recreation centres as a central physical location, where proximity between services is equivalent to meaningful integration.

Meaningful integration is only possible if it is recognized as imperfect, never finished and motivated by the needs of those meant to benefit from the coming together of different experts, private partners, residents, and service providers. There is no one "Corner" and moving towards the future means embracing the uncertainty of evolving populations, policies and technologies.

### 1 Between The Corner and The Home

Employees and volunteers are just as likely to provide services at The Corner's 200 and 240 Wellesley locations as they are in resident homes. They blur arbitrary boundaries between community, home, and public health/service spaces. This is critical to employee, volunteer, and resident experiences, as everyone recognizes that these domains are not, and never should be, seen as separate. Too often, patient and community-centered care exists within a siloed model, one where appointments are strictly regulated, doors are shut, and silence between residential, public, and private/clinical spaces is deafening.

One social worker described making regular house calls on residents if he has not seen them in a while. He was not only worried about possible issues of addiction, isolation, and other health problems, but emotional and social stresses of daily life keeping someone away. He also saw value in seeing and spending time in the environments in which his



clients live. A former physician, he loved any opportunity to make client interactions more meaningful. Moving a conversation from his shared office at 200 Wellesley to the messiness and richness of people's home environments allowed him to assess client cases with greater thoughtfulness, empathy and compassion. As he put it:

"I feel better when I visit them in-home. It's important to see them in their world."

These blurred boundaries also generate profound feelings of home at The Corner's physical locations. The best example is the Senior's day programming, run in conjunction with Progress Place. Clients come to these programs with a range of mental health, financial, and medical needs, but have little to no support in terms of family, neighbours, or home care. They come to The Corner to have lunch, sing songs, play games, and dance with unsuspecting anthropologists. They do so in a space with low ceilings, tiny windows, less than ideal lighting, and a lot of other things that one might assume would take away from feelings of "home." Yet, regardless of the physical limitations of space provided at 200 Wellesley, thoughtful programming based on a real assessment of people's needs is all it takes to offer a sense of home, family and togetherness. The troubling circumstances of client lives can be ignored for a few hours. As the organizer of the program explained to me:

"They come here and they have very little. This might be their only meal for the day, their only visit with other people, at least people who they feel comfortable enough to be themselves around."

Too often, experts and their professional environments are privileged in building community health and grassroot service initiatives. By entering client homes and building feelings of home through particular on-site programs, The Corner's staff and volunteers bridge arbitrary gaps between community, home, and clinical space and service. They walk through the parks, down the streets, take the elevators, and stroll down the hallways of their clients' lived environments. They hear neighbours laughing or yelling, witness children playing, drug dealers dealing, and they call people by their name, never confining their work to spaces and places of professional expertise. Instead, The Corner privileges resident experiences, letting these shape contours of care and community, and the interactions and environments that drive what it means to truly live well in St. James Town.

## 2 Building Grassroots Models of Cultural Entrepreneurship

The unique relationship between community and home described above has also informed a recognition that, despite limited space and resources, The Corner can become an entrepreneurial hub. At both the 200 and 240 locations, The Corner has developed diverse and non-hierarchical approaches to helping residents showcase their unique skills, interests, and backgrounds to meaningfully engage, educate, and empower fellow residents. At 240, weekly Repair Cafés and knitting groups have begun fostering unique collaborations between experienced makers and menders and those newly curious about recycling and repurposing clothes and household items. These initiatives can inspire an entrepreneurial spirit, especially when it comes to empowering people to take on unexpected leadership roles in developing programs and services for environmental sustainability at the local level.

Perhaps the best example of The Corner's unique model of cultural and economic entrepreneurship is The Catering Collective. The Catering Collective was spearheaded by a dietician from Sherbourne Health who works with residents at the 200 Wellesley St. location. With a population so varied and diverse across culture and age, as well as dietary needs and restrictions, she decided to educate people about balanced diets while showcasing their passion for home-cooking.

The management of The Corner is a collaborative undertaking between its two anchor organizations. The operations team comprises of The Corner staff as well as staff from partner organizations. This removes organizational hegemony & monopoly and places partnership at the crux of The Corner operations. At the same time, the catering collective takes seriously that starting a new business is nothing worth rushing:

“There are too many variables. Too many ways we could screw this up. You can't just build a collective and dive into a big job. Food is especially dangerous. How and where is it being prepared? We had to think about the kitchens people were cooking in at home, how they understood best practices for safely handling food. We needed to do taste testing, and eventually think about branding and marketing.”



The Catering Collective has been embraced by staff and volunteers, with meetings and smaller community events being catered by one or more of the women in the collective. I had the privilege of eating fantastic Indian food during my participation in a steering committee meeting in May of 2019. At the end of the meal, a card was passed around, asking attendees to rate the food and offer suggestions. The most fascinating aspect was the push for people to criticize the food, to offer honest assessments, something that seems refreshingly out of place in the context of a community-based initiative.

There is something profound in The Corner's ability to embrace experts, including professional repair people and dietitians, in developing new initiatives, while always being driven by the skills and untapped ambitions of community residents. At both 200 and 240 Wellesley, The Corner empowers people who might not otherwise see themselves as leaders or entrepreneurs. This moves beyond older models of community-building, as The Catering Collective pushes and challenges people to understand the complexity and risk associated with putting themselves out there in the world.

The Corner can provide more than just a platform for small businesses. It could more meaningfully reach out to local community members to bring together groups that share unique or uncommon interests. They could develop new approaches to helping people promote their skills and talents, to try and organically bring together groups who might not otherwise meet.

Getting people out of the house to share their unique values, traditions and talents can build cross-cultural interactions that community hubs often struggle to put in place. Whether that is having The Catering Collective provide meals for The Spring Gathering – an annual community consultation – or bringing together unique combinations of volunteer artists, craftspeople, and storytellers to provide new programs, The Corner has a chance to continue developing its powerful model for community collaboration.

This is a unique model of cultural entrepreneurship, one that privileges social, political, and cultural values, rather than monetary value, providing novel ways of building bottom-up collaborations whose success is the result of often untapped abundances of passion, skill, and patchwork care.





### 3 Bringing the World to The Corner to Overcome Unmet Needs Now and Tomorrow

One of the biggest challenges facing The Corner is the fact that St. James Town's population is going to look wildly different in 20 years, and again 20 years after that. It is impossible to predict the way that a city like Toronto will change. The design of future buildings, the development of new services, and how to know which kinds of medical, mental health, and social work staff and volunteers are going to best represent and care for residents, is unpredictable.

What is concerning is how to make sure that current and future populations feel like programming and services are geared towards everyone. Many staff members are worried that The Corner's space feels like it only caters to a kind of stereotype of St. James Town. It seems too geared only for the poor, unappealing to more affluent groups, but also sometimes fails to adequately address the needs and experiences of diverse gender, age, and cultural groups. For instance, more than one staff member described to me the difficulty of getting middle-aged men to join programming. This is especially true in the context of addiction and trauma issues. These are men who might not know that opportunities exist, both for leisure and treatment, to get them out of the isolation that comes with a number of physical and mental health conditions. Not to mention the fact that this group is far more likely to be in denial that they have one or more problems in the first place:

*"We can't care for them if we don't know they exist, or where they are. Stage of life is often critical too, just as important as language and cultural barriers."*

The underlying assumption was that new approaches to engaging potential program and service providers might inform a more nuanced approach to engaging fluctuating, or even unknown, populations in St. James Town. One approach is to reach out to people outside of St. James Town to provide programming. By reaching out to the unique talents and areas of expertise of people across the GTA and beyond, it might be possible to provide niche programming for people who don't fit into the most common community health and social service need areas. Bringing the world to St. James Town helps better account for local and personal needs and experiences that one city neighbourhood may not have the capacity to account for on its own. Broadening the geographic scope for who provide services would allow The Corner to more meaningfully engage with unknown populations to come.



## 4 The Virtue of Cacophony

There is no such thing as complete privacy at The Corner. Bathroom doors are open, and sound bleeds across and between event spaces, clinical offices, management offices, front-of-house, staff area, and everywhere else. Staff and volunteers all described the fact that, at first, finding themselves in the cacophony was a challenge. Yet, at the same time, they nearly all pointed to how quickly the noise and chaos faded away into a lively background hum:

“It’s there, it’s always there. But I never really mind, and rarely notice. Nobody does.”

The buzz of The Corner at both 200 and 240 Wellesley, and the surrounding residential apartments, parks, and streets, makes for a unique experience that almost everyone seems to adapt to. The very fact that this adaptation is possible means that The Corner is working. For some, The Corner’s cacophony is a sign that everyone and everything is, and always will be, accessible to everyone else. The cacophony is what lets you know it’s almost always okay to knock on any door and talk to any person walking by. The accessibility that comes with such tight and noisy spaces needs to be harnessed, because it reflects the reality of community-building, and the messiness of human interactions and connections.

This is especially true at The Corner’s 240 location, in which programs unfold in a single open-concept room. The tool library, Repair Cafés, knitting workshops and other programs unfold with a relatively steady flow of people coming in and out. During knitting groups, there is often someone who sits at a table, welcoming people who want their clothes or other household materials mended, or other ideas for repurposing these materials. Staff and volunteers are adamant about the benefit of letting programs and services overlap with one another, believing this to be more representative of what communities are, and how they operate. Putting up arbitrary divisions between the multiple programs, services and spaces would, for several reasons, diminish the value of what The Corner does, and who it is meant to serve.

In shaping The Corner 2.0, it will be important to lean into the virtue of cacophony, to own it as a central character trait, and key experience of what makes The Corner not only unique, but essential.





## 5 People Driven, Not Professional Imposition

Walking into The Corner, one is immediately struck that it can feel scattered and a little disorganized. For staff and residents, it takes time to accept that The Corner does not operate like other community organizations. Staff, volunteers and residents move in and around each other, the flow of bodies, tasks, and objectives seemingly unclear in the direction they are headed:

“Coming from a more focused work environment, it has been such a challenge getting used to working here, to knowing what my day to day roles, responsibilities are going to be.”

What is most surprising is how many people seem embrace that work is so often scattered and unpredictable:

“I will say, okay, I am going to sit down and finish writing this up for the next thirty-five minutes. Two hours later I’m in the back room organizing supplies and running an errand with a resident.”

A therapist from Sherbourne Health, who comes in once a week to meet with clients, suggested that The Corner pushes the boundaries of what professionalism is. In her mind, overly “stuffy” health and social service environments feel as if they are incapable of being driven by human needs and experiences. Kids, adults, and seniors all mentioned the fact that they love that everyone at The Corner will stop what they are doing to help someone in the moment. The suggestion always seemed to be that paperwork, menial tasks, and even pre-scheduled meetings, are less important than being present with people in a moment of need. These needs could be serious medical concerns or housing crises, but they can also be unexpected moments to laugh, cry, and otherwise talk about personal lives:

“It’s simple really. You want to know what this place lives and breathes, and what other places can learn from it? ‘Less Professionalism, More Human Connection’”

In a certain sense, The Corner needs to embrace that its professionalism is different, one that is people and compassion-centered, in a way that showcases and sells the vibrancy, complexity, and emotionally wrenching work of opening its doors to St. James Town. The challenge, of course, is in framing this not as a lack of skill and knowledge, not as a lack of programming or careful planning, but as an application of finely honed expertise that facilitates the removal of needless barriers between staff, volunteers, and residents. This is the only way to truly showcase The Corner, the real experiences that shape how and why this place is so critical, and why it can serve as a model for similar initiatives outside St. James Town, the GTA, and beyond.



## DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Design Principles take Insights and turn them into more directive statements about how to overcome challenges, and shape new opportunities, for moving into a future state. In the case of The Corner 2.0, the early Design Principles presented below are meant to serve as a set of necessary guidelines for beginning a discussion about what the near and long-term future should look and feel like for residents, service providers, and for potential partners.

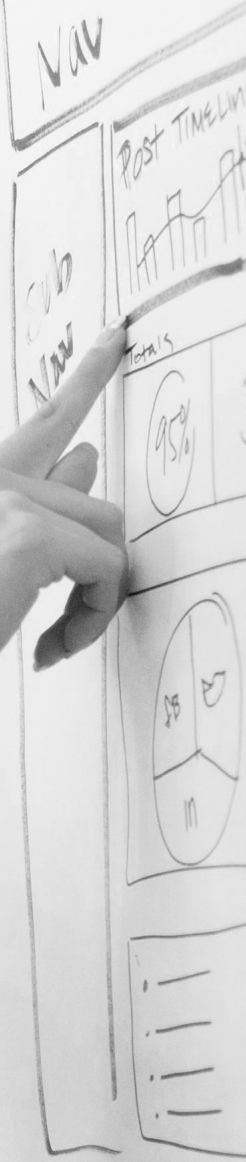
### 1 Design Space that Provides Chaotic Blank Canvases

The Corner 2.0 needs to evolve with the times, but should never lose sight of the beautiful chaos of St. James Town as its driving force. Infrastructure, services, fundraising, and programming initiatives must reflect a neighbourhood that is never one thing, and that will never settle down. Key to this is to continue avoiding assigning spaces to individuals, organizations, or service providers. Because you cannot cater to every possible social, cultural, economic, and religious experience, spaces need to always feel like blank canvases, just waiting to be imbued with meaning by the passions of those who occupy and collaborate within them. By not predefining what a space is, or who it is for, it is much easier to empower people to make it their own, as they work through the physical, social, and emotional dimensions of community health and service provision.

### 2 Cast a Wider Programming Net

Shape programming based on the real needs of St. James Town. This means developing stronger tools and procedures for understanding the experiences, values, and needs of invisible members of the community. This will help better target programming gaps, but also inform a richer understanding of best approaches to finding the right people to facilitate those programs. At the same time, see this as an opportunity to reach out to other sites and service providers in St. James Town who might be better suited to serve identified groups. It might be the case that the current space makes some programming impossible, so reach out and redefine how you think of where and under what circumstances The Corner exists.





Make porous the walls between 200 Wellesley and the rest of St. James Town. See this as just one location where The Corner's novel approach to community hubs can meaningfully connect people. At the same time, develop a more involved process of finding talent, experts, and support systems that will truly improve the individuals, groups, and environments of St. James Town. Critically, a process for more meaningfully recruiting program facilitators from across the GTA and beyond is going to be necessary.

### **3 Build Entrepreneurial Partnerships**

Designing the future of The Corner requires a much richer sense of what it means to empower individuals to benefit their communities. Develop innovative approaches to public and private partnerships that will help residents develop, harness, and translate skills into small business, arts, and activist initiatives. Rather than just thinking of The Corner as a service provider, see it more and more as a platform from which to train residents to become active participants in meaningfully shaping what St. James Town is, and what it should become in the near and distant future.

### **4 Promote an Ever-Evolving Diversity**

Excite and provoke potential partners from government, industry, and community development, by designing a promotional language driven by an embrace of the unpredictability of who does, and who might, make up the St. James Town population. Refuse to generalize who makes up this community. Rather, frame the ever-evolving nature of St. James Town as the central point of both challenge and opportunity for potential partners, funders, service providers, and innovators.

### **5 Design Spaces that Welcome Everyone and Anyone Home**

Building spaces, services, and programs for a chaotic and evolving community is never going to be easy. Avoid trying to provide for the experiences of every possible cultural, social, religious, or political organization that might utilize the services provided at The Corner. Rather, design facilities, services, and programs that continue to evolve the blurred boundary between home and community that makes this such a special place. This means evolving your relationship with the rest of the network of service providers and private organizations that seek to provide better and more agile spaces, program opportunities, and access to untapped community members of St. James Town who could benefit from more collaborative efforts between The Corner and its neighbours.

**LOVE YOUR  
NEIGHBOUR**





## **CONCLUSION:**

The above insights and design principles are attempts at revealing and reframing the current realities, challenges, and opportunities facing The Corner. They piece together a more nuanced story of what The Corner is, what it needs to do, who it needs to serve, and the extent to which it is doing these things effectively. This is a truly grassroots organization, one that provides a unique and collaborative model of what community hubs can and should look like. Yet, The Corner is hitting a threshold, one that requires it to transform and reimagine core principles and practices, while also more fully embracing its unique model of service delivery. The Corner needs to grow and evolve without losing its people and compassion first approach that has allowed it to create a unique and flexible model of health and social service provision.

As a result, these insights and design principles are meant to serve as a platform on which to tell the next chapter in The Corner's story. The Corner 2.0 is only possible, in my opinion, if we embrace the nuances noted in this document. The Corner should never become an overly professionalized, or even stable, community service provider. In fact, it needs to see itself as a collaborator, not a provider at all. At the same time, an increased, overly buttoned down, professionalism could risk providing a disservice to the staff, volunteers, and residents that make The Corner such a unique and innovative operation.

I caution everyone at The Corner to take seriously the value of leaning into the rich and, at times, quirky characteristics noted in this document, as they are the best way to begin building a foundation for meaningful growth. The Corner needs to grow on its own terms, and needs to see itself, warts and all, as truly deserving to state its unique needs, and to carve out its own approach to finding the right partners and pathways for getting where it wants to go.





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