

## **Hot House Discussion Group Trinity Bellwoods**

Hot House Café



For the first 9 weekends in January, Gene Threndyle ([gene@genedigs.com](mailto:gene@genedigs.com)) and Jiva Mackay turned the community greenhouse in Trinity Bellwoods into a pop-up café. In December Gene replaced the Home Depot plastic shelving with rustic cedar shelving, trellises and a bar running the length of the south side of the greenhouse. He also built a small counter and rebuilt an existing smaller counter, putting tile on both and wheels on the rebuilt one.

With some overwintering plants like rosemary, bougainvillea, calla lily, lavender and forced spring bulbs, Sunday mornings the otherwise empty greenhouse became the Hot House Discussion Group. Jutta Mason had advised us that if we called it a café, Parks Dept. would force us to get permits and would likely end up shutting us down.

As a result we had talks from Jutta about how Parks Department is making it harder for the Friends of Dufferin Grove to carry on the activities that have made that park so celebrated, we heard painter and painting instructor Martha Eleen tell how the bureaucracy at the Toronto School of Art shut down a 40 year old institution over

\$30,000, we heard from Nicholas Brooks how it took 20 years to establish a community garden on unused land owned by the TTC in the east end and we had a performative talk by artist and much loved former Queen West resident and gallery owner Andrew Harwood. He spoke about his new life in Winnipeg as compared to his life in Toronto as well as his experience with arts council funding.



We heard Tessa and Sharona Plakidas talk about Tessa's childhood moving with her mother Sharona from their King Street Condo and to an Aegean Island at age 2.



We also heard Jungle Ling tell us about his experiences taking 20 seriously long bike trips in 20 years, especially one of his latest from Whitehorse to Inuvik as well as hitch-hiking through Mongolia and Tibet.

There was a lot of music mostly recorded but also live especially Jesse Stewart demonstrating and playing the meditative and healing percussive instruments the “singing bowls”.

At every one of these Sunday functions, good coffee and gluten-free, vegetarian tacos were served up by Jiva Mackay. Some of the ingredients were roasted on the wood oven at 900 Queen West across Crawford Street.



The greenhouse was often open Saturday afternoons and occasionally during the week as well advertised as such by a sandwich board sign set out in the park. All in all we had well over 200 visitors from all over Canada and the world but especially from the neighbourhood.

Our facebook page Hot House Discussion Group Trinity Bellwoods received 112 likes and our most viewed post was seen by 384 people. Clips from some of the talks are viewable there. We were featured in an article by Chris Dart at the Torontoist and our Guest Book was signed by many people and had one proposal of marriage. Aside from the cost of 18 stackable stools and about \$100 in paint, paid for by money in a greenhouse fund, this cost Parks Department nothing more than if the greenhouse had stayed locked and empty for those 2 months.

## **What to Take Away From The Hot House Experiment?**

A successful, vibrant urban public space should not have built features in it that are not open to the general public. This is all the more true if those features are also unused and empty.

Many of the rooms in the Trinity Rec Centre are empty most of the time the building is open to the public. These are large commodious rooms that could be used for many things and yet like the greenhouse they sit unused much of the time.

One of the most unused features of the Rec Centre is the kitchen. Although built with roll-up windows suggesting it was meant to provide food to users of the building if not the park, those windows seem to never be opened.

Many fitness centres, gyms and other community centres like the Columbus Centres have cafés for their user to eat together in. This is a very civilizing activity that fosters and strengthens human relationships. For Trinity Rec Centre that is only something that could potentially be. Just outside the kitchen is a large open area that could serve as a café seating area and a meeting place not only for people using the facilities in the building but also park users. It could be a place where events like those that happened in the greenhouse took place or it could be a place for a morning coffee and a baked treat.

This is the one area of the building though that is constantly in use. 4-5 ping-pong tables fill this area as well as some poorly used and placed fixed metal benches. It is really encouraging to see that ping-pong attracts so many people from the neighbourhood but it is unfortunate that this location right outside the kitchen is where the tables have to be placed. This would be such a great meeting place for a park café especially since there is a completely unused terrace attached to it on the south side of the building.

Truly creative, engaging public space should encourage spontaneous interactions between people. It should be catalyst for creating community. That in turn sparks creativity, a sense of place and simple happiness.

In her last book, *Dark Age Ahead*, Jane Jacobs pointed out that strong communities were more likely to come out of disaster successfully. They are also more likely to have healthier people and lower crime rates. These neighbourhoods with a strong sense of community are less likely to have people die or be injured because no one cared or because people were too frightened to intervene. We can try to foster community building in Trinity Bellwoods by using facilities like the greenhouse or rec centre kitchen that have been built and paid for but that lie idle. By doing this the park would become a better, more enjoyable place to visit. We only need the creativity and the will to do it.