

# COMMUNITY BUILDING & NEIGHBOURHOOD IDENTITY IN DOWNTOWN OSHAWA

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## FINAL REPORT

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 **OntarioTech**  
Social Science  
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## Introduction

**Oshawa** is the largest urban municipality in Durham Region and is a gateway to the Greater Toronto Area. It is a growing city known for its waterfront location, robust manufacturing sector, high quality educational institutions, and strong healthcare sector. However, despite these strengths, the city faces stigma from inside and outside the Region, with much of the stigma focused on Downtown and south Oshawa. This stigma is captured in the well-known epithet, "The Dirty 'Shwa". A name rooted in negative perceptions of Downtown and South Oshawa's lower socioeconomic neighbourhoods and its historic roots as a manufacturing city.

Despite this stigma, over the last 20 years, Downtown Oshawa has seen a number of important changes, including the establishment of two university campuses (Ontario Tech University and Trent University), the continued growth of its popular and resilient downtown restaurant scene, the opening of new music venues, and the construction of a number of new residential high-rises. Downtown Oshawa also has key attractions in the Region including: the Robert McLaughlin Gallery (RMG), the Oshawa Valley Botanical Gardens, and the Parkwood National Historic Site. The City of Oshawa has also recently identified a series of development projects in the downtown neighbourhood within its 'Plan 20Thirty' proposal (City of Oshawa, 2022). However, despite these encouraging directions, residents and business owners have continued to raise concerns about the vibrancy, safety, and cohesiveness of the downtown neighbourhood (Gee, 2023; Szekely, 2023).

Inspired by this backdrop, the research team from Ontario Tech University, in partnership with City of Oshawa and Mitacs, set out to better understand how local governments and other community entities can help grow community and vibrancy downtown. However, community building is complex and there are many ways to approach it; this is where frameworks and models can be useful for guiding the work. In recent years, the focus on community building has been primarily focused on community-oriented approaches (rather than government driven) (Kelly & Caputo, 2011; Todd & Savard, 2020). Community-driven efforts usually take one of two approaches: 1) ground-up strategies in which local governments and community leaders come together to identify local priorities and work towards collective action (e.g. 'collective impact', 'community engagement', 'co-design', etc.)

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(Kania & Kramer, 2011; Trischler et al, 2019) 2) more theoretically-driven strategies that use models to identify key goals, priorities, and indicators (e.g. ‘happy communities’, ‘quality of life’, ‘placemaking’, ‘inclusive neighbourhoods’, ‘resilient communities’, ‘Indigenous community building’, etc.) (Kenny & Fraser, 2012; Montgomery, 2013; World Health Organization, 2020; Zautra et al., 2009). Both strategies are driven by a large network of governmental and non-governmental organizations to build capacity and provide resources (Community Foundations of Canada; Happy Cities, 2025; Ontario Trillium Foundation, 2025; Tamarack Institute, 2025; Canadian Urban Institute, 2025).

Both of these broad strategies have their strengths and limitations. In a ground up strategy, community members get to define their own priorities, but the downside is that these priorities may lack cohesion. Furthermore, agreement and consensus can be challenging because of competing priorities and different ways of framing the issues at hand (Zautra et al, 2009). Theoretically-driven models, in comparison, can be beneficial because they can provide insightful and motivating ways of thinking about community priorities that community groups might not have considered on their own (e.g. ‘the importance of resilience’, ‘the importance of inclusion’, etc.). The downside, however, is that the approach may not resonate or feel meaningful to community members and thus future engagement with those priorities might be difficult to achieve. The aim of this project is to explore a strategy that combines these two approaches with the aim of leveraging their advantages.

With this complexity in mind, we designed a research project with three main goals:

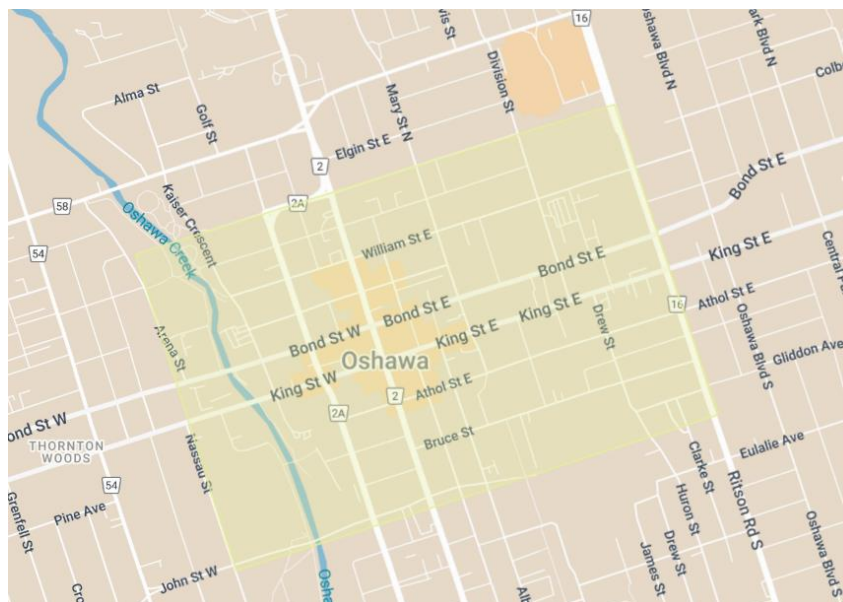
- 1) To learn about community dynamics Downtown Oshawa**
- 2) To explore how existing frameworks for community building apply to the unique context of Downtown Oshawa and to understand the extent to which those frameworks resonate with community members and local leaders**
- 3) To identify and develop a community building perspective that fits within the local context and provides a useful roadmap for future community building planning and activities**

This report summarizes these research activities and provides recommendations for next steps. The remainder of the report is divided into 4 main sections: methodology; results from phase 1; an overview of useful community building frameworks; results from phase 2 of the research; and recommendations and next steps.

# Methodology

## Location

We define Downtown Oshawa using the approximate boundaries identified by the City of Oshawa, which are Brock St to the North, Ritson Rd to the East, John St to the South, and the Oshawa Creek to the West.



## Project team

The principal investigator and co-investigator for the project were Tyler Frederick and Tim MacNiell, both researchers within the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities at Ontario Tech University. The work was supported by a group of fantastic students. Student leads on the project were Maria Cashore and Carolina Gutierrez Cadavid – both PhD students in the Ontario Tech University criminology program. The research was also assisted by four excellent undergraduate students: Adam Milne, Alwin Mathai, Callum Kettles, and Colin Jones.

We also want to give a special thanks to Julie MacIsaac, Jen Plishewsky, Catherine Richards, Derek Fullerton, Dan Walters, and Cindy Malachowski for their support and guidance over the course of the project.

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### ***Data collection activities***

Data collection for this project ran from Winter 2024 to Winter 2025 and was divided into two main phases, plus a course component. These phases are outlined below and illustrated in the timeline graphic.

#### ***Phase 1 Research Activities***

- 1) Model scan: Searches were conducted through Google Scholar and the Ontario Tech Library databases to identify frameworks for community building – search terms included “community building framework”, “community building models”, and “neighbourhood community building”. Through those searches, 8 primary frameworks were identified. Additional searching was done to identify key sources and citations for each of those frameworks. The sources were organized into an annotated bibliography and reviewed for common themes.
- 2) 17 community leader interviews: In consultation with city staff and through recommendations from our participants we conducted interviews with 17 community leaders in Downtown Oshawa including business owners, service providers, and politicians. The interviews focused on perceptions of downtown, key priorities for community building, and perspectives on cohesiveness and vibrancy. Participants were also asked to reflect on the concepts and priorities of each of the 8 frameworks and their suitability for Downtown Oshawa. Our participant list was definitely not comprehensive and there were many more individuals we could have consulted if time allowed. After the first 11 interviews, the project began to focus in on *neighbourhood identity* as a guiding concept. The final 6 interviews were focused on engaging specific organizations and entities downtown on the topic of neighbourhood identity and to gain insight into connections across organizations and groups downtown.

#### ***Phase 2 Research Activities***

- 1) Word on the street interviews: 136 interviews were conducted at 8 locations around Downtown Oshawa to gather the perspective of residents and visitors on perceptions of downtown and about sources of neighbourhood identity. Brief word-on-the-street style interviews were chosen to make the interviews accessible and to engage the broadest set of participants. Two teams of 2 students each, went to 8 locations around

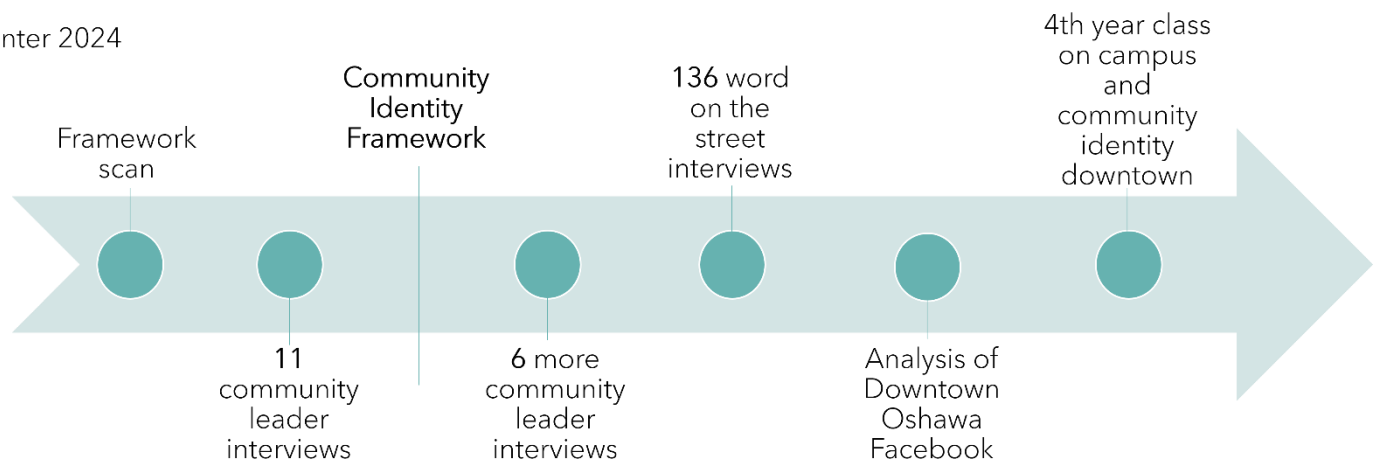


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the downtown neighbourhood for approximately 2 hours per session (see Appendix for location list). During the 5-7 minutes interviews, participants were asked about favorite features of the neighbourhood, given descriptive words to choose from, asked what they would like to see more of downtown, and asked to identify existing scenes/communities downtown (see Appendix from prompt list).

- 2) Content analysis of Downtown Oshawa Facebook page. The community leader interviews identified social media as a big influence on the perception of Downtown Oshawa (including the stigma) and so we conducted a preliminary content analysis of the Downtown Oshawa Facebook page. All of the posts made to the page in January 2025 were reviewed and categorized for content and tone.
- 3) Ontario Tech Course Component: This component is not directly related to the main project, but it does provide valuable insight into the student perspective on the downtown neighbourhood. In correspondence with the main project, the principal investigator designed an experiential learning course for 4<sup>th</sup> year criminology students at Ontario Tech University to reflect on the following research question: *What concepts and strategies can be used to enhance community identity at the downtown campus, as well as to enhance connections between the campus community and the broader Downtown Oshawa neighbourhood?* Students were divided into 6 groups and each group developed and executed a small primary research project related to community building and community identity at the downtown campus. Students were given a guiding concept related to the various frameworks to help guide their work.

Winter 2024



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# Phase 1 Results: Building towards a Framework

## *Insights from the Community Leader Interviews and Framework Scan*

Phase 1 of the research had two main components: 1) the scan of community building frameworks 2) 17 community leader interviews. Ultimately, the scan and interviews led us towards the need for an integrated framework that combined elements of the reviewed frameworks, but that also addressed the unique context in Oshawa.

To see an overview of each of 8 frameworks checkout the breakout section on page 12.

In terms of insights into a community building framework, we heard from the community leaders that we needed an approach that is:

- 1) **Multicomponent and integrated.** The community leaders we spoke with were drawn to many of the frameworks and wanted something integrated that captured elements from across perspectives.
- 2) **Practical and straightforward.** In the interviews there was a general skepticism of any silver bullets or grand ideas. To be practically useful we needed a framework that could appeal across groups and ideological orientations. This insight led us away from perspectives that might be overly academic or abstract.
- 3) **Multi-level and multi-sectoral.** Oshawa is in a unique position in which many of the policy levers that impact community building are distributed between the City of Oshawa (e.g. zoning and bylaw), the Region of Durham (e.g. transportation; housing and social services), and other entities like the local universities (e.g. investment in student spaces).

We heard that we needed a perspective that could be addressed through municipal and regional governments but also through the efforts of other community entities including the downtown universities and grassroots efforts

## *Additional Insights from the Community Leader Interviews*

Beyond insight into what is needed from a framework, we also heard a number of reoccurring themes about the community in Downtown Oshawa that are important to highlight:



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- Everyone we interviewed expressed a deep belief in the potential of the neighbourhood. The participants highlighted the neighbourhood's unique history and character. Descriptions varied but they often emphasized the scrappy, hardworking, and artistic character of the neighbourhood. Most participants expressed a desire to retain and leverage the neighbourhoods existing character as much as possible.
  - The interviews showcased a vibrant contingent of people who have a strong pride in Downtown Oshawa and who are actively cultivating connection and vibrancy. This relatively small but active group of people had many mutual connections and expressed admiration and respect for each other. The presence of this group fits well with Chriswell and Huberts (2023) description of "collective action infrastructure" which references the social networks that can be repurposed from past collective action to reduce barriers to future collective action.
  - There was consistent agreement around key features of the neighbourhood, including the food scene, the music scene, the RMG, the Tribute Communities Centre, the Oshawa Valley Botanical Gardens, Parkwood National Historic Site, and the universities.
  - Stigma was identified as a significant issue and most people agreed that the level of stigma did not match the reality. Most of the participants recognized that homelessness is an issue in Oshawa (as it is across the province) and that visible homelessness downtown contributes to a stigma that the neighbourhood is dirty or unsafe. In contrast to the stigma, most participants felt that their own interactions downtown were positive and they rarely felt unsafe. This general sentiment does not erase concerns that were raised about disorder downtown (e.g. drug paraphernalia on the street) particularly located in the Simcoe and John area where there are multiple social service agencies.
  - The music, culture, and food scenes in Oshawa were emphasized as a key resource by most participants, but they were described as somewhat fragmented and lacking a collective identity. The nerd scene was also mentioned as an important source of community and vibrancy downtown owing to a collection of businesses connected to game and comic book culture.
  - Participants also mentioned a desire for more nature and for more public spaces downtown. Respondents were excited about the new park being built at Simcoe and Bond and were hopeful that trend would continue. Victoria Street was mentioned as an underutilized space with significant potential.

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- Some respondents did mention generational divides, uneven levels of engagement, and internal politics between downtown business owners that could make collective planning challenging and that had impacted the work of the now defunct Downtown BIA. However, most respondents were respectful and understanding of the different points of view within the downtown business community. There was also a consensus about the positive work of the Oshawa Chamber of Commerce in supporting downtown business and culture.
  - Other themes included: more enforcement of property standards downtown, beautification measures on the streets, and finding ways to address the negative impact of the one-way streets.

## The Neighbourhood Identity Approach

Based on the model scan and phase 1 community leader interviews we developed an integrated approach that we are calling the Neighbourhood Identity Approach. In this framework, Neighbourhood Identity is defined as a **shared or collective connection to a neighbourhood. This collective connection to a neighbourhood is driven by 4 interconnected drivers: identification, affinity, participation, and care.**

A few other important aspects of this approach:

- In this framework, neighbourhood identity is not just a branding or image but is formed through 'social practice' (enjoying, interacting, identifying, caring)
- Neighbourhood identities can be contrasted with interest groups. Interest groups can align people, but they can also just as often create division (e.g. home owners having an interest in property values, or business owners having an interest in attracting particular types of clientele). This framework recommends orienting governmental engagement and outreach to include community groups (broadly defined), rather than just interest groups.
- Space is an important component of this framework because neighbourhood spaces are central to the drivers of community (we identify with spaces, we are attracted to spaces, we interact in spaces)
- Neighbourhood stigma is the opposite of neighbourhood identity because it erodes identification, affinity, participation, and care
- An advantage of this approach is that it can engage community members across sectors and groups (government, universities, grassroots, etc.). In fact, identity building is likely to be most effective when it is community-driven, but there is an important facilitator role to be played by larger entities.

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- Feelings of belonging and pride are key markers of a robust neighbourhood identity; so is a shared perception of a neighbourhood's defining features such as its name, location, vibe/character, attractions, history, and values.
  - The framework recognizes the importance of development and investment, but also cautions that development if not done thoughtfully can erode identity and connection (e.g. through displacement of existing communities; resentment)
  - Neighbourhood connection and pride drive a sense of ownership and collective efficacy that is important for community engagement and safety. Visitors can contribute to the vibrancy of a neighbourhood but visitors without a sense of connection or ownership can also be a source of disorder.

Next, we provide elaboration for each of the 4 drivers of connection.

### **Identification:**

This is a connection that comes through a feeling that a neighbourhood represents or is tied to some aspect of a person's sense of self, such as a group identity, ethnic identity, or historical connection to the neighbourhood.

In the interviews, this kind of connection came through people talking warmly about music shows and venues that were nostalgic for them. Or it came through people describing pride in the working class roots of the neighbourhood, or talking about how they remember spending time downtown as a kid.

### **Affinity:**

This is a connection that comes through an affinity or attraction to the features, spaces, and events of a neighbourhood. However, for these affinities to build neighbourhood identity the feature, event, or activity needs to be connected back to the neighbourhood itself. In this sense we can make a distinction, for example, between an event that happens to be located downtown vs. *a downtown event*. This association can be enhanced through branding and messaging, and by finding ways to help neighbourhood events and features to reflect the broader spirit or character of the neighbourhood.

This type of connection came through in the interviews when people described the enjoyment they got from downtown spaces and activities such as the Botanical Garden,

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Convergence Festival, 70 King Food Market, Ontario Philharmonic, the RMG, Parkwood Estate, music venues, and many of the downtown restaurants.

**Participation/Relationality:**

This is a connection that comes through participating in neighbourhood social life, participation in neighbourhood groups, and from interconnections between different neighbourhood communities.

In the interviews, this connection came through people describing a connection to downtown through friendships and socializing in the local bars, restaurants, and music venues; going to RMG Fridays and seeing familiar faces; and through activities and communities like the curling club, YMCA, Brew Wizards, and the Seniors Centre.

**Care**

This is a source of connection that comes through caring for a neighbourhood and its residents.

This source of connection came up in the interviews when people talked about the vibrant and committed care community in Downtown Oshawa. This includes the staff and volunteers of the many social service providers, but also the citizen and mutual aid groups looking out for one another.

## Framework Overview Breakout

The model scan identified 8 prominent community building frameworks that have potential for guiding community building practices in Downtown Oshawa. We briefly summarize each of them below. These frameworks were crucial in shaping the Neighbourhood Identity approach that we present in this report.

- **Placemaking:** Placemaking is a broad approach that refers to activities and practices aimed at cultivating a sense of place within a city or neighbourhood (Loh et al., 2022). There are different types of placemaking and they often focus on a particular asset or focus such as ‘creative placemaking’, ‘natural placemaking’, and ‘sacred placemaking’ (Fitzpatrick & Fontana, 2017; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2008). Placemaking can take different forms, but it is often tourism oriented with the aim of establishing a neighbourhood or city as a destination for a particular type of activity or experience. One placemaking strategy that has been deployed in Canada is the Mainstreet approach which focuses on creating revitalized and attractive urban main streets (MyMainStreet, 2025). Unfortunately, the research evidence for placemaking shows mixed results (Loh et al., 2022). The findings from the research suggest that placemaking is most successful when it is community-oriented and inclusive (rather than top-down and professionalized) (Ellery & Ellery, 2019; Loh, 2022; Toolis, 2017). An alternate approach is ‘place-keeping’ (Dempsey & Burton, 2012), which emphasizes the need for ongoing maintenance and care of existing communities (rather than just redevelopment).
- **Inclusive:** Inclusive community building perspectives emphasize the importance of inclusive practices in planning and development. These perspectives are often broadly influenced by Arenstein’s (1969) classic work on the ladder of community participation, as well as more recent adaptations of that overall approach (Davidson, 1998; Pretty 1995). Inclusive perspectives are generally process-focused and include practices such as co-design, equity diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives, and strategies for meaningful community engagement. The emphasis here is on challenging segregationist or discriminatory practices in community building and actively working to ensure everyone (including historically marginalized groups) are

included in planning and community building processes (Bell & Reed, 2022; Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2019; Ryder et al., 2014). Inclusive practices are not standalone and can be integrated across a variety of other frameworks (i.e. inclusive placemaking).

- **Resilient:** Resilient oriented frameworks are focused on creating structures and processes that allow for functioning and adaptation after a disturbance (Bec et al., 2015; Longstaff et al., 2010; Norriss et al, 2008; Wilding, 2013). This range of frameworks is primarily oriented to building the resources or capacity within a community to recover after a severe event such as a natural disaster. Some of these frameworks emphasize disaster planning and more administrative structures and tasks, but it can also include an emphasis on community building (Cafer et al., 2019; Magis, 2010). For example, key elements of community resilience theory (Zatura et al., 2008) include having neighbours that trust one another, having neighbours that interact on a regular basis, and having residents who have a sense of community and cohesion.
- **Belonging:** Belonging oriented frameworks are focused on strategies and initiatives that build a sense of belonging among local residents (Allen et al., 2021; Thomas & Griffin, 2021). Older versions of these types of perspective tend to focus on the belonging that comes from participating in the activities of daily life such as employment, civic participation, and leisure activities. More contemporary versions tend to emphasize the interactive aspects of belonging such as relationality, representation, and inclusion (Hudson, 2015; Renwick et al., 2019). Storytelling is often emphasized as a key strategy in these latter frameworks as a way of capturing, highlighting, and reflecting the unique identities and histories of a neighbourhood (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001).
- **Collective Efficacy:** Collective efficacy typically refers to the collective sense in a neighbourhood that the neighbourhood can respond to social problems and it typically references a sense of collective ownership, neighborliness, and a willingness to intervene or speak up when there is misbehavior (Sampson et al. 1999). The relationship between collective efficacy and community building is bidirectional in



that high collective efficacy will help drive resident engagement in community building, and in turn, successful community building will help strengthen feelings of collective efficacy. Despite a large research base on the concept within sociology, the policy implications of collective efficacy are underdeveloped. When they are mentioned, they typically point to governments and NGOs partnering with residents to help implement community and public safety initiatives.

- **Sustainable:** Sustainable community building frameworks tend to have an ecological focus and aim to address the risks of climate change (Eizenberg & Jabareen, 2017; Winther, 2016). They tend to be oriented towards environmental and eco-centric design and policy across a range of domains including land use policies, sustainable transportation, net-zero buildings, and sustainable business practices. As a result of this focus, these frameworks tend to have less engagement with the relational and identity aspects of community building, but some of these frameworks do make note of elements such as social capital building and inclusivity (Cloutier & Pfeiffer, 2015; Winther, 2016). Sustainable perspectives are often integrated with other types of frameworks (MacKendrick & Parkins, 2004).
- **Social Capital/Asset Based Community Development (ABCD):** This set of frameworks focuses on the broad set of social, economic, political and human 'resources' that exist within communities that can be leveraged in the service of community building (McKnight and Russell, 2018). The ABCD method is a particular process for cataloging and mobilizing resources in the pursuit of core community functions such as security, economic participation, ecological stewardship, and care. Social capital perspectives, in particular, emphasize the social bonds within and between groups (Flora & Flora, 2008; MacKendrick & Parkins, 2004; Putnam, 2000). The stronger those bonds and connections, the easier it is to achieve collective action.

- **Quality of Life/Capabilities:** This set of frameworks is defined by a holistic approach aimed at improving health and wellbeing (Sung & Phillips, 2018; Canning et al., 2012). The frameworks in this perspective often draw from the capabilities approach of Sen (1999), which focus on the structural capability of people to pursue a healthy and fulfilled life. In these frameworks there is often an emphasis on the structures within a community that promote freedom, choice, and empowerment. These perspectives often aim to challenge the structural barriers that poor and marginalized individuals face in imagining and pursuing goals. Quality of life perspectives also closely align with the social determinants of health perspectives popular within public health.
- **Cities for everyone/happy cities:** These types of frameworks emphasize community building through an urban design focused on parks, welcoming public areas, walkability, and multimodal transportation (Montgomery, 2013; Cities for Everyone, 2025). The idea is that these renewed spaces can promote social interaction and conviviality. Some prominent examples of this model can be found in some large South American cities like Bogota, Columbia. The view is that effective urban design can reclaim disused and unsafe public spaces and provide feelings of freedom, empowerment, hope, and dignity. One particular framework in Canada is the 880 perspective that argues that design choices should work for people who are 8 all the way up to 80 (880 Cities, 2025). Although the principles can be applied at a smaller-scale, this approach tends to emphasize public investment in renewed infrastructure such as transit, sidewalks, bike paths, and parks.
- **Indigenous:** Indigenous perspectives on community building are complex and varied but are generally community-driven and focused on relationality and balance (Cajete, 2020). They are often inspired by the Medicine Wheel which places emphasis on the interconnectivity of the physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental dimensions of life. Environmental sustainability and protection is also central. Other themes in these frameworks include an emphasis on the importance of local knowledge and history, networks of mutual support and action, and resident control over local economies (Cajete, 2020).

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## Phase 2 Results: Exploring Neighbourhood Identity

With the Neighbourhood Identity framework in mind, the purpose of phase 2 was to gather more information about neighbourhood identity and connection in Downtown Oshawa.

### *Word-on-the-street interview findings*

136 interviews were conducted at 8 locations around Downtown Oshawa in order to gather the perspective of residents and visitors on perceptions of downtown and about sources of neighbourhood identity. This approach was chosen to make the interviews accessible and to engage the broadest set of participants possible.

These interviews provided a number of interesting insights:

- 27% of residents, and 14% non-residents described pride in Downtown Oshawa. This is valuable insight given that pride is an indicator of neighbourhood identity. On the one hand this is lower than we might hope and suggests a relatively low level of neighbourhood identity. However, this number does also highlight that there is a core group of people who feel a connection to the neighbourhood.
- Another hypothesized marker of neighbourhood identity is a shared understanding of the characteristics of the neighbourhood including its name, location, and features. The results on this theme are mixed. On one hand we observed a lack of Neighbourhood Identity in that people were often confused about the boundaries of the neighbourhood and many respondents merged Downtown Oshawa and south Oshawa when giving their answers.
- We also observed that many respondents had trouble naming communities they associated with downtown despite there being many (curling club, nerd scene, Mosque, seniors centre, music and art scene, etc.). The community leader interviews were more likely to highlight the music and arts scenes downtown, suggesting that they might be known to downtown insiders within those sub-communities but not necessarily more broadly.
- Where we found some consensus was around features with downtown restaurants and RMG being common responses. Unfortunately, so was Lakeview Park, which is in south Oshawa. Further, 26% of respondents reported that they could not think of any features to highlight.

- When asked to select words that they felt captured the neighbourhood, most respondents selected more than one and the most popular word choices were: 'Gritty', 'Unique', and 'Evolving'. Downtown residents also mentioned 'Working Class'. This suggests that marketing and storytelling efforts around the neighbourhood character might benefit by tapping into these sentiments.
- Although we did not ask specifically about how long our respondents had lived in the city, anecdotally we observed that newer arrivals in Oshawa had a more positive attitudes about downtown than longer standing residents. This finding suggests that the stigma associated with the longstanding north/south divide in Oshawa might be playing a role in how the neighbourhood is perceived. Further, some older participants expressed a loss-nostalgia for the type of Downtown Oshawa that they remembered from their past. This imagined past was poorly defined, but tended to emphasize downtown shopping opportunities and ample parking.
- We also observed that students have very minimal exposure to downtown and generally lacked connection to the neighbourhood. This finding was confirmed within the Course Component of this research, which is discussed below.
- When asked what they want more of the most common response was 'Parks/Nature'. Downtown residents also mentioned 'Activities'. Interestingly, approximately 25% of respondents did not know what they wanted more of, which is somewhat counter intuitive given some of the negative sentiment within the interviews. It also underlines a particular challenge to attracting that subset of individuals who are less engaged and more dismissive of the neighbourhood (i.e. how do you appeal to a group who doesn't even know what they are looking for).

#### *Downtown Oshawa Facebook content analysis findings*

To understand more about the stigma we heard about circulating online we conducted a preliminary content analysis of the Downtown Oshawa Facebook page. All of the posts made to the page in January 2025 were reviewed and categorized for content and tone. Of the 78 posts we reviewed, we were able to organize them into 7 main themes. The percentages related to this classification are listed below.

- Concerned – post is raising concerns about the neighbourhood but in a way that suggests a genuine engagement and investment in the neighbourhood -- 19%

- Nostalgic (warm) – post is reflecting on the history of the neighbourhood in a positive way (this type of post was often in response to historical photographs that were being shared) -- 17%
- Negative/Trolling – post is making dismissive, offensive, and extreme comments with minimal context or justification -- 15%
- Supportive/positive general – post is engaging with other users on the page in a positive and supportive way that is not specific to the neighbourhood -- 15%
- Politics – post is sharing opinions about local politics --13%
- Informational – post is sharing information with other users on the page -- 12%
- Oshawa Pride – post is making positive comments about features or experiences in Oshawa -- 9%

These findings show that despite a general feeling in the community leader interviews that social media is a major source of stigma, the majority of posts were not overtly negative or trolling. This suggests that negative and trolling posts might draw our attention more than positive or neutral posts. It is also possible that when people observe the page, they mentally lump ‘concerned’ and ‘negative’ posts together and see them as part of the same sentiment. We think that it is important to distinguish the two - concerned posts were defined by a genuine engagement in local issues, whereas negative posts were dismissive and stigmatizing.

#### *4<sup>th</sup> Year criminology course on campus identity*

Although not a direct component of the main project activities, the principal investigator designed an experiential learning course for 4<sup>th</sup> year criminology students at Ontario Tech University. The class was tasked with addressing the following research question: *What concepts and strategies can be used to enhance neighbourhood identity at the downtown campus, as well as to enhance connections between the campus community and the broader Downtown Oshawa neighbourhood?* Many of the project insights were more specific to the culture on the downtown campus but there are some broader insights worth highlighting:

- 1) Many Ontario Tech students have minimal connection to Downtown Oshawa and lack knowledge of what the neighbourhood can offer.
- 2) Student respondents reported negative perceptions of neighbourhood safety, however, few students reported negative firsthand experiences and they tended to rely on general impressions and rumours.

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- 3) The projects identified a general lack of downtown student culture at Ontario Tech that impacted student engagement in downtown events and other activities.
  - 4) The projects identified a lack of student spaces downtown, including a lack of welcoming outdoor spaces. Victoria St and the small patio at 61 Charles St were identified as potential candidates for re-design.

## Recommendations and Next Steps

Downtown Oshawa has many strengths and resources and there are already great examples of community building downtown that provide a roadmap for future activities. These examples include Convergence Festival, RMG Fridays, We are Your Friends dance parties, Bollywood Karaoke at the Seniors Centre, the Bright and Merry Market, the General's Fan Zone at 70 King, and Kars on King.

Before making recommendations around each of the 4 drivers of neighbourhood identity, we offer some general thoughts on next steps:

- *Prioritize neighbourhood identity.* This means targeting connection & pride alongside growth. Growth and development are obviously important but growth without connection can create community friction and disorder. We recommend developing a 'Neighbourhood Identity Strategy' to guide this work.
- *Build from the inside out.* Rather than chasing people who are dismissive and stigmatizing, we recommend partnering with and investing in the strong contingent of people who are already coming downtown, who are engaged in community building already, and who have pride in the neighbourhood (we include a figure below that visualizes the types of attitudes and engagement we encountered in the research).
- *Invest in public spaces that are attractive and welcoming.* Spaces are central to the neighbourhood identity model because people need places to connect to and interact within.
- *Neighbourhood identity needs facilitators.* The City and other entities like the universities and Chamber of Commerce can act as much needed facilitators of neighbourhood identity building through strategy building; microgrants; community initiatives; hosting and convening planning sessions; developing spaces; and facilitating access to downtown spaces.



- *Identify a neighbourhood character.* Use engagement and storytelling to facilitate community members to identify a character that captures and unifies the neighbourhood. The words and sentiments from this research point in some promising directions -- evolving, unique, scrappy, gritty, artistic, self-made, foodie, musical, and working class. Find ways to reflect this character in events and branding.
- *Something for everyone.* The size and configuration of the downtown neighbourhood defies a simple 'Mainstreet' development approach. Instead, we recommend exploring the possibility of open and fluid 'micro-districts' with defining features such as flagship spaces/attractions, public art, and engaging design elements. This approach could help establish multiple points of connection to the neighbourhood (e.g. sports fans, student life, history buffs and vintage culture, car culture, foodie culture, families/children, art and music, game and hobby culture). These areas could be linked together through enhanced pedestrian routes that create walkable and unifying links.

We now turn to some more specific recommendations organized around each of the main drivers of connection identified within the Neighbourhood Identity model.

### **Identification:**

To help enhance connection through identification we recommend different forms of storytelling and culture work that aim to capture and build the unifying character of the neighbourhood; to celebrate Oshawa's history in fun and interesting ways; and to enhance the visibility of existing neighbourhood communities so as to more closely associate those groups with the neighbourhood itself (e.g. the Muslim community that attends the mosque, the local Caribbean community, the metal community, the Oshawa Generals fan community, the Oshawa foodie community, etc.). More specific examples:

- storytelling through murals and community art, flashback nights, retro parties, restoring and preserving old signage, ghost tours, plaques that celebrate popular history and stories
- Identifying communities that already have a footprint downtown that can be more visibly represented through murals and wayfinding, and more actively welcomed through events and pop-ups.
- Community-designed merch can be a great way to show pride and to help establish a narrative and identity for what makes downtown Oshawa unique (e.g. thinking here of

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slogans like ‘Keep Austin Weird’ that help encapsulate a community spirit). Official slogans tend to have mixed success and so we recommend supporting grassroots approaches.

### **Affinity:**

To help enhance a connection through affinity and enjoyment we recommend focusing on spaces and events.

- Spaces play a key role in this type of connection and there was a consensus in the interviews that downtown needs more welcoming flagship spaces that appeal to residents and visitors (dog parks, destination play parks, community arts spaces, etc.).
- Finding ways to bring more nature downtown and other beautification strategies.
- Branding and design strategies can help establish a shared understanding of the name and boundaries of the neighbourhood (e.g. the DTO branding is a good example). Design features such as banners and arches can welcome people and designate the boundaries and areas of the neighbourhood. We also recommend design features that link different parts of the neighbourhood together and that create a pedestrian flow through the neighbourhood.
- Continuing to support flagship events with a particular emphasis on events that reflect the communities and unique character of the neighbourhood.
- Supporting the launch of engaging activities and businesses that will serve as destinations for residents and visitors to the neighbourhood.

### **Participation/Relationality:**

To help enhance connection through participation/relationality we recommend:

- Using outreach initiatives to find ways to invite new groups/communities downtown and to understand how city and public spaces can be made more inviting for those groups to participate (cycling routes, dog parks, cricket pitches, children’s play parks, workout equipment, maker spaces, bbq and fire pits).
- Supporting existing communities to expand and attract new members through cross-promotion, grants, and other ways of facilitating the work of active community groups.
- Enhancing event and permitting processes that make it easy to host family and community events that can animate downtown spaces

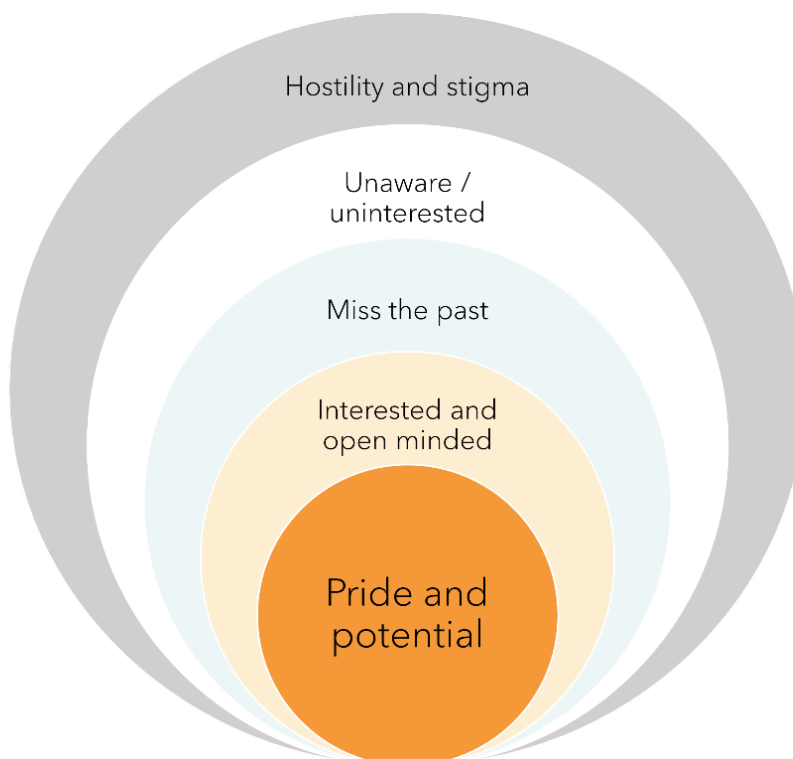
- Enhancing the connection between different groups and communities to promote a sense of neighbourhood solidarity and identity. For example, facilitating ‘community group matchmaking’ so that different groups/communities can meet each other and find ways to bring their members together (e.g. metal night at the curling club, or seniors board game night). Micro-grants could be offered to support these cross-community initiatives. Another example is using events to help unify the music, arts, nerd, and food communities that are already active downtown.

## Care

Downtown Oshawa already has a robust volunteer and care community that can be leveraged to help build this source of connection. To enhance this type of connection further we recommend:

- Events and initiatives that celebrate and unify Oshawa’s care community.
- Grants to support community events and care activities.
- Leveraging the care community to promote a caring community ethos within the neighbourhood
- Investing in mutual aid and peer support networks.

Figure: Levels of Engagement



## Appendix

ACTIVITIES

PARKS &  
OUTDOOR  
SPACES

NATURE

BASIC SERVICES

NEIGHBOURHOOD  
PRIDE

ART

MUSIC

CLEANLINESS

NEIGHBOURLINESS

GROUNDING

UNIQUE

CREATIVE

COMMUNITY  
FOCUSED

RESILIENT

WORKING  
CLASS

ECLECTIC

EVOLVING

UP AND  
COMING

## WORDS TO DESCRIBE DOWNTOWN OSHAWA

SELF-  
MADE

GRITTY

ARTISTIC

RESOURCEFUL

AUTHENTIC

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## Location List

- 61 Charles Street
- Oshawa Centre
- YMCA
- Botanical Gardens
- Bond/Simcoe
- 70 King
- Christmas Market
- 80 Bond



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