



# THE BENTWAY

TORONTO, ONTARIO, CANADA

*Finalist: 2021 ULI Americas Awards for Excellence, Urban Open Space Category*



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The Bentway is a prime model of how to reimagine underused public space in the shadows of 20th-century infrastructure. Through innovative design, the project improves safety and accessibility, introduces new techniques for urban sustainability and resilience, and provides vital amenities and diverse uses for residents and businesses in an increasingly dense downtown.

**Owners:** City of Toronto, The Bentway Conservancy

**Designers:** PUBLIC WORK, Greenberg Consultants Inc.

**Developer:** Waterfront Toronto

**Size:** 2.5 acres (1.0 ha)

*Image cover: (Denise Militzer)*



The Bentway's multiuse path connects to Toronto's network of pedestrian and cycling trails, increasing access to the waterfront. *(Nic Lehoux)*

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## Park Overview

**Until recently, the Gardiner Expressway in Toronto was a point of division, serving as a physical barrier between the city and the waterfront. In 2018, the first phase of the Bentway—a 2.5-acre (1.0 ha) urban park underneath the elevated expressway—opened, creating a new public space with year-round programs and events that also improves the north-south connection to Lake Ontario.**

The linear park, which spans just over one mile (1.75 km) running parallel to the waterfront, knits together seven distinct urban neighborhoods that are home to nearly 100,000 people living within a 10-minute walk of the park. Year-round programming draws residents and visitors to the site. Amenities along the Bentway include two amphitheaters, a summer splash pad, a winter skate trail that weaves between the overpass columns, a multiuse path that connects to surrounding communities, restrooms, and free wi-fi.

As of 2021, the second phase of the project—extending the Bentway to the east to create connections into more neighborhoods—was in the design phase.

The Bentway is more than just a physical space; the Bentway Conservancy operates and manages the park and is dedicated to reimagining how people experience public space. With art installations, interactive signage, community workshops and conversations, recreational amenities, performances, and more, the Bentway is continuously evolving its offerings to best support the surrounding communities. The mission—“to ignite the urban imagination”—plays out through demonstration, experimentation, and regeneration.

Recent Bentway programming has included [a neighborhood-wide exhibition](#) exploring play in the city; a new [artist residency program](#); dialogue about [the past, present, and future of the site](#); and other programs that stretch from beneath the Gardiner Expressway and beyond.

The first phase of the Bentway was just the beginning of a growing civic movement. The Bentway Conservancy is working closely with various agencies of the city of Toronto, private landowners, businesses, residents, and a diverse design team on future expansion sites and [an Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan](#) to guide the complex future of the Gardiner Expressway.

## Social Equity and Community Engagement

An important component of the Bentway is the park access that it provides to many condominium dwellers living in neighborhoods within a 10-minute walk of the site, many of whom may not have access to outdoor spaces or backyards.

A critical piece of the Bentway's development and design included an extensive public process with neighbors, artists, community members, and local organizations. Providing free, open, and welcoming spaces and programs was determined to be essential to allow anyone to enjoy and benefit from the park.

The Bentway sits on the Treaty Lands of the Mississaugas of the Credit and the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat, the Haudenosaunee, the Métis, and many other Indigenous nations. In addition, the first phase of the Bentway is located on lands that are part of the Fort York National Historic Site.

Home to many diverse Indigenous people, the city of Toronto has the largest Indigenous population in the province of Ontario. Programming and activities are designed to acknowledge this history and maintain and celebrate diverse partners and perspectives. For example, the Bentway led [It's All Right Now](#), a citywide public art project and community movement that ran over summer 2020 as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the convener of this project, the Bentway ensured that voices from Black and other BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities, which were disproportionately affected by the pandemic, were foregrounded in this movement.



The Bentway's multiuse path becomes a Skate Trail during the winter season, as cars pass on the Gardiner Expressway overhead. *(Droneography Aerial Imaging)*

The park continually works to be more welcoming and inclusive and launched [Safe in Public Space](#) in fall 2020. Through a variety of programming and community conversations, using the Bentway as a platform for this work, this initiative seeks to understand ways to address safety, new public health challenges, and equity in public spaces. Results from this work will be used to develop a new public-facing tool kit that outlines best practices for making spaces—including the Bentway—safer for everyone.

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## Resilience and Sustainability

The transformation from a 169,000-square-foot (15,700 sq m) brownfield to a safe, clean, and usable public space significantly enhanced the built environment under the Gardiner Expressway. Air quality modeling was used to confirm the safety of the area beneath the expressway. Stormwater is treated on site using native plantings and permeable ground treatments, and topography was created using displaced soil. The paving system throughout the park was created using recycled materials, including construction debris. The importance of sustainability and resilience is evident in the construction and ongoing programming of the Bentway, as numerous activities and events have focused on climate resilience and the environment.

## Funding

A combination of private donors and public funds helped make this park a reality. Local philanthropists Judy and Wilmot Matthews pledged C\$25 million (US\$19.2 million) in 2015 to the city of Toronto to kick-start the project and build the first phase. The project moved forward in collaboration with renowned urban designer Ken Greenberg and cooperation from Mayor John Tory and multiple city departments.

In 2016, the Toronto City Council approved a proposal to form a new independent, nonprofit organization to program and operate the space as a platform for creative practice, public art, and connected urban life called [The Bentway Conservancy](#). The conservancy counts the city of Toronto, city residents, artists, and other supporters as vital partners in its efforts. Funding sources for the conservancy include government grants, donations, corporate partnerships, and event revenue. Expenses, which include those for programming, facilities, communications, design, and staffing and administration costs, reached C\$3.5 million (US\$2.7 million) for the 2020–2021 fiscal year.