

THE CORNER@240:

AN IMPROVISATIONAL AND COLLABORATIVE SPACE OF SUSTAINABILITY

CAMERON MICHAEL MURRAY, WITH
ADDITIONAL RESEARCH AND WRITING
FROM GEORGINA ALFORD



SHARE & REUSE



SWAP

ATE

NEED

SOMETHING?

WHY DON'T YOU
BORROW IT...

REHOME

REUSE

FIX
IT

REPURPOSE

REPAIR

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability as Catalyst for Unexpected Community Connections

The Corner@240 is a newly opened shared space that extends The Corner's overarching principles and unique model of community building. This model, first developed through the 200 Wellesley St. E location, is based on a grassroots approach to community action, where the always changing social, cultural and economic dynamics of St. James Town create a flexible understanding of the services and programs that best serve resident needs. The Corner@240 represents a bridge between these foundations and the future of urban community building. This future will be shaped by a deep appreciation of the entangled relationship between social, health and environmental factors in determining how best to support increasingly vulnerable 21st century human populations.

The Corner@240 is driven by a unique emphasis on environmental action, an often overlooked aspect of health and wellness in urban communities. In debates around community building and public health, the environment tends to take on the role of something that acts upon community health and wellness. It is rare that the environment is directly engaged, treated as an entangled element of community health that can be acted upon itself. The Corner@240 is designed to become a catalyst for environmental change at the local level, by turning residents into active participants who link their environmental footprint with the health of themselves, their family, and the world around them. Emphasizing on the 3Rs—in this case referring to Reduce, Reuse and Repair—The Corner@240 narrows the scale of climate change, sustainability and related environmental crises to the local level. Through its Library of Things, repair workshops and other programs, this is a space that enables residents to take action in small but impactful ways, viewing themselves as arbiters of measurable environmental change.

The Corner@240 is a catalyst in another sense, in terms of the ways in which it brings people together in unexpected collaborations. This represents a key difference between The Corner@240 and The Corner@200. The original site at 200 Wellesley St. E provides broad services to meet the needs of individuals, families and social organizations. It represents



THIS IS A LOGO WE DESIGNED
FOR THE HUB

•What do you think about it?

•Any suggestions on the colours /
design / concept?

•Do you have other ideas?





The Corner's grassroots model of community building through a flexible and ever-changing combination of social workers, physicians, therapists and newcomer service providers. The Corner@240, on the other hand, flips this, bringing a diverse combination of residents together to engage in programs geared towards meeting a single collective goal: long-term local sustainability.

The Corner@240 challenges St. James Town to learn DIY skills that can reduce the neighbourhood's environmental footprint. People learn to reuse, recycle, repair and reimagine household items, while embracing unexpected ways to come together as cross-cultural collaborators. The Corner@240 is, more than anything, a space of improvisation and collaboration, one driven by a deep rooted interest in improving the physical, social and environmental health of St. James Town.

VARIATIONS ON A THEME:

Programs to Build Experts through Experience

What follows is an introduction to individual programs and services available at The Corner@240. The goal is to reveal the unique ways in which The Corner@240 extends the grassroots model of community building that has long shaped The Corner's core vision.

The Library of Things

The Library of Things is the foundation on which The Corner@240 operates. It is open every day of the week and provides access to a wide range of tools, kitchen equipment, sports and camping gear, as well as board games and other recreational offerings. These items are central to the programs and services offered at 240 Wellesley St. E., but can also be brought back to people's homes for repair projects.

Most impressive is the range of tools available, many of which are displayed out in the open along one of the walls inside the 240 Wellesley space. This is significant because the openness of the tool display is the first sign that, more than anything, this is a space dedicated to a unique philosophy of sharing. People share these tools, equipment and other materials, but they also share knowledge, sometimes in unexpected ways and at unexpected moments.

As people determine which tools best fit their needs, volunteers and fellow residents are on hand to provide or ask for advice. Yet, the Library of Things can also serve as the foundation



on which new relationships are built, as conversations shift from the task at hand to other aspects of people's shared experiences in St. James Town. This is critical to the overall philosophy of sharing that drives how The Corner@240 brings the neighbourhood together, building a stronger community along the way.

Sharing is important for a number of reasons, including the fact that sharing reduces the overall consumption and waste of tools, accessories and household items. At the same time, the model of sharing used by The Corner@240 is one based on a unique understanding of the relationship between sharing, trust and cross-cultural engagement. To avoid penalizing community members if a tool was lost or broken, Corner@240 has designed a waiver that navigates other ways in which people can re-pay through, among other things, volunteer service.

The Repair Café

The Repair Café Toronto is a grassroots volunteer organization in Toronto that facilitates repair workshops at a number of community hubs across the city. The Repair Café is uniquely suited to the Corner@240's overarching philosophy, especially in the flexibility of how it operates. The Cafés are set up almost like classes, but classes where people are free to speak, ask questions, or continue to work away at stuff on the side. An instructor presents a very general initial lecture before letting people take apart and look inside a piece of equipment. Residents might bring in their own household items, but there are also other items made available. The goal is to give everyone a sense for the multiple ways a problem can be interpreted. The instructor does not walk around telling people exactly what to do, but allows everyone to fumble through the process of taking something apart, determining the source of a problem and putting it back together.

What makes this so impressive are the kinds of conversations you hear along the way. People are broken into small groups, each working with a different item. Across cultural and language barriers, they find ways to communicate, to ask questions of one another, and to quickly begin to understand who has what skills to get the job done. Groups ask each other questions, and the instructor fades into the background, just another equal participant in the repair process.



Knitting with Tea

A quiet and contemplative Friday afternoon session with the Knitting with Tea group brings a welcome conclusion to a work week. The Knitting with Tea group was a one off experiment, one that organizers were unsure was going to get off the ground. Slowly, but surely, those who came the first week tended to come back and others joined as the first four or five sessions unfolded. Like the Repair Cafés and Tool Library, the Knitting and Tea group is non-hierarchical. There is an instructor, but the goal is to emphasize the different skills and qualities brought by everyone. You are as likely to see someone who has never held a pair of needles as you are someone in the midst of their 15th scarf for the winter. Supplies are available, or people can bring in their own works in progress.

While the knitting group works and chats, either with an instructor or a series of YouTube videos, there is also someone who comes in at the same time to repair clothing. As is always the case with The Corner, the space is inherently multipurpose. Women, families, even a couple men come in to have their jeans and jackets repaired, or merely assess the damage and see what else might be done to a piece to avoid it finding a new home in a landfill. The knitting and mending groups are not separate, they are overlapping one another.

COMMUNITY
REDUCE
AND
REUSE

CONCLUSION:

A Space for Sustainable Environments and Cross-Cultural Collaboration

A Non-Hierarchical Model of Learning and Collaboration

Like The Corner@200, The Corner@240 does not privilege experts over resident experiences in shaping its reimagined understanding of how to Reduce, Reuse and Repair the materials of everyday life. There are perhaps some people who may have more technical knowledge than others and they may offer advice and show people the “steps” they must take, yet, fundamentally it is a process of self-learning. The result is a non-hierarchical model of local sustainability. Everyone, volunteers, staff and residents are in a continual process of learning something new, regardless of prior experience mending and repairing, or just thinking about their environmental impact. The process of learning, one participant told us, is as simple as taking items apart and putting them back together again. As they put it,

“learning how to do things here, you break it eight times and the ninth time and the tenth time you learn”.

Multiple participants in the Library of Things, Repair Café and Knitting with Tea sessions recognised this. They had never previously thought about the global impact of simply replacing, rather than repurposing appliances, clothing, games, tools, and other things they use on a daily basis. Becoming interested, even in small ways, in the repair and maintenance of everyday items, is a uniquely empowering experience, one that can be as meaningful for the economically well off as those struggling to make ends meet.

The ad-hoc learning model is also represented in the ways in which The Corner@240 facilitates relationships building between staff, volunteers and residents. This is a flexible and contemplative space through which relationships are built. In one instance, we watched two men dissect a radio. Over the course of two hours, we saw their bond form silently. One held a lamp down for the other to see inside the radio, pointing out places where the underlying problem might reveal itself. Across language and cultural barriers, the physical language of repair was bringing them together. This is a language that confronts people with a collision of social, financial and environmental incentives to maintaining, repairing and repurposing the materials of everyday life.



The Environment as a Unifying Challenge Across Cultural, Health and Economic Status

The Corner@240 breaks down barriers of culture and commerce in part because the environmental crisis is universal, and everyone can benefit from taking greater ownership of their role as individuals and as part of communities. As one person put it:

“This kind of work is challenging because it will cost you money to fix things, not including your time.”

Yet, despite the difficulties faced in fixing the seemingly ‘unfixable,’ people have, in the short time since The Corner@240 opened its doors, formed an attachment to the space, and have kept coming back. As a result, they are recalculating a set of values which not only bring them together, but which can be shared with others to improve the community as a whole.

The Corner@240 provides a valuable contrast to The Corner@200. Driven by the same spirit of improvisation, collaboration and grassroots community-building, the two spaces provide powerful complements to one another. The contrasts make sense, as The Corner@200 is first and foremost dedicated to overcoming serious physical, social and mental health challenges facing a diverse and imbalanced urban neighbourhood. The Corner@200, out of necessity, has to consider targeted groups for its services and programs, dividing people by identifiable needs and challenges.

The Corner@240’s unique strength comes from its narrower focus on programs and services for sustainability. In this way, The Corner@240 asks St. James Town residents to think of their experience as it relates to much larger scale crises unfolding around the globe. The act of mending a pair of jeans, or borrowing tools to fix a toaster, becomes an inherently political act, one where the local and the global blend into one another. Yet, the emphasis on sustainability can be deceptively narrow, as the real value of The Corner@240 is the unique ways it brings unexpected combinations of residents together. There is something almost universal in these sustainability initiatives, programs that highlight that environmental degradation can impact everyone. As a result, there is a much richer opportunity for people to meet across culture, language, social and economic status. At the same time, the loose structures of The Corner@240’s programs empowers people to take ownership of their unique skills and limitations in shaping the contours of cross-cultural connection and collaboration.



The Corner@200 | The Corner@240

AN INNOVATIVE SPACE TO COLLABORATE AND INSPIRE CHANGE



A World Within a Block.

St. James Town Community Corner (The Corner)

105 – 200 Wellesley Street E.,
Toronto, ON
M4X 1G3

[T] 416-964-6657

[E] info@stjamestown.org

WWW.STJAMESTOWN.ORG

    @thecornersjt