Youth Spaces Project

Safe Youth Cowichan
Executive Summary

From 2012-2014, Safer Futures and Safe Youth Cowichan (SYC) conducted Youth Safety Dialogues in response to community concerns around increasing issues of youth safety in the Cowichan Region. The dialogues involved over 500 youth from all areas of the region. Findings from the dialogues highlighted the importance of fostering communities that value and include youth in decision making processes especially when designing and developing youth friendly spaces, programs, facilities, activities and transportation.

The aim of the Youth Spaces Project was to build a sense of belonging for youth by designing and developing innovative spaces within community parks where youth feel safe and welcomed to express their diversity without fear, shame or violence.

The project was funded by the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General through a Civil Forfeiture Crime Prevention and Crime Remediation Grant and was carried out by SYC, with the Safer Futures program of Cowichan Women Against Violence Society and in collaboration with the CVRD Community Safety Advisory Commission, Cowichan Green Community Youth Outreach Team, Municipality of North Cowichan and the City of Duncan. SYC began creating awareness about the importance of belonging for youth and how they needed to be consulted in decisions that affect them and especially in designing and developing in the local community.

We know that when youth feel a sense of belonging and connection, and when they are engaged and supported by community partners and organizations, that these conditions create important protective factors. This project aimed to address prevention of youth criminality in the Cowichan Valley through engaging at risk youth to foster and enhance protective factors through involving them in a community project designed to:

- increase attachment to and belonging in the community,
- provide them with a voice in the way their community is designed,
- build skills in civic planning, and
- foster the completion of a community project that will research, design and develop safe places for themselves and other youth at risk.

Over the summer of 2016, SYC worked with youth in the Cowichan region to identify community parks where spaces for youth could be created. Two spaces in the central area of Cowichan were identified as key areas as youth were already using these spaces and these were parks where there was evidence of conflicting uses between youth and other community members. SYC consulted with 120 youth to determine what youth would like to see in a space that was created for them. The project also consulted with community members living around and using the parks to address any concerns and garner input into the design process. With these results SYC created a design for a space that could be used by all community members but especially welcomed youth.
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Introduction

Youth use public spaces more than any other subset group in our society however public spaces are almost never planned with youth in mind (Millard 2015) and youth often are not included in the process of designing or developing public spaces. Youth are further excluded from public spaces when they are labelled as loitering while using these spaces unless they are seen to have a structured task or activity they are engaged with. This stigma is applied to youth and this can be particularly damaging to youth at risk.

The Prevention Institute highlights the importance of using public spaces as ways to reduce violence and ways to engage youth in pro social activities. Their evidence points to how parks and recreation facilities that are designed to be family and youth friendly are vital to supporting positive social networks (Prevention Institute, 2015). By creating positive social networks and places where youth are welcome to go it contributes to a sense of belonging which is a vital development milestone for youth.

In 2011, the Cowichan Valley Region suffered the loss of two young women to violence. Local governments, organizations and community members were concerned about youth safety and wanted to find out how they can make youth safer and what they needed to feel safe. This desire was the basis for the Youth Safety Dialogues. Over 500 youth were engaged and asked specifically, what does safety mean to youth, what makes youth feel safe, what do youth do to keep safe and what would help youth to be and feel safer in their communities.

The dialogues explored a range of indicators that tells us about risk and protective factors for youth in the valley. The Youth Dialogues showed us that safety is related to our mental, social and physical environments, and that we have to work on all fronts to change attitudes, behaviours, and make our communities more welcoming and accessible for all.

The dialogues pointed to the need for addressing safety, health and resiliency through engaging youth in a few key areas. These include designing and promoting youth friendly spaces, programs, facilities, activities, and transportation. Findings also highlighted the idea for fostering communities that value and include youth in decision making processes especially when designing and developing within the local community.
**Project Aim**

The Youth Spaces Project aimed to build sense of belonging for youth by designing and developing innovative spaces within community parks where youth feel safe and welcomed to express their diversity without fear, shame or violence. We know that when youth feel a sense of belonging and connection, and when they are engaged and supported by community partners and organizations, that these conditions create important protective factors. This project aimed to address prevention of youth criminality in the Cowichan Valley through engaging at risk youth to foster and enhance protective factors through involving them in a community project designed to: increase attachment to and belonging in the community, provide them with a voice in the way their community is designed, build skills in civic planning, and foster the completion of a community project that will research, design and develop safe places for themselves and other youth at risk.

**Project Activities**

**Project Planning, Development, Recruitment and Outreach**

SYC kicked off the Youth Spaces Project in the spring of 2016 by participating in Youth Action Day. Youth Action Day was an event for successful community groups that promote and provide meaningful opportunities for youth action in the Cowichan Region. SYC gave a presentation to over 700 youth from all areas of the Cowichan Region on the project and how youth could become a SYC member. SYC attended schools and youth leadership groups and invited youth to be actively involved in the Youth Spaces Project.

SYC formed a close partnership with the Youth Outreach (YO) team from the Cowichan Green Community. With the YO team, SYC identified parks where they would specifically like to create youth spaces in. SYC looked at parks where youth were already visiting and parks where youth loitering was an issue. They chose two parks within the core area of the Cowichan Valley, Centennial Park located on First Street and Kin Park on Alderlea Street. They chose Kin Park to focus on first because of the overwhelming support SYC received from surrounding community organizations that were already actively involved with Kin Park.

Planning began by looking at how we would engage youth and get their ideas on what they would like to see in a youth space. The group created an online survey and consultation questions that could engage youth all around the region. Plans were made for conducting focus groups with youth groups and classes in schools and two community events were planned to reach out to youth as well as to community members in general.
Community Partners

SYC is fortunate to have the support of many community partners in all the work they do in the community. This was especially true for the Youth Spaces Project. Kin Park is located in both the Municipality of North Cowichan and the City of Duncan. SYC consulted and worked closely with staff representatives of both local governments. Staff representatives were very supportive in answering questions about by-laws and zoning issues in the community park. They worked with SYC to develop estimates of cost to design ideas and participated in focus groups held with youth.

As mentioned previously, a close partnership was formed with the Youth Outreach (YO) Team from the Cowichan Green Community (CGC). Youth from the YO team actively participated in the design development, focus groups and presentations. Four members of the YO team are now official members of SYC. The CGC has a vested interest in the Youth Spaces Project and it's focus on Kin Park. CGC manages an Urban Farm at Kin Park and runs programs for youth and community members at the park. They were key partners in helping develop the design especially since they hope to use the space in their youth programming. CGC has also made a commitment to maintaining the park with the support of the Municipality of North Cowichan who assumes maintenance and management for the park.

The Community Safety Advisory Commission (CSAC) of the Cowichan Valley Regional District has been a key supporter in all of SYC ‘s work and assumed a consultative role in this project. Project updates were provided to the commission by SYC and feedback and suggestions were made throughout the duration of the project. Commission members provided linkages where necessary to other organizations and local governments.

The North Cowichan/Duncan RCMP detachment’s newly developed TRACE unit provided support to the project by addressing any safety concerns within the parks and the design of the Youth Spaces themselves. They see the youth gathering space as beneficial. Historically, Kin Park has had issues with drug use and homelessness. The TRACE Unit views the addition of the youth space as contributing positively to the park.

Island Savings Centre was consulted for it’s expertise in recreation and youth programs. Staff representatives took part in meetings and offered financial support in building a play box for the Youth Space. They also are located one block from the park and see the youth space as a space to utilize for outreach programs.
Youth Consultation of Design and Development

From June until the end of August 2016, SYC consulted with over 120 youth in leadership groups, at community events and online to ask them what they would like to see in a space created for them.

An online survey was launched through SYC’s social media platforms throughout the summer in conjunction with other consultation activities. In June, SYC attended schools and conducted workshops with youth. These workshops not only collected feedback on the youth space design but also helped to create awareness with youth about designing a space that would be most inclusive to the different people using the space. Youth in the schools visited the park where the youth space would be built which allowed the youth to take into context the greater area of the park and the neighbourhood when considering what they would like to see in the youth space design.

In July 2016, SYC was invited by the Duncan Business Improvement Area to participate in a street festival called Duncan Day. SYC engaged with a variety of community members and educated the community on why it’s important to include youth and received design ideas from youth and adults. The event was such a success that SYC decided to hold their own fun community event.

At the end of August 2016, SYC hosted *Chalk Up the City* in downtown Duncan City Square. SYC wanted to create an event that was a family friendly event and bring inter generational groups together to create awareness about the importance of including youth in public spaces and community events. They facilitated a whole block of chalk art, cooked food by donation, and hosted a scavenger hunt throughout the downtown core engaging youth with local business owners.

Based on the feedback received during these activities, SYC and the YO team, created a design that would utilize the most common themes threaded throughout the responses we heard from the community.
Community Support for Design

After the creation of the design SYC wanted to get community support for the design concept. Although consultation had already taken place they knew the importance of hearing the neighbourhood's voices throughout the whole duration of the project. SYC canvassed the neighbourhood over two evenings in December 2016 and posted informational signs throughout the park. They knocked on 21 residences next to the park and received positive feedback. Many of them wanted to see the park used more. They agreed that as more people use the park it becomes a more active and friendly place. Only one house indicated that they were not interested in speaking with us. Residents who were not home were left with a information package and contact information where they could provide feedback or raise concerns. The project coordinator also received positive support via emails in response to the informational signs left in the park.

SYC met several times with the building managers at the apartment building and left information packages for each of the building residents. The project coordinator has consulted with a couple of the residents in the building throughout the duration of the project to receive feedback on the project and design.

![Image of a park and a gathering space in Kin Park for community which welcomes youth. We are looking for feedback on our design concept. We will be canvassing the neighbourhood to engage community members. Look for us soon!](image-url)
**Design Summary**

Youth had many different ideas around the social and physical set up of the space. They were really interested in making the space welcoming for youth but they wanted it to be used by all members of the community. Over half of the youth were in support of having the space be one that promotes intergenerational interaction. 90% of the youth providing feedback wanted the space to promote interaction with other community members and other youth.

Youth also came up with ideas about how to engage neighbours, how to get support from the community for the space, establishing a set of rules of conduct for youth on how and when to use the space, how to invite the neighbours to be a part of the process, and how to keep the spaces maintained and prevent vandalism.

The top five things youth wanted to see in the physical aspect of the space included having some kind of shelter, seating, a power source, wifi connection, and they wanted it be visually attractive.

Working with the Parks and Recreation Director of North Cowichan, SYC’s first step is to build a gathering space within the park to see how it is used by community before making any other additions. The gathering space would be situated in the middle of the park for visibility. The design is rather simple. Three groups of natural rocks will be used as seating. Within each pod of rocks there will be solar powered electrical outlets for charging phones or laptops to work on homework.
The existing volleyball court is currently not used often and has raised safety issues due to discarded used sharps being found in the sand. The volleyball court will be replaced with a 3 on 3 basket ball court. A 3 on 3 basketball court takes up less room and provides relief to the over used basketball court at Quamichan Campus of the Cowichan Senior Secondary School.

The CVRD Island Savings Centre has kindly donated a play box to be included in the space. A play box is a box of sports or craft equipment that community members can use for free. Anytime a community member would want to use the equipment, they can call a number to get a code that opens the box. Finally, a sign will be included in the gathering space inviting all community members, but especially welcoming youth to use the space.

The Cowichan Senior Secondary School staff and administration are excited about the potential of the space. They envision using it as an outdoor classroom and a place where their students can be active.

There was some concern on the onset of the project that the gathering space would attract more problematic behaviour such as drug use and people sleeping in the park. Historically, the park has been one that has attracted homeless people and has been used as a thorough fare for a suspected drug house located in the vicinity. However, research shows that the more community members use a public space, it decreases undesirable behaviour. The more community members are involved in a public space the more personal relationships are built. Neighbours that know neighbours are more likely to take care of each other and this includes the physical space of the neighbourhood (City of Ipswich, 2013).

From a Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) perspective, the more people that use the park, the more natural surveillance and ownership of the park is created (Perkins, 2016). The design also meets CPTED principles because the gathering is in a very visible area of the park, provides clear access points, and through maintenance and management it will create a sense of ownership of the space. Currently the park is maintained and managed mostly by the Municipality of North Cowichan. The Cowichan Green Community has also indicated that they would help with maintaining of the space since they see a gathering space very beneficial to their programs they currently run out of the park.
Outcomes and Highlights

The Youth Spaces Project has completed its first phase. The project raised awareness about the inclusion of youth and how as a community it’s important to create a sense of belonging for youth in public spaces. It’s important to note that many of the youth engaged in this project including members of SYC are themselves at risk youth. This project gave youth involved the ability to use their voice, build leadership skills and gave them opportunities to build pro social relationships between themselves and with other youth and adults in the community. The post survey results taken from SYC members indicated that 7 out of 9 of the members agreed that being in the project gave them a sense of belonging. 2 of them indicated that they weren’t sure however all of the members indicated that they felt they had developed leadership skills and made positive relationships.

SYC has made new and lasting partnerships with other organizations in the community. These relationships are built on values that include youth and view their input as paramount to community development. Over 820 youth were engaged in the project and were invited to participate in a decision-making process that encouraged a sense of belonging and sense of safety in the development of public places to express their individuality without shame or fear or violence. At the commencement of Phase 1, SYC and the Youth Spaces Project has a community supported design and the full support of the local government that manages the park. The next phase includes garnering funding for the capital costs to build the space. SYC is in the process of applying for grants and the youth space design is a candidate for consideration in the 2018 local government budget deliberations.

The youth learned through this process that you just can’t build a public space without consultation and context to the greater community. They gained appreciation of the challenges faced by the homeless people who use the park at night and the issue the residents around the park are having with negative behaviour coming from a few individuals. Youth have also realized that the park is situated in a community that is facing many issues including homelessness and substance use.

SYC wanted to create a space that will be welcoming for all and improve the state of the park and hopefully alleviate the problems the park is experiencing. SYC has realized through this project that people experience the built environment differently according to who they are – their social, cultural and economic background. The full diversity of this experience needs to be considered if all users are to be comfortable and feel that a particular space or place belongs to them. As a group and as a community we need to be constantly thinking about inclusion and how people view things through different lenses.
Conclusion

Young people use public spaces more than any other group in community because they often have no where to go, yet these public spaces are often created without youth in mind. The youth involved in this project want to be included in the process of community development. One of the goals of the Youth Spaces project was to bridge the gap between those with decision making powers in how a community is developed with the youth who will most likely be using these public spaces. The project set out to help youth find a way to belong and be included in these decision making processes. This project also educated decision makers around how to meaningfully include diverse youth and the importance of creating a space for the youth to express this diversity in a safe and welcoming environment.

By engaging young people in youth friendly spaces, young people can be invested in their community and can develop a strong sense of ownership and belonging to their communities.
Bibliography


Appendix A: Youth Spaces Feedback survey

What Makes A Great Space For Youth?
1. How old are you?
   ~ 12 ~ 17 ~ 21
   ~ 13 ~ 18 ~ 22
   ~ 14 ~ 19 ~ 23
   ~ 15 ~ 20 ~ 24
   ~ 16 ~ 21 ~ 25
   ~ Other

2. What Gender do you identify as?
   ~ Female
   ~ Male
   ~ Agender
   ~ Bigender
   ~ Transgender
   ~ Other

3. What ethnicity do you identify as?
   ~ First Nations ~ Hispanic
   ~ Caucasian ~ South Asian
   ~ African American ~ Asian
   ~ Inuit ~ Metis
   ~ Other

4. Have you used Kin Park or Centennial Park in the last year?
   ~ Yes
   ~ No
Appendix A: Youth Spaces Feedback survey continued

5. What area of the Cowichan Valley do you live in?

~Duncan ~ North Cowichan ~ Crofton
~ Chemainus ~ Ladysmith ~ Lake Cowichan
~ Cobble Hill ~ Cowichan Station ~ North Oyster
~ Glenora ~ Mill Bay ~ Malahat
~ Youbou ~ Sahtlam ~ Saltair
~ Shawnigan Lake ~ Skutz Falls ~ Other

6. If you indicated that you live outside of the Duncan area, would you use these parks (Kin Park or Centennial Park) if they had a space designed for youth?
   ~ Yes
   ~ No

7. When you vision a perfect space for you i.e. a space you would feel comfortable hanging out in, do you prefer spaces that are just for youth or spaces where people of all generations can interact? Please explain why.

8. Once again, think about the perfect space for you to hang out in, would it be a place where there is lots of opportunity to interact with other people or just a place to chill out on your own?

9. What can we do to ensure that neighbours accept Youth and Youth Spaces in parks?

10. Should the park be accessible by walking, cycling and boarding?
    ~ Yes
    ~ No
11. Please indicate your most frequent mode of transportation?
~ Cycling
~ Walking
~ Transit
~ Boarding
~ Ride from family and friends
~ Driving

12. Should a space for youth have regular activities scheduled? If so please list the type of activities you would like to see in the Park:

13. If there was a space for youth in community parks, what can we do to keep that space clean, safe and free from vandalism?

14. What physical elements would you like to see in a space for youth? Please check all that apply:
~ Wifi ~ Visibility to see the whole park ~ Use after dark
~ Seating ~ Attractive ~ Power
~ Shelter ~ Natural Elements ~ Lighting
~ Displays of Art ~ Other:

15. If you had unlimited resources and the power to create your own space for youth, what would it look like?