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## A Taste of Home at the Market: Mapping the concentration of consumers inside and out of Downsview Park's Merchant Market

Upon a cursory glance at Google Maps, one would be reluctant to call Downsview Park's North Depot a thriving neighbourhood. Its land is dominated by the old airplane hangar that houses the Downsview Park Merchant's Market with a sea of parking spaces connected by feeder roads that wrap around the building. However, in crafting our own alternate cartography, we found that this site is a place of rich local economic activity and multicultural community development. The atlas we have created reflects where people were concentrated within the Market on Sunday, February 5th, 2023 from 12:00 PM to 3:00 PM. The levels of concentration are delineated by different shades of magenta, with low concentration being the lightest and high concentration, the darkest. Through analyzing these patterns, we discovered how important food is to the Downsview Park community to strengthen, fulfill, and share their cultural identities with one another; thereby, transforming the Downsview Park Merchant's Market on the weekends from dead space to a site of rich cultural placemaking and community bonding.

Downsview Park is divided into four zones: the park zone, the recreational zone, the Centennial College zone, and the commercial zone (i.e. the Depot). This use-based segregation of land provides each park zone with unique infrastructure specific to its service. This allowed us to logically limit the scope of our area of study to the North Depot zone<sup>1</sup>, which is demarcated in physical terms by Sheppard Ave. W to the north/west and Carl Hall Rd. to the south/east. Upon visiting the North Depot on a non-Market day and analyzing pre-existing Google and park maps, we originally believed this site to be mostly dead space that was underdelivering on its socioeconomic production and community development capacity. The monolithic grey hangar has been beaten down by the winter weather, the large signage advertising the Merchant Market "every Saturday and Sunday from 10-5PM" faded and peeling. In the surrounding area, few vehicles and dumpsters dotted the premises. Finally, the Google-registered

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that we have excluded the South Depot from this map for it is less relevant to the activity of the Merchants' Market; however, we observed that this area, while mostly commercial office space, does contain a daycare. Early on, the existence of this daycare lent credence to our suspicions that the Depot could be a site to fulfill both economic and social needs.

businesses that are purported to be inside of the Depot are comprised of a small, eclectic group, including Downsview Park Merchants Market & Farmers Market (listed as a distinct entity located in the hangar's northwest corner), the Rhema Foundation Canada (a faith-based charity), Rhema Christian Ministries (a church), Computech Computer Solutions, Nikolay Gaming Repairs and five restaurants (Sue Ellen's Pies, Poutine Hub, Pazarcik Kebab, Tacotento Mexican Foods, and Sweetnuthin's Dessert Shoppe).

While the Merchants' Market and the church do provide places for people to gather and build connections, the monolithic hangar with its parking lot moat appears to be otherwise sparsely populated with commercial activity and little cultural diversity. Notable to this study, these pre-existing maps also say very little about the significant role that food plays in defining and reinforcing the multicultural fabric of the place. Based off the five Google-registered restaurants, one would assume that the Depot caters to a Canadian/North American palette and cuisine. Thus, these maps alongside our dull site visits outside Market hours led us to believe that this area falls outside the realm of a neighbourhood – but our site visit on a Market weekend revealed an entirely different and wonderful reality.

The first map in the atlas is an exterior bird's eye view obtained from that original Google Maps image that we annotated to understand how the car infrastructure is actually used on open Market days. When we arrived on the site, the north and west parking lots were full and in perfect homeostasis. While a steady, heavy flow of traffic came from feeder roads off Sheppard Ave. W and Carl Hall Rd., the pedestrian traffic and folks using public transit was very few at this time. While we initially perceived this parking lot infrastructure as dead-space and personally did not enjoy trudging through the snow to get to the Market, it seemed as though customers were happy to bring their cars in for the additional cargo space. When you walked around the parking lots, you saw many people struggling to carry milk crates and laundry baskets filled with fresh produce and other miscellaneous items into large vehicles. On non-Market days, the traffic flow to the recreational zone on Carl Hall Rd. was the heaviest; however, on that Market day, most traffic was being redirected into the North Depot from both major entrances. This shows how significant an institution the Market is to those in the community and how the usage of the park transforms from weekday to weekend (non-market to market day).

The second map depicts a rough layout of the Downsview Park Merchants Market separated by Market type and, once again, delineated by concentration. This map demonstrates that the most populated areas were those selling and serving food (i.e. the Farmers' Market and the International Food Market). While they make up a

small minority of the hangar, they are the axis upon which the Market revolves: as shown on the map, people congregated in the arteries that directly connected to/were adjacent to these areas. While the low and medium concentration areas served as mostly thoroughfares, the farmers' market and, especially, the International Food Market were places to congregate, to socialize, and to get in touch with your culture and others. We observed that majority of the customers throughout the hangar were people of colour and were shopping with their family, eagerly pointing out cultural food items and services to their children. As a first-time shopper, it was crowded and overwhelming, but the people around us navigated the chaotic market layout with the ease of a regular, chatting with familiar vendors and shoppers in English and their native tongues as they passed.

The third map illustrates the International Food Market and highlights which cuisines were most popular and to better understand which communities the Merchants' Market serves. We observed that the highest concentration of people were found ordering from the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Mexican stands, the second-highest were found at the Trinidadian, Latin American, and Jamaican stands, and the lowest were found at the North American, European, and Filipino restaurants. While this does not provide a direct correlation for the ethnographic makeup of the consumer base (after all, the best tasting restaurants are going to be the most popular, regardless of cuisine), we observed that the high and medium concentration cuisines also reflected the languages most written and spoken throughout the hangar. The only seating area is found in the International Food Market and, sitting in the middle of the space, your eyes and ears were flooded with Creole, Patois, Spanish, Mandarin, and Farsi. Upon talking with a sample of these groups, we also found that many vendors and consumers live in the area and have been attending the Market for years; one vendor told us that she's met many friends through serving her Jamaican recipes. Among this cultural diversity, among the hundreds of stalls, among the thousands of shoppers, it was food that attracted the largest swaths of people and allowed strangers and families alike to sit down and strengthen their bonds over their shared experiences with food.

Thus, through tracing the concentrations of usage, we can see that food is a vital tool for multicultural neighbourhoods like Downsview Park to build long-term connections with your neighbours, to strengthen familial relations, and to strengthen your own cultural identity. The first two maps show that the farmers' market and the International Food Market have established themselves as community hubs with a large regular clientele that benefits from the items sold and the social services provided at the Market like fresh, below market price produce; thereby, transforming the character of the site from a barren hangar to a buzzing multicultural

neighbourhood built around consumption and shared experience. Similarly, these spaces redistribute wealth back into the stalls; thereby, allowing local vendors to continue renting their plots and serve their community for the long-term. The final map hints at who is represented within that neighbourhood and which communities the Market is fit to serve based on types of products sold and languages used. Through this exercise in alternative cartography, we can see how food is a powerful tool for community development in multicultural areas like Downsview Park and how the provision of culturally-appropriate services within the Depot transforms the way that people navigate the park at-large.

