

Equitable Access to Toronto's High Park



Figure 1: Drone image of Grenadier Pond in High Park [1]

History

For thousands of years the site of Toronto (a name derived from Tkaronto which in the Mohawk language means "where there are trees standing in the water") has been a living and meeting place for many First Nations peoples. During most of that time, what we now call Ontario was covered with two million hectares of savanna (grasslands with sparse tree cover). When European settlers arrived, they colonized the savanna, deeming it less work to convert to farmland than the woodlands. Less than 10,000 hectares now remain. [2]

The site of High Park (See Figure 1) is home to a unique subset of the remaining savanna, the Black Oak Savanna. The Black Oak Savanna in High Park (See Figure 2) is the result of active land management strategies on the part of various indigenous cultures that occupied the land for thousands of years prior to European colonization [3]. These Indigenous stewards used controlled burns [4] (See Figure 3) and other techniques to create a unique ecosystem that supported a diversity of flora and fauna and the 65,000 inhabitants of Tkaronto at the time.

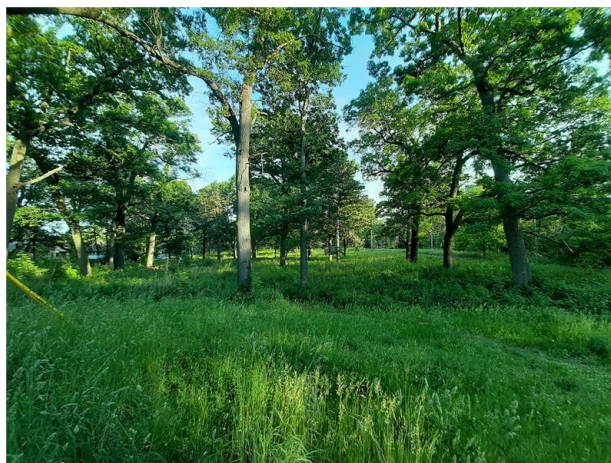


Figure 2: High Park Black Oak Savanna. Photo: Ted Nolan



Figure 3: Prescribed burn 2015. Photo Oliver Pauk [5]

In 1873 John Howard, a city of Toronto engineer, deeded 66 hectares of Black Oak Savanna to the city after ensuring it would forever remain “for the free use, benefit, and enjoyment of the citizens of the City of Toronto.” [6]

Since then, the park has grown to nearly triple its original size, now at almost 160 hectares. Today, High Park is one of Toronto’s largest and most beloved public green spaces, offering a blend of natural forests, landscaped gardens, cultural landmarks, recreational facilities, and walking trails. During its growth, many popular amenities were added including a zoo, sports fields, a swimming pool, groomed turf areas for picnicking, concrete edging on the ponds, non-native gardens and trees, and roadways to access it all. Unfortunately, this came at the cost of much of High Park’s Black Oak Savanna [6].

In the 1970s, biological research saw a shift in public opinion returning to the value Indigenous people place on the Black Oak Savanna. A large area of the park was designated by the City of Toronto as an *Environmentally Significant Area* [7]. In 2000, the city also returned to the Indigenous stewardship methods of prescribed burns (See Figure 3).

Finding a Balance in Addressing an Accessibility Issue

The current stewardship strategy aims to return the landscape from a European-style manicured park to its pre-settlement status – a landscape cultivated over thousands of years by the local Indigenous people. High Park’s remaining Black Oak Savanna captures the historically human story of a landscape that once covered huge swaths of southern Ontario but was largely eliminated through colonization. Your team will be taking a small part in a much larger project to recognize the importance of the history of the land we currently occupy. This project aims to maintain and enhance the efforts to restore High Park to its pre-colonial environmental status, while maintaining the benefits that the park can and does bring to the communities around it.

Your task is to balance that set of priorities with the practical needs of park users to move around the park. You are to **select one and only one** of the following routes:

- Route 01: Keele subway station to the Nature Centre

- Route 02: Grenadier Café to Grenadier Pond

For your chosen project, design a single route that finds a balance between the restoration and conservation of the Black Oak Savanna, the needs of the community for amenities, and the equitable access for users (See Figure 4). Finding this balance forms the challenge of this project.

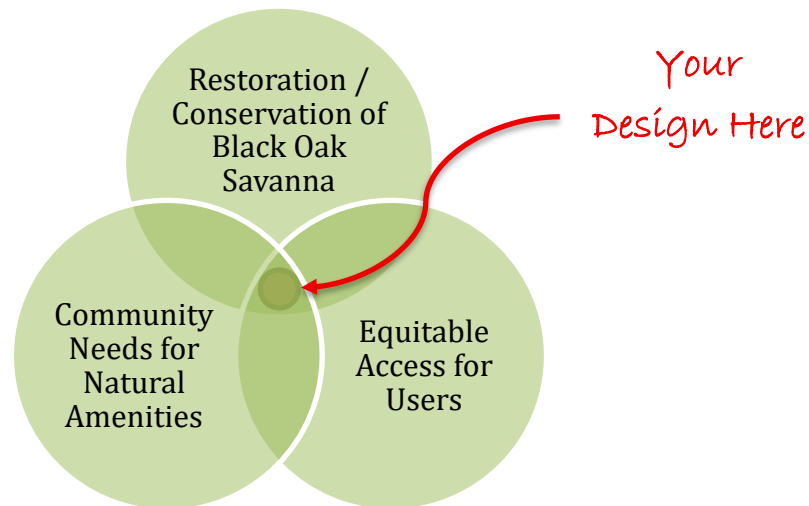


Figure 4: Where your design fits with respect to the three different goals of the High Park space.

The Nature Centre and the Grenadier Pond are major features of the park for visitors. Both locations are accessible through multiple paths, each with different characteristics. Some paths wind through the Black Oak Savanna surrounding the visitor with tranquility, but are difficult for many people to navigate. Some paths are accessible to nearly all people and vehicles through their paved roads and sidewalks, but at the cost of the Black Oak Savanna. Unfortunately, there is little overlap between these two types of paths.

The Nature Centre is under renovation to become more accessible, but areas of the park itself are not as accessible. The client wants to close that gap.

Your client, in keeping with the principles of Universal Design, is looking for design solutions that maximize accessibility of these paths while minimizing the negative impacts on the natural surroundings. Some populations who struggle to access the more natural paths are:

- Seniors with mobility challenges,
- Persons with mobility and/or sensory impairment,
- Families with children, especially those using strollers or wagons.

In honouring the Indigenous tradition of speaking for those without a voice, including the land and its environment, your designs should give voice to the park. No one benefits from making the park more accessible if you, in doing so, destroy the Black Oak Savanna. The best way for your team to gain this personal experience is to conduct one or more site visits to the park.

Route Selection and Design considerations

Holding to the mission to keep High Park affordable for citizens of, and visitors to, Toronto, the client will prioritize low-cost, or cost-effective solutions. However, they also want to see a wide range of potential solutions, including those that seem too expensive. Any solutions at the more expensive end of the cost spectrum should be coupled with cost-mitigation strategies.

Choosing a route and visiting the site: both paths are important to the park. The client prefers you to work on the route that most interests your team. Your team should have open discussions in deciding on a route, and you may use site visits strategically in making that decision. Site visits will also be very important for your team documenting the service environment, as the descriptions below are not detailed enough for design.

Route 1: Keele Subway station to the High Park Nature Centre

The Nature Centre is a popular destination for families [8]. Those travelling to the site often arrive from the Keele Subway station (Bloor St. W and Parkside Dr.) and traverse a pathway through the forest, which includes Black Oak Savanna, to get there. Unfortunately, as you can see in the posted video [9], these paths are not easy to navigate by those with mobility issues, or mobility devices, including strollers and wagons. To access the Nature Centre, these people are required to travel an alternative path along Bloor Street West and other roadways. Your challenge is to find a way to enable them to traverse a path through the forest to reach the Nature Centre without destroying the tranquility or coverage of the forest. You are not required to use the blue dotted path in Figure 5 specifically. Note that the dotted path crosses Spring Road. Spring Road cannot be blocked or removed as utility task vehicles (aka Gators) use it to access the retention ponds. Finally, some paths similar to the dotted path cross the dogs off leash area. These areas cannot be moved and must be considered or avoided entirely for any designs considered.

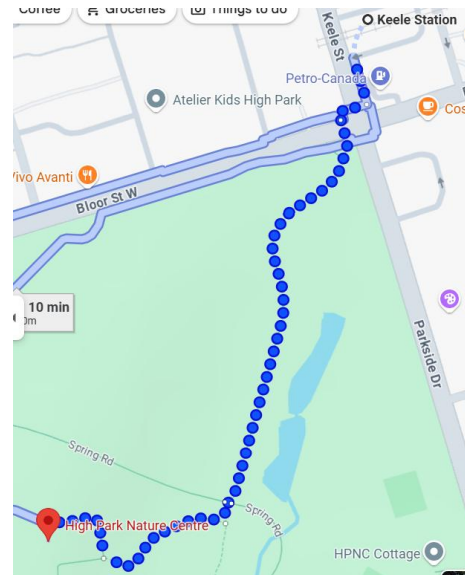


Figure 5: Route 1 - One path from Keele subway station to the High Park Nature Centre [10]

Route 2: Grenadier Café to Grenadier Pond

The Grenadier Cafe is a common park destination for a meal and drink, and is also a common waypoint for children travelling from the Nature Centre down to Grenadier Pond. Leaders of the Nature Centre running their various programs often guide both children and adults between these two points. There are roadways that connect the café with the pond, but travelling along roadways as a pedestrian, particularly for children and/or those moving slowly, is neither relaxing nor safe. Even on days when cars are banned in the park, cyclists on the roads can pose a danger to pedestrians.

There are paved pedestrian paths, but as you can see from the posted video [11], they are quite steep and would prove a challenge for those with a stroller, a wheeled mobility device, or those with respiratory challenges. The current pathways are also a sanitized version of nature with groomed grass not in keeping with the desire to encourage / increase Black Oak Savanna in areas of the park. Your challenge is to find a way for park visitors to traverse between these two points while experiencing the history and purpose of the park. You are not required to use the dotted path highlighted in Figure 6. Note that West Road is a road busy with both motor vehicle and bicycle traffic. This must be taken into account in any considered designs.

Client

There are many institutions and organizations charged with the stewardship of High Park. However, the High Park Nature Centre holds special status as your client. They are a City of Toronto organization with the mission to connect the Toronto community with nature [8]. Route one is an extremely common route taken by adults and children to get to the Centre. Route 2 is a common route taken by individuals who participate in the various programs offered by the Nature Centre. At the conclusion of this project, they will be best positioned to advocate for your design to the City of Toronto and other interest holders.

Please DO NOT contact your client or other interest holders. While these connections are expected practice within the design process, for the purposed of this course we will be reaching out to them on your behalf. You will be prompted later in the term for questions you'd like answered. In the winter team you will be conducting these meetings yourself.

Acknowledgement of Land

We recognize that High Park is located on the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, Anishnabeg, Chippewa, Haudenosaunee, and Wendat peoples. The land is covered by Treaty 13 with the Mississaugas of the Credit and remains home to diverse Indigenous peoples. Any proposed solutions must be developed with respect for the land's cultural and ecological significance.

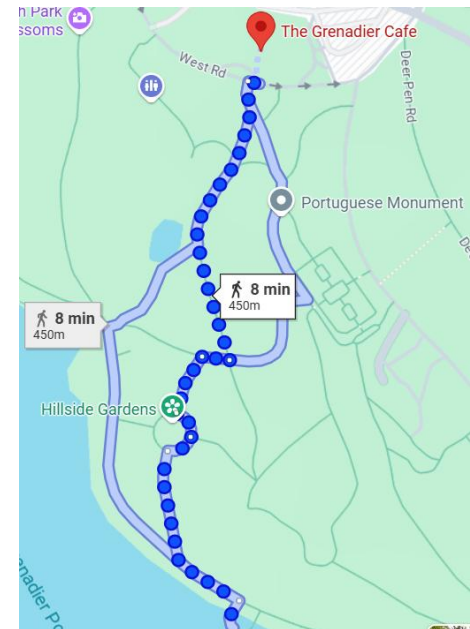


Figure 6: Route 2 – One path from the Grenadier Café to the Grenadier Pond [12]

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