

# **An Evaluation of the Sparks Street Mall in Ottawa, Ontario**

By

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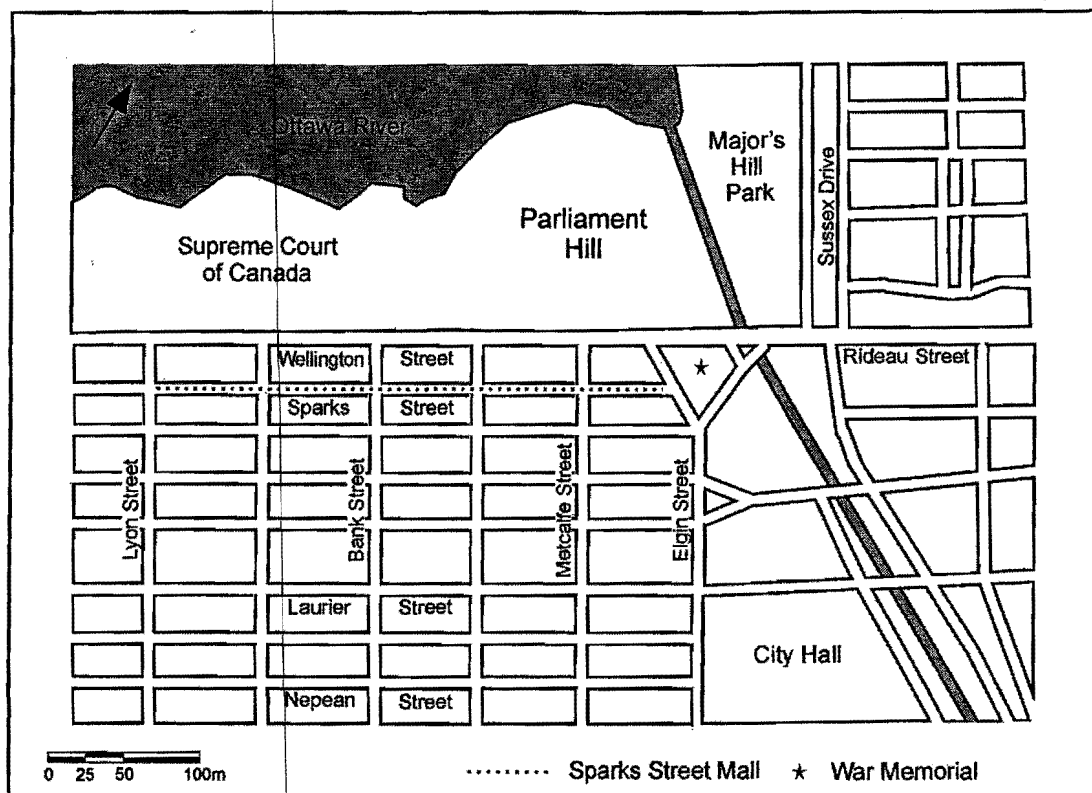
## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report evaluates social and physical factors affecting the life of the Sparks Street Pedestrian Mall in downtown Ottawa, Ontario. It uses a method developed by the City of Toronto to evaluate elements that contribute to the health of public spaces in urban environments. The twelve factors discussed in the report describe a broad view of the life of the Mall. They help identify the successful and unsuccessful features of the Mall as an urban open space.

### Location

The Sparks Street Mall is located one block south of Parliament Hill in Ottawa's central business district. It is surrounded by numerous government buildings and facilities, both old and new, as well as several tourist attractions. The Mall includes five blocks running east-west between Elgin Street and Lyon Street.

Map of Central Ottawa



**Background**

Sparks Street was originally developed by Nicholas Sparks in the early 1840s. After Queen Victoria selected Ottawa as the new capital of Canada, the street became the thriving commercial hub for the area.

Its role as a commercial centre grew steadily through the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as the street became home to banking, fashion and cultural activities. This boom was short-lived, however, because the development of suburban shopping centres in the 1950s began to slowly draw patrons and businesses away from Sparks Street.

In an effort to invigorate Sparks Street and curtail the flow of business away from the region, the merchants turned a section of the street from Elgin Street to Bank Street into a temporary mall in May 1960. The overwhelming success of the temporary mall led to the creation of the permanent mall on June 28, 1967.

Although the first two decades of the Mall's life were a success, its popularity began to fade in the 1980s. This was in large part a result of the opening of the Rideau Centre shopping mall only three blocks away and the further construction of several large suburban malls in the city's growing periphery.

In an attempt to limit this downward trend, local authorities have tried to inject life into the site by organizing new activities for the Mall. To date these activities have been relatively successful in achieving temporary improvements in the Mall's activity levels. Overall, however, the Mall's success as an urban open space is a fraction of what it was during the 1960s and early 1970s, and during its more distant past when the Mall was busy downtown street full of social and commercial activity.

**Methodology**

This report employs a methodology that was developed by the City of Toronto in their 1988 study, A Comparison of Five Inner-City Parks. These procedures include an ecological mapping exercise, a "door handle" survey, the analysis of maps and photos, and direct observations. A multi-method approach was adopted because it allowed for the collection of different data types. Field data for this report was gathered in the fall of 2002. It is important to note that this report emphasizes users and site design equally. Thus, the interplay of design factors and human activity can be better understood.

**Criteria**

The following twelve criteria, grouped into three progressive categories, were used to evaluate the overall success of the Mall as an urban open space:

1. *Contextual Support* – These are pre-design environmental factors that should be considered before site development.
  - i. *Microclimate/Environment*
  - ii. *Surrounding Land Use*
  - iii. *Enclosure*
  
2. *Design Framework* – The design framework should consider the needs of potential users.
  - i. *Focus*
  - ii. *Centering*
  - iii. *Legibility*
  - iv. *Intricacy*
  - v. *Street Views*
  - vi. *Seating*
  
3. *Social Milieu* – By responding to user needs, learning from use patterns and providing elements that promote an active social life, a successful social milieu can be created.
  - i. *100% Location*
  - ii. *Territories and Turfs*
  - iii. *Animation, Attractions and Amenities*

**Analysis**

The analytical results of this study are summarized in the table below. This table highlights the positive and negative attributes of each of the individual blocks that make up the Mall. Within these tables, each criterion is marked with a 1, 2, 3 or 4. A score of 1 is poor, 2 is fair, 3 is good and 4 is excellent.

**Evaluation Summary**

Design Elements		Block				
		I (east)	II	III	IV	V (west)
Contextual Support	Microclimate	2	2	2	2	2
	Surrounding Land Use	3	4	4	1	2
	Enclosure	3	3	3	3	N/A
Design Framework	Focus	3	3	3	2	2
	Centering	4	4	4	3	3
	Legibility	3	3	3	3	3
	Street Views	4	4	3	2.5	2.5
	Intricacy	3	3	3	2	1
	Sitability	3	3	3	4	4
Social Milieu	100% Location	3	4	3	3	2
	Animation, Attraction	2	2	2	1	1
	Territories & Turfs	2	2	2	2	1

**Conclusion**

***Successful Features***

**Block One:**

- Water features
- Street views
- Ease of circulation
- Accessible to disabled people
- Well maintained
- Proximity to nearby attractions
- Presence of seasonal vendors
- Outdoor dining facilities
- Access to retail facilities
- Architectural variety

**Block Two:**

- Water features
- Ease of circulation
- Accessible to disabled people
- Well maintained
- Proximity to nearby attractions
- Presence of seasonal vendors
- Outdoor dining facilities
- Access to retail facilities
- Architectural variety

**Block Three:**

- Water features
- Ease of circulation
- Accessible to disabled people
- Well maintained
- Proximity to nearby attractions
- Presence of seasonal vendors
- Outdoor dining facilities
- Access to retail facilities
- Architectural variety

**Block Four:**

- Direct access to neighbouring plaza
- Ample amount of seating
- Slight change in topography
- Ease of circulation
- Proximity to nearby attractions
- Accessible to disabled people

**Block Five:**

- Ample amount of seating
- Ease of circulation
- Proximity to nearby attractions
- Accessible to disabled people

***Unsuccessful Features***

**Block One:**

- Lack of sunlight
- Lack of formal seating
- Lack of year-round activities
- Lack of user diversity

**Block Two:**

- Lack of sunlight
- Lack of public art
- Limited evening activities
- Lack of year-round activities
- Lack of user diversity

**Block Three:**

- Lack of sunlight
- Lack of public art
- Lack of formal seating
- Limited evening activity
- Lack of year-round activities
- Lack of user diversity

**Block Four:**

- Lack of sunlight
- Limited evening activity
- Lack of year-round activities
- Lack of user diversity
- Not well maintained
- Limited architectural diversity
- Not very complex
- Lack of accessible retail
- Lack of user diversity

**Block Five:**

- Lack of public art
- Lack of sunlight
- Limited evening activity
- Lack of year-round activities
- Lack of user diversity
- Not well maintained
- Limited architectural diversity
- Not very complex
- Lack of accessible retail
- Lack of user diversity
- Overall absence of social milieu

**Recommendations**

It is apparent that there is a genuine discord between the east and west end of the Mall in terms of design framework, contextual support and social milieu. As such, future design interventions should be tailored to the blocks east of Bank Street. Given that the three eastern blocks performed relatively well in almost every criteria, it is more likely that this section of the mall can be rescued. In contrast, the western two blocks of the Mall appear to be so overwhelmingly unsuccessful that any attempt at improvement may be done in vain. Consequently, converting blocks four and five back into a vehicular street with generous sidewalks appears to be a more appropriate approach. By focusing pedestrian improvements on the first three blocks of the Mall it is conceivable that a successful urban open space can be created.