

Perceptions of Safety and Great Public Spaces around SFU's UniverCity Neighbourhood

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Introduction

The UniverCity Community next to Simon Fraser University is a unique community that stands out for its location on top of Burnaby Mountain, adjacent to a large university campus, and for its natural forest surroundings of the Burnaby Mountain Conservation Area. This residential community has a network of diverse public spaces and parks along with blocks of high-rise commercial developments to give it an urban appearance and feel. During the course of my summer research on public spaces in general, a couple of developments influenced the direction of this project:

1. A student initiated petition to keep the campus community shuttle running due to safety concerns. According to the petition, it is an important first step for the students living on campus¹.
2. A few safety incidents, including a fatal cycling accident in late June on Gaglardi Way², and two instances of sexual assaults in July³ highlights the need for increased awareness of safety, both in terms of spatial design and traffic, around the SFU campus and the UniverCity community. The group mapping exercise that is core to this project is a starting point to understanding the perception of public spaces from various users.

¹ Online petition to keep SFU Burnaby's free shuttle running goes live. July 7, 2019. The Peak <https://the-peak.ca/2019/07/online-petition-to-keep-sfu-burnabys-free-shuttle-running-goes-live/>.

² SFU's vibrant cycling community rattled by death of cyclist on Burnaby Mountain. July 20, 2019. The Peak <https://the-peak.ca/2019/07/sfus-vibrant-cycling-community-rattled-by-death-of-cyclist-on-burnaby-mountain/>

³ Second assault reported as SFU within two weeks. August 2, 2019. The Peak <https://the-peak.ca/2019/08/second-assault-reported-at-sfu-within-two-weeks/>

Guiding Questions

My main objectives are to find out more from members of the SFU and UniverCity community regarding public spaces they enjoy spending time in as well as spaces that can be improved.

1. What makes a public space great?
2. Which public spaces are the most used and popular, and for whom?
3. What spaces do users feel unsafe in and how might they be improved?

Methodology

The central research activity involved organizing a focus group with members of UniverCity residents and students on campus. Most of my potential participants were recruited through an E-mail list of the Community Residents Association from the database of the SFU Community Trust. This mailing list consists of residents as well as people interested in the community.

However, the group is inclusive to all and the perspectives of outside residents not living on campus (but are familiar and concerned about campus spaces) are also valued.

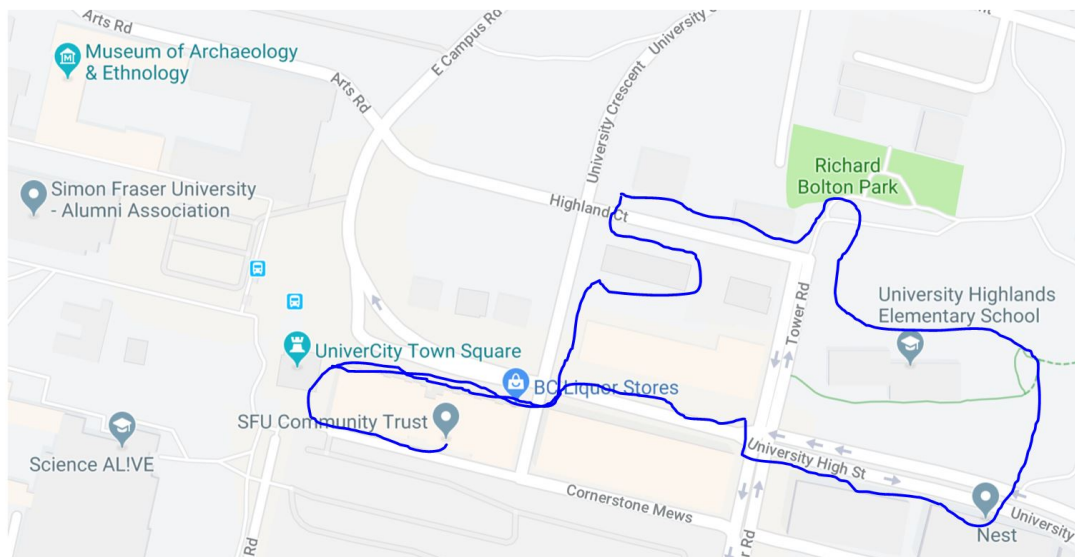
I also conducted interviews lasting up to 30 minutes each with two UniverCity residents to gain an idea of their personal experiences in terms of safety and noteworthy public spaces around their community. It allowed me the opportunity to start a dialogue on their perception of their community as well as offer some of my thoughts as an outside visitor to UniverCity.

Scope of areas in study:

Start and End point from SFU Community Trust office at 8971 Cornerstone Mews.

Network of green spaces, mews, sidewalks, and plazas extending from Town Square, public space walkways adjacent CentreBlock building, and Richard Bolton Park and University Highlands Elementary School. The group gathered at the Community Trust office at 6pm on Tuesday July 9. The activity wrapped up an hour later at 7pm with a short debriefing for comments and suggestions.

General walking plan situated in this area



Screenshot taken from Google Maps: approximation of walking tour shown in blue line.

I took my own photos of sites around the selected walking area throughout the summer. Therefore, all photos taken here were from various days.

Community Mapping Exercise Plan

Supplies:

- Copies of UniverCity maps
- Questionnaires for participants
- Pens for participants
- Poster board
- Markers
- Red, green and yellow circle stickers
- Post-it notes
- Paper binder clips



The Complete Mapping Walking Tour Kit: Copies of surveys, pens, stickers, and post-it notes ready to be handed out for participants. Each package is clipped together to allow for easy removal of questionnaires and helps me reference completed maps with demographic information.

Total allocated time: 45 minutes to one hour

The purpose of this group mapping exercise was to learn from residents, including youth and children if possible, about how they perceive the network of spaces around UniverCity. Larger groups would be ideal but I anticipated at least ten participants in total to have a working turnout. They were here to comment on the safety of pathways and public spaces around their neighbourhood, as well as point out exceptional spaces that they enjoy. Youth, children, and seniors were all welcome in this exercise.

-Questionnaires and Group mapping activity (15 minutes)

I welcomed participants into the SFU Community Trust office by giving everyone a copy of a short anonymous questionnaire to complete individually (see Appendix 1.0). This allowed more efficient use of time while we waited for others to arrive. Once people had completed their surveys, I asked participant members to interact with each other and share thoughts on good public spaces around their community, as well as perceptions on safety. Participants were encouraged to identify locations at UniverCity public places and pathways where they feel safe or unsafe through the use of coloured stickers (see Appendix 2.0).

This initial group mapping and labelling exercise of mapping the entire UniverCity community is done from memory prior to the active group walking activity. I provided two large community maps that were posted on the wall. One map was intended for users to write comments while the other was meant for colour coded stickers. Each survey package contained a smaller version of the community map to be completed during our group walk. The walk itself is focused more specifically on critically looking at features among the predetermined trail, although participants were welcome to label and add notes for any UniverCity area appearing on the map. Green represent safe spaces while red means less safe spaces. As a

bonus, yellow stickers meant exceptional public spaces that they enjoy spending time in.

While participants took turns discussing the themes of safety and public spaces with each other, I used markers to record major themes and ideas visually on a large paper sheet (see Appendix 3.0). I asked open-ended questions like “What makes a place great?” and “What is a safe area to you?” to gather ideas. Discussion points also mentioned whether there are spaces which feel more safe, attractive, or unsafe depending on the time of day and night. Participants could feel free to add their own thoughts and feedback onto the sheet.

-Group observation Walk (20 minutes)

Following the group mapping exercise, I took the group on a predetermined walk through the selected locations while I made notes of where they could identify and evaluate various features of the environment that makes them feel safe or unsafe. The route was selected for its variety of urban sidewalks, commercial areas, park and forested trails that could be completed within twenty minutes. Each participant was given a personal questionnaire and copy of a shareable map where they could mark down areas that feel safe or unsafe, along with Post-it notes for additional comments of remarkable areas. Throughout the walk, I announced the names of each stop that I made in my notes such as “Town Plaza”, or “Richard Bolton Park” and stopped for a couple of minutes to give everyone a chance to observe and write notes. At the same time, I minimized my commentary along the walk in order to receive unbiased responses.

-Debriefing (10 minutes)

This was an opportunity for participants to share their overall experience of pathways and spaces around UniverCity, along with any other thoughts and suggestions that they wanted to share with me.

-Analysis

I studied the initial stickered UniverCity map worked on by participants prior to the guided walk. Some of their comments and sketches were recorded on accompanying post-it notes and main map. This first map depicting resident's impressions of places around their community from memory was then be compared with participant's individual maps that represent their impressions of public spaces following a closer, critical walk through spaces. I looked for spatial patterns and clusters on maps to determine the situation concerning safety and popular public spaces in the neighbourhood while checking the attached unnamed surveys to know general demographic details of each participant.

Event Statistics and Demographics

A total of 6 participants showed up to the focus group, completed questionnaires and the walking tour on July 9, 2019. This is successful as there were no mid-session terminations. Some descriptive statistics are drawn from this gathering. Each selected pie graph is followed by counts of each participant. The focus group participants can be characterized as relatively older, with a few seniors over the age of 65, and all university educated. All participants, except for one, reside at a UniverCity residence.

The limitations to this focus group include the fact that there is a lack of children, youth, or current students. A more detailed statistical analysis would only be possible with a larger, stratified sample size with greater representation of different demographics and ages. On the other hand, the strengths of having the perspectives of seniors is that they may be more

sensitive to locations and crosswalks where safety, mobility, paved areas, and lighting may be an issue. This walk that took place represents a fairly warm day in the summer where pathways were clear of rain or snow, with minimal obstructions for traffic and vehicles. It would be insightful to see how patterns of both preferred and safety locations may change if this walk is repeated in the middle of winter with lots of snow and ice or at night when we can see existing street lighting and point to more places where it may be needed.

Summary of Encounters during Our Route

The first route our group encountered was Cornerstone Mews, a paved pedestrian pathway that shares the road with cars and delivery trucks. Mews is a British word for a row of stables and carriage houses built behind larger city houses in the days before cars replaced horses. Modern urban planning, such as from the City of New Westminster has adapted the term Mews, as “a narrow, intimate street that balances the access and service functions of a lane with active building frontages, accessory uses, and a street space shared by cars, bicycles and pedestrians”⁴. UniverCity’s Cornerstone Mews exhibits the modern interpretation for the traditional European mews as it the road navigates the backside of buildings and typically only experiences very light traffic.

A variation on the more common raised concrete sidewalk and road, Cornerstone Mews puts less emphasis on the division between pedestrian and traffic space. There are metal poles guiding where pedestrians can walk but it feels more of a suggestion than a legal requirement or social convention.

⁴ Front Street Mews, New Westminster.
https://greatplacesincanada.ca/gpic_places/front-street-new-westminster/



Cornerstone Mews, a harmonious pedestrian pathway shared with traffic

I was curious to know whether anyone felt slightly uncomfortable while we veered off from the pole guide and into the centre of the lane. At that hour, it was a very lightly used road and I did not see any indicators of unsafeness as we walked onto the “vehicle side” of Cornerstone Mews from participants.

We walked up the stairs into Town Square, the unofficial “downtown plaza” for UniverCity, situated across from the bus loop.



This Town Square is designed as a versatile public place, decorated with fountains, and large step stairs that can double as seating. It is a convenient meeting spot for the student community, UniverCity residents, and staff as it serves as one of the entrances for the community. Two participants marked Town Square as a safe spot and one of them marked it as an enjoyable space. When there are no events going on, such as the Summer Block Party, it is easy to pass for pedestrians to quickly walk through the Square as they perceive it to be an extension of public sidewalks. This could be a reason that not everyone marked or commented on the Town Square.

From the Town Square, we headed East on University High Street while crossing over to the North Side of the Sidewalk where there were benches and decorative planters. All participants marked down the two blocks of University High Street to the intersection of Tower Road as a desirable and safe area.



Wide sidewalks with varieties of seating, flowers and A&W patio space



Two examples of participant surveys: the stretch of University High Street is marked with green and yellow circles, denoting safe and enjoyable space

One of the comments I received on the survey regarding sidewalks on University High Street is “Nice space in front of Tim Hortons & A&W but feel like need to buy”. In other words, there are individuals who may feel there is a requirement to be a customer in order to use tables or chairs in front of certain businesses, even when there is no explicit written notice or sign. In day to day life, such spaces are commonly self-regulating. I only see it as a potential problem when the establishments become so busy to the point where staff may want to remind users of this space that the space should be used for paying customers first. The most visible marker of this space being maintained by Tim Hortons is the presence of the waste bin.



Large patio space in front of Tim Hortons at the intersection of University Tower Street and Tower Road

Our group crossed the intersection at Tower Road to take a look at the Eco So Mo public art bench sculptures.



A row of Eco So Mo public art in the form of benches and sculptures

From the comments I overheard and my own observations, these seating have aesthetic appeal and distinguishes this street from others but do not seem to be widely used. One critical comment noted “Dislike all benches that collect water + trash”. The design tends to trap rainwater, take longer to dry, and people may use it as a bin to throw away cigarettes.

We crossed the street across from the Nest residences into the wooded pathways leading to University Highlands Elementary School and Richard Bolton Park. Two participants pointed out with red stickers that this crosswalk area does not feel to be particularly safe since there is no electronic pedestrian lighting signal. Vehicles driving along must slow down and be cautious of pedestrians. Visibility can be limited due to the sloping road.



Pedestrians must be careful at this crosswalk where eastward visibility may be limited

The shaded path connecting to Richard Bolton Park is marked as green on four surveys and special on one. It is a short path but preserves trees and Stoney Creek, which begins at the top of Burnaby Mountain well, as I was told by one participant involved in the Stoney Creek Environment Committee. Light fencing on side of the trails remind park users and pedestrians that the nature conserved here is ecologically sensitive.

The patch of wooded forest next to the landscaped area and playground of Richard Bolton Park stands out as a significant site, as reflected on the surveys and from the personal walk. Exclamations of “beautiful” were heard when we arrived at the site. Five participants marked this forest as either safe or special. One left the comment “I like the forest of Richard Bolton Park. That’s the heaven of kids.” This walk naturally led us to Richard Bolton Park and playground, which holds the distinction of the only designated park on UniverCity, and managed by the City of Burnaby.



The old forest on the left adjacent to Richard Bolton Park

From Richard Bolton Park, we walked down the path back to the urban setting of Highland Court. I wanted users to think critically and gain an appreciation for the various public rest stations or types of seating available.



I guided participants through an entrance of CentreBlock to show them a special public walkway and green space that is not visible from the sidewalk.

This public area is situated above the parking section of Centreblock and a few participants remarked that they have never walked in from this

entrance before, nor were they aware that this was public space open for them to use.



The quiet elevated public walkway of Centreblock



The public walkway and greenspaces of Centreblock (above) are accessible through an entranceway on Highland Court and through stairs on University Crescent

It started to rain lightly at this point and we exited the walkway through stairs leading down to the sidewalk. We ended our walk by going a block south, back onto Cornerstone Mews and to our office for the debriefing session.

Research Limitations, What has Worked Well and Recommendations

In addition to the smaller sample size of the focus group, I had to respect the time restraints of my participants and limited the entire focus group activity to one hour maximum. Following this round of participants in July, I sent out more invitations to propose a second round with the expectation of committing to it if there were at least three people who could commit to it. Unfortunately, our time schedules did not match.

The green, red, and yellow round stickers to represent safe, unsafe, and special places are very general and do not divide into degrees for more precise measurements such as “more safe” or “a little safe”. The categories are general and the organization of the survey meant I was only able to inspect completed maps on my own time after the focus group has terminated. The Post-it notes were optional for participants who wanted to elaborate more on their mapping choices but I was not able to ask for specific clarifications on the spot by asking questions such as “why do you feel less safe at this location?” A larger sample size would lead to a more quantitative analysis where I could see more patterns in the big picture of this study.

Most of the comments and recommendations collected from residents were concerned about practical issues, such as navigating through traffic and fast cars. Another comment on the group mind-map mentioned that is not always clear about whether spaces are public or not, as seen in the elevated walkways of the Centreblock Building. This exercise also generated considerable praise and compliments about where UniverCity has succeeded. The preservation of forest, trees, and spacious sidewalks buffered by green from road are notable examples enjoyed by residents.

Some of the critical comments are located in areas outside of the scope of this particular walk, but worth mentioning. Sections of University Crescent close to Slopes Park have been marked red on questionnaire maps, in part due to ongoing construction, which can lead to the presence of garbage and machinery. Traffic along University Drive East are also perceived as too fast and there should be an effective way to slow down traffic once it approaches residential streets, such as the addition of speed bumps or signs.

In my interview with resident Brad Lund, it appeared that Richard Bolton Park is not kept up to standards expected from the City of Burnaby. He rarely saw park staff or maintenance being done there, especially on some of the wooden structures in the park which needs fixing. In contrast, the landscaped courtyard of the Academic Quadrangle at Simon Fraser University is maintained more often to a higher standard. Resident Drew Jenkins agreed that Richard Bolton Park could be improved, as he noted that public art was in disarray, grass poorly maintained, and garbage was not picked up regularly. He suggested that the area with trees has the potential to be more of an education area. The park has diverse ecology, and trees should be better maintained and could be labelled with tags. Lund always felt safe in the community, as pathways are lit. However, some lights occasionally go out at night. Jenkins noted that all of the mountain trails need regular maintenance. Footpaths and bike paths are generally well-maintained, although not always well linked to other parts.

Overall, Lund perceived UniverCity as a mix of a college town and suburban community, as it has a mix of families and older people in a small village setting. In his opinion, the boundary between SFU's academic campus and UniverCity is the Town Square. Commercial establishments around the Town Square have fast food restaurants popular with both the campus population and community.

Drew Jenkins believed that the UniverCity community would be strengthened when there are more connections with Simon Fraser

University, both physically and in other relationships. He would like to see SFU architect Arthur Erickson's original vision of the university completed with more walkways accessible to everyone. The network of pathways should include parks, as well as viewpoints. Parks and viewpoints should incorporate the university, community, as well as the City of Burnaby through view corridors as part of this vision for outdoor space.

Report Summary

What Works in Public Spaces at UniverCity

- Preservation of old forests and natural greenery in close proximity with trails and Richard Bolton Park.
- Wide, spacious sidewalks on University High Street enhanced with seating and flowers in sidewalk planters. There is enough room here for patio and leisure activities.
- The Town Square is a pleasant meeting point between the campus community and UniverCity neighbourhood. It is a programmable space with room for small scale concerts, marketplace, and social activities, as seen during Summer Block Parties.
- Cornerstone Mews seem to function seamlessly as a walkway where pedestrians share space with vehicle traffic. The fact that it did not generate comments or concerns during the walk and in my personal experience shows that it works well for its intended purpose.

Suggestions to Improve Public Spaces, as Taken from Surveys, Interviews, and Personal Analysis.

This list is not meant to be exhaustive of all possible improvements in public space at UniverCity. They are summaries of ideas taken from surveys, interviews, and my personal opinions. Attributions are marked in parentheses

- A sign could be posted to inform people that the green courtyard space and pathways of Centreblock are open to the public. This could be in the form of a label announcing “public space” posted by the concrete staircases leading to the walkway or on the information board in Town Square. At the moment, few residents are aware that this space is open and available for them to use. Therefore, communication is important.
- Richard Bolton Park should be maintained to a higher standard where grass is cut, and garbage cleaned more frequently. Wooden features such as benches need to be kept in good condition (Brad Lund). This rich natural environment has the potential to play a role as an educational ecology park where some trees and greenery are labelled (Drew Jenkins).
- Richard Bolton Park and the grounds by the old Water Tower have the potential to be integrated and used more by the public once developments around it are completed with more paths leading to the park (Brad Lund). The platform by the Water Tower should be kept public and there is an opportunity for it to be used as a fenced park space for dogs. This park is also a viewpoint location and efforts should be made to keep its nice views after the Water Tower is replaced in the future (Drew Jenkins).
- For added pedestrian security at the crosswalk on University High Street connecting residents from Nest (Parcel 28) to the trails by

University Highlands Elementary School, speedbumps can be added. There are already pedestrian walk signs and street lights but its visibility is restricted for traffic approaching from the east due to the bend in the road.

- The Eco So Mo bench sculptures can have small bins next to them for litter or cigarettes to discourage people from using the sculptures as a garbage disposal site.

The author would like to thank all the participants of the focus group, as well as residents Brad Lund and Drew Jenkins for their time and insights to make this project possible.

Appendix 1.0

Example of Surveys

Sample Demographics Survey

Your participation and feedback is meaningful to us and will help inform this research report. The information collected here is for the purpose of analysis following the group mapping exercise and not for the Trust.

Research report will be found here:

<http://university.ca/media/research>

1. Gender:

2. Age

- a) 10-20
- b) 21-30
- c) 31-40
- d) 41-50
- e) 51-65
- f) 65 and over
- g) Under 10

3. What is your ethnicity?

4. What is your country of origin?

5. What is your primary language?

6. In which UniverCity residence do you reside in?

7. Are you a student?

- a) Not a student
- b) Part-time student
- c) Full time student

8. What is your occupation?

- a) _____
- b) Student
- c) Retired

9. How long have you resided at UniverCity?

- a) Less than a year
- b) 1-3 years
- c) 3-5 years
- d) 5 years and over

10. What is the highest level of education you have attained?

- a) No schooling
- b) Some primary or secondary school
- c) Completed secondary school

- d) Technical or community college
- e) Undergraduate degree
- f) Graduate degree

Do you have any other comments?

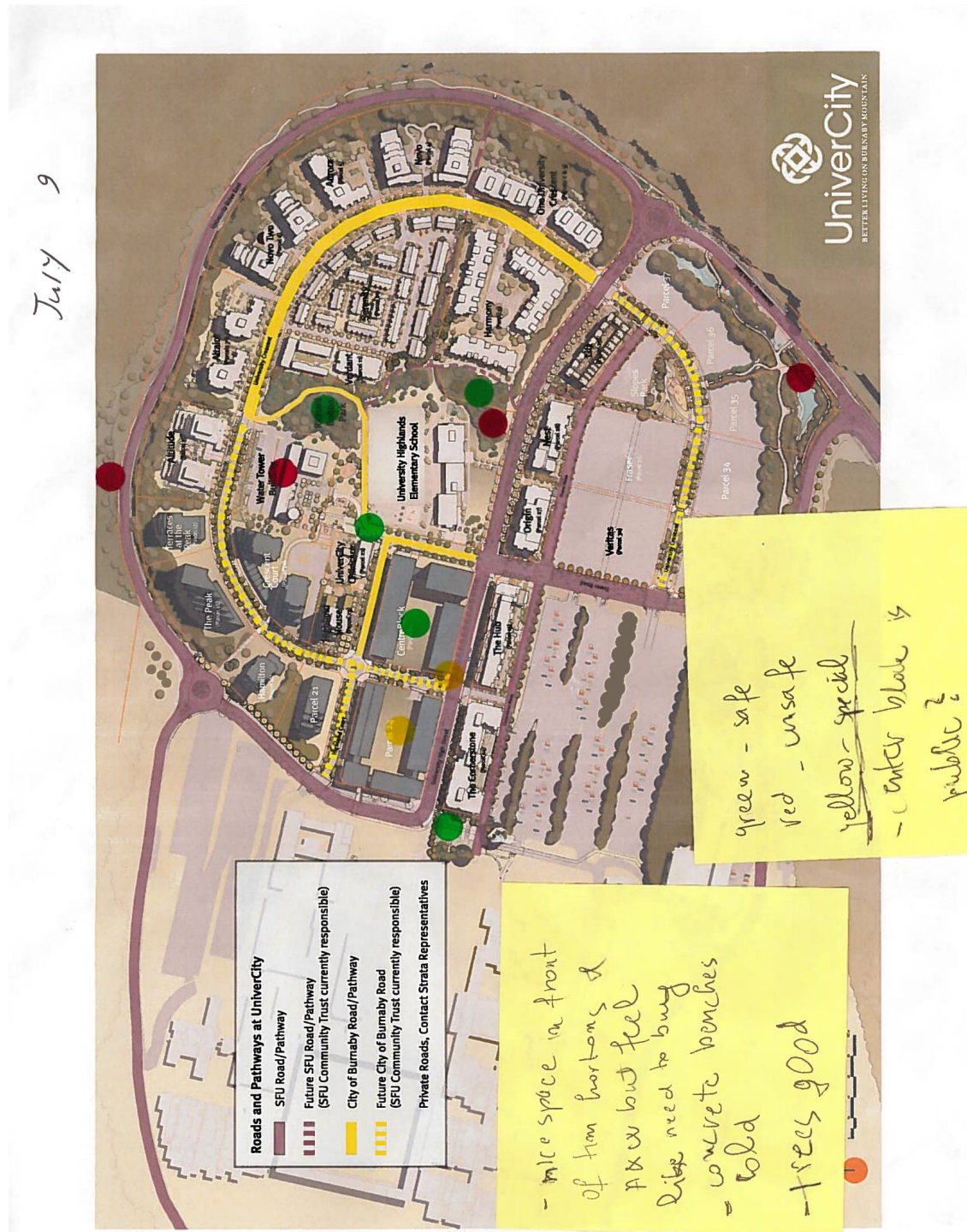
Leave your E-Mail here if you would like to be contacted for a follow-up interview on public spaces at UniverCity: _____

Thank you!

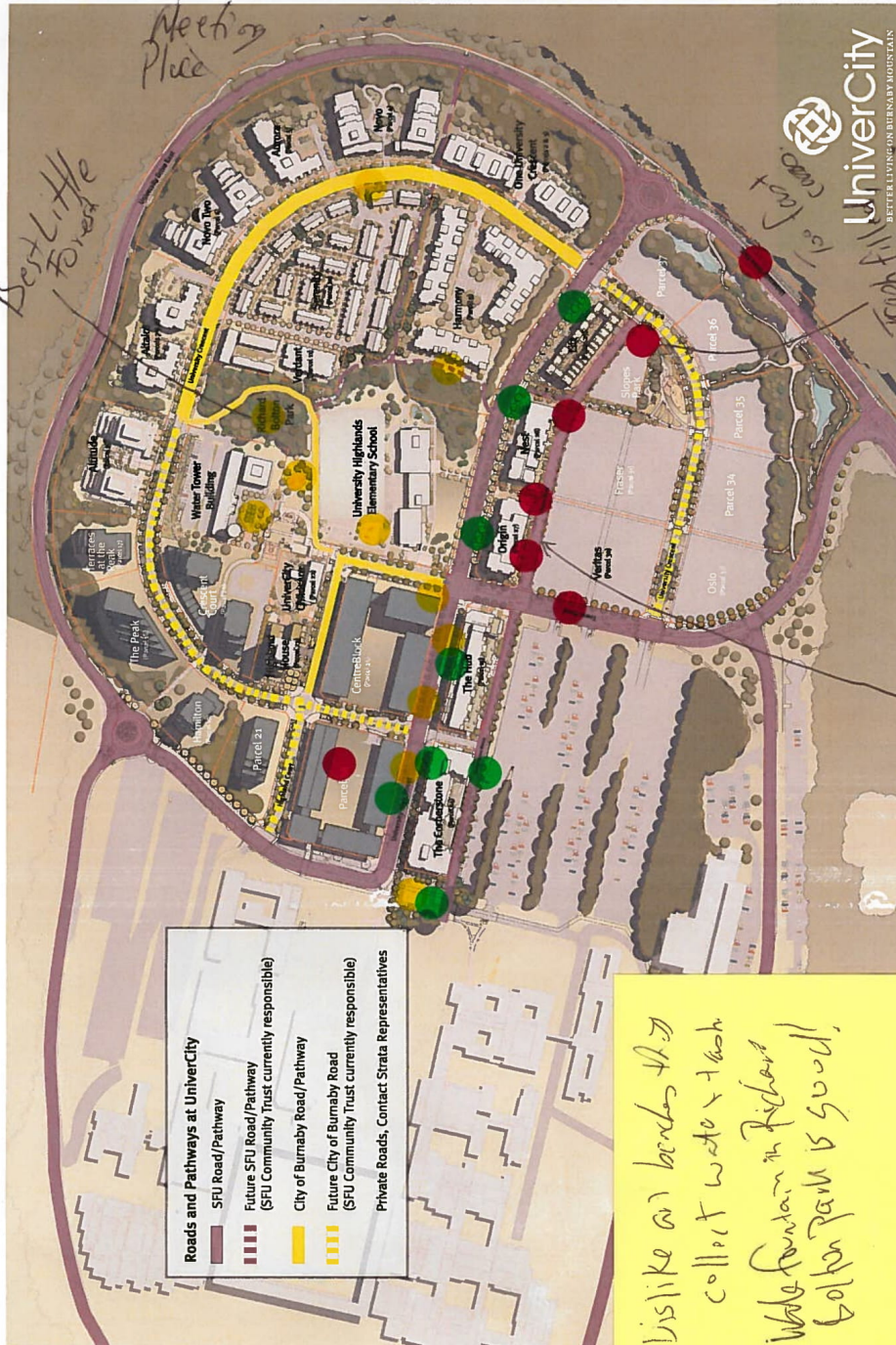
Appendix 2.0 showing scanned maps from focus group on following pages



Appendix 2.1 Scanned maps from individual participant surveys



July 9



July 9



July 9



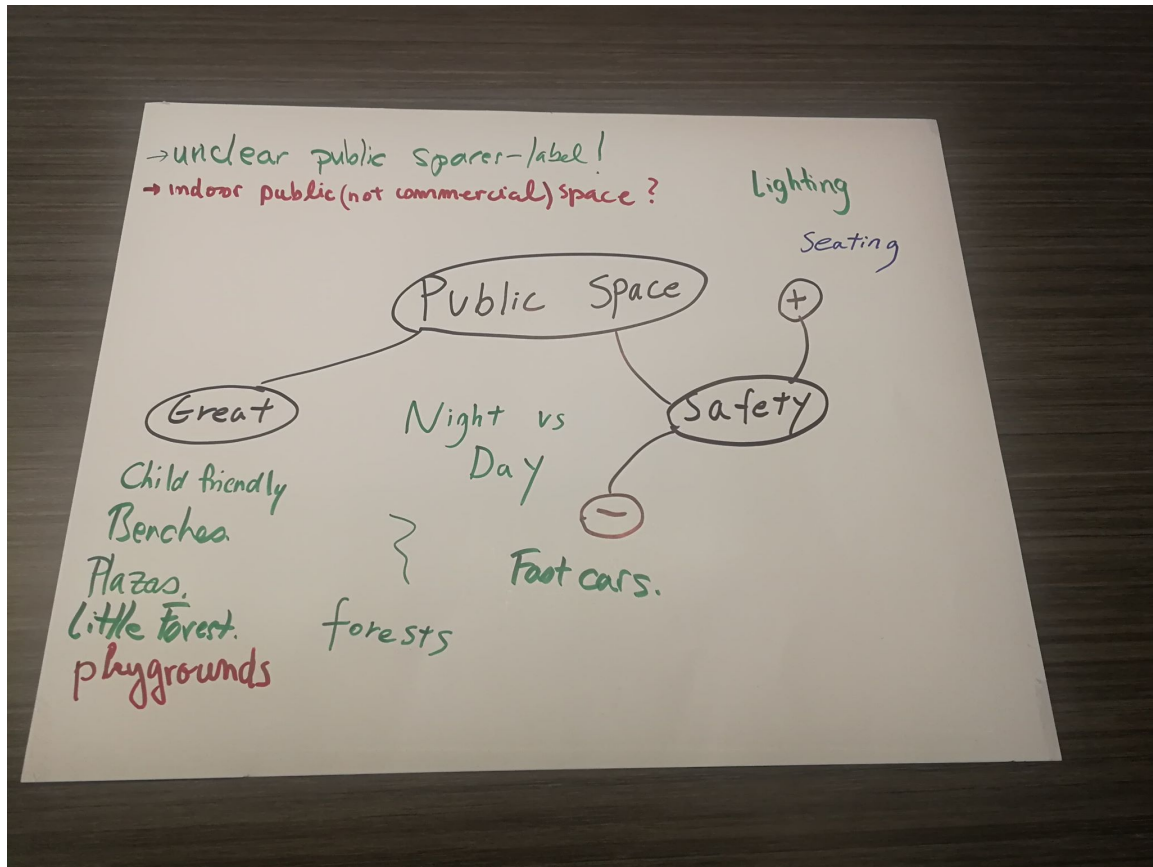
I like the forest of
Richard Bolton Park.
That's the heaven of
kids.

July 9



Appendix 3.0

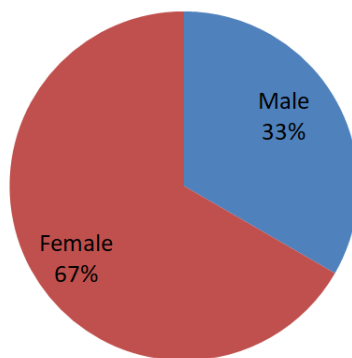
Photograph of Icebreaker Mind Map Exercise used to initiate discussion on public spaces during briefing and debriefing



Appendix 4.0

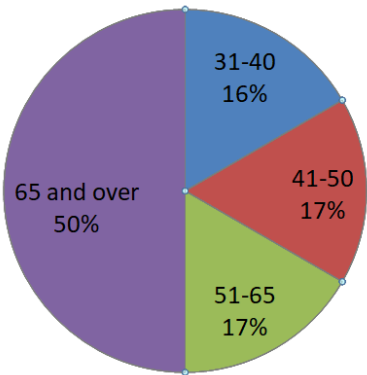
Charts and summaries of focus group demographics and results

Gender



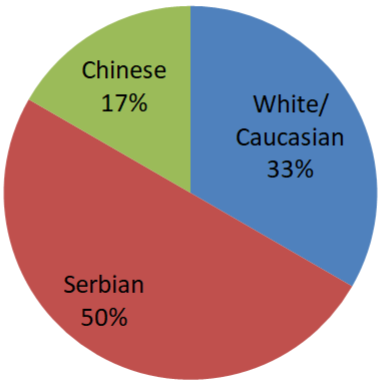
Male	2
Female	4

Age Group



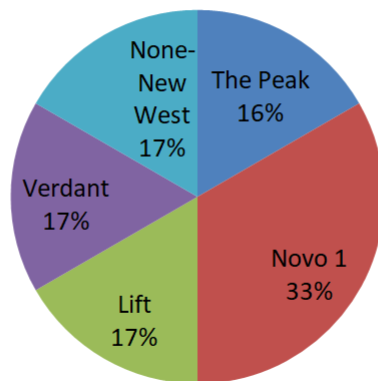
31-40	1
41-50	1
51-65	1
65 and over	3

Ethnicity



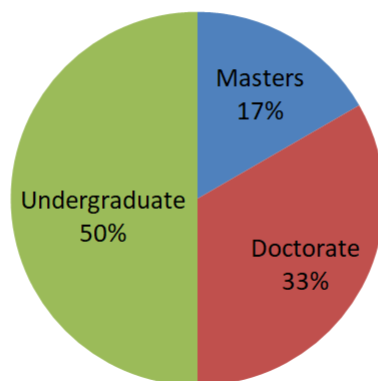
White/ Caucasian	2
Serbian	3
Chinese	1

Residence



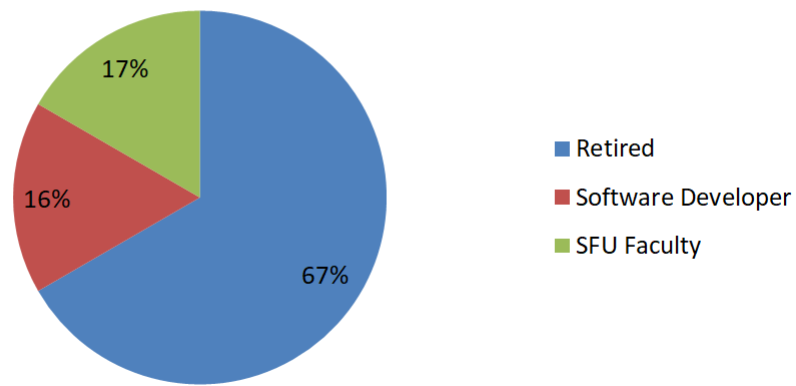
The Peak	1
Novo 1	2
Lift	1
Verdant	1
None- New West	1

Educational Attainment



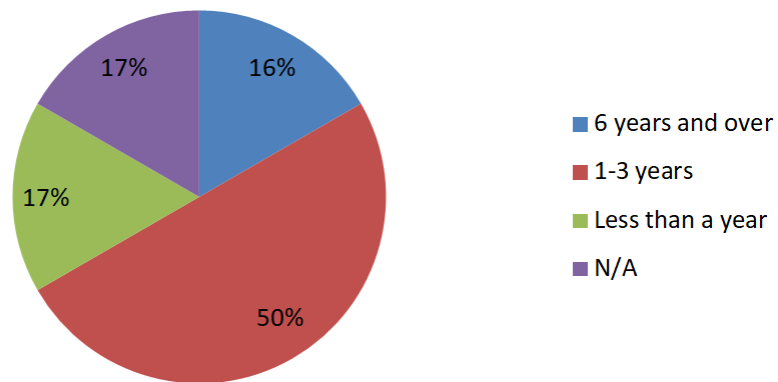
Masters	1
Doctorate	2
Undergraduate	3

Occupation



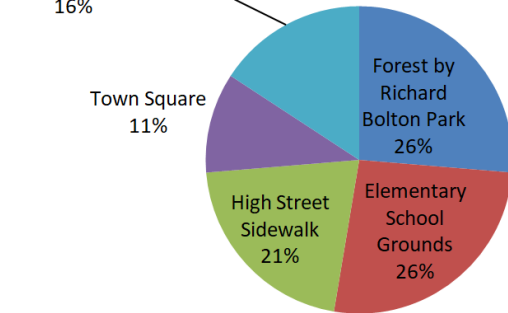
Retired	4
Software Developer	1
SFU Faculty	1

Length of Residence



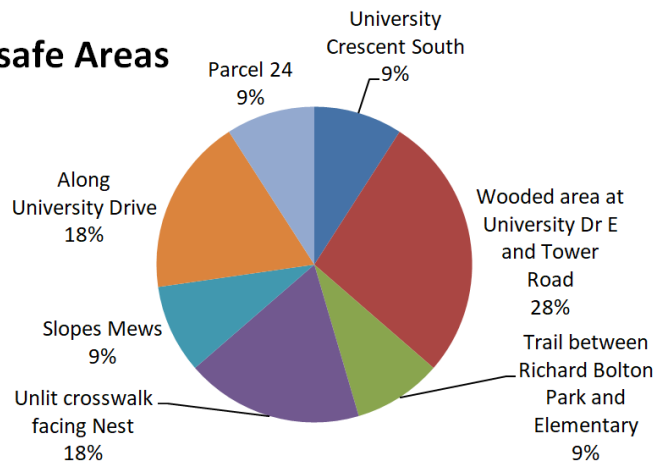
6 years and over	1
1-3 years	3
Less than a year	1
N/A	1

Safe and Enjoyable Areas



Forest by Richard Bolton Park	5
Elementary School Grounds	5
High Street Sidewalk	4
Town Square	2
Centreblock Courtyard and Sidewalks	3

Unsafe Areas



University Crescent South	1
Wooded area at University Dr E and Tower Road	3
Trail between Richard Bolton Park and Elementary	1
Unlit crosswalk facing Nest	2
Slopes Mews	1
Along University Drive	2
Parcel 24	1