



# Cities For Youth

Toolkit for Youth Engagement in Planning

January 2022



School of  
Urban & Regional Planning  
Faculty of Community Services

# Acknowledgments

This report was prepared on behalf of Urban Minds, based out of lands now referred to as 'Toronto'. As such, we ask our readers to take a moment to reflect on the meaning of place and in doing so recognize the various traditional lands on which our organization is based. "Toronto is in the 'Dish With One Spoon Territory'. The Dish With One Spoon is a treaty between the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee that bound them to share the territory and protect the land. Subsequent Indigenous Nations and peoples, Europeans and all newcomers have been invited into this treaty in the spirit of peace, friendship and respect. We encourage everyone reading this report to embody this spirit throughout their personal and professional activities as they navigate the spaces covered by this treaty, and beyond.

This project was delivered in partnership with the Ontario Professional Planning Institute (OPPI), formerly Ryerson University\* and the Mitacs Accelerate program. This work was offered by Urban Minds as a summer internship position in conjunction with Ryerson's School of Urban and Regional Planning. As a student, I am very thankful for this opportunity to work with all of the aforementioned stakeholders, as well as all of the respondents. It was a great chance for me to further my education, by managing a project independently, under the supervision of supportive professionals.

Having been curious about a career in engagement, I was excited to learn about the process, and contribute meaningfully to this field of work. Having the opportunity to learn from planners and other allied professionals was eye-opening. As a newcomer to the profession, I look forward to bringing this imparted knowledge with me as my career progresses and finding ways to continue supporting the planning and engagement professions. Thank you to all of our respondents; for your enthusiasm, support, time and wisdom. Not only were you instrumental to my formal planning education, your contributions will support Urban Minds in their mission to continue engaging and inspiring youth.



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This work was supported by Mitacs through the Mitacs Accelerate program.

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\*In August 2021, the university announced it would begin a renaming process. In this toolkit, we will be referring to the university using its current official name, Ryerson University, with the understanding of Egerton Ryerson's role in the residential school system in Canada and the harm it has inflicted and continues to inflict on Indigenous peoples.

# About Urban Minds

## Our mission

To create meaningful ways for youth to shape equitable and sustainable cities.

## About us

At Urban Minds, we want to transform youth engagement for city-building projects from being a tiresome chore into an inspiring journey. We want to change the perception of youth as lesser, passive participants to that of youth as capable, active co-creators.

Municipalities and civic organizations have a hard time engaging youth. They don't know how to reach them, how to appeal to them, and how to effectively involve them. They have limited time and resources, or find it awkward, to cultivate relationships with youth.

We help municipalities and civic organizations to better connect with youth and design youth-friendly spaces, programs, and services. We help our clients develop effective recruitment strategies and identify incentives to get youth involved. We also act as relationship builders to bridge the gap between our clients and the youth we work with.



Founded in 2016, our team has directly worked with over 500 students from more than 50 schools across the Greater Toronto Area. Through our 1UP Youth City Builders Program, we inspire and equip high school students to lead their own community design-build projects and co-design spaces with our clients. Our first youth-friendly public art installation, #WouldYouRatherTO, is a winner of the Everyone is King: Design-Build Competition for the King Street Pilot Project in Toronto.

Today, we continue to build relationships with municipalities and civic organizations to help them deliver their strategic and design objectives through youth engagement.

EVENTS,  
TRENDS,  
AND MORE  
! membership

Solidarity  
Circular

# The Next Economy

2018-2019

**REAL LIFE SUPERVISED:** CSR members are breaking down barriers, creating solutions, and saving the planet.

**IT'S BEEN HOW LONG?** These years of CSR and other things you might be surprised to learn about us.

**FROM TWELVE TO NINE:** These members are the creative spaces that function as the heart of our community.

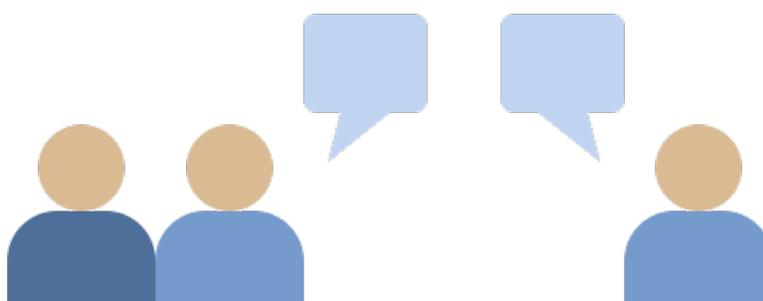
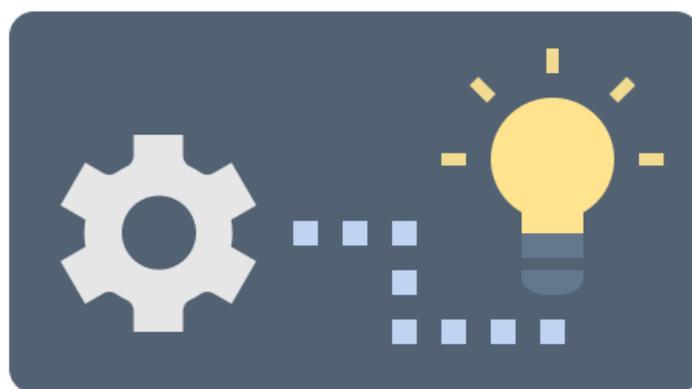
**WHAT'S SO NEW ABOUT THE NEXT ECONOMY?** Putting people and planet before profit.

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OF



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# 1. Executive Summary



**This is a toolkit of best practices in youth engagement in urban planning.**

Urban Minds centres its work around the core belief that youth perspectives in city building are highly valuable. As city dwellers, youth have unique perspectives on urban spaces; perspectives that we believe should inform how spaces and communities are planned, and we're not the only ones that feel this way!

A range of professionals have contributed meaningfully to the field of youth engagement by crafting highly specialized policy frameworks for working alongside youth. The team at Urban Minds are curious about what youth engagement really means to professionals in urban planning, and related industries. We want to explore youth engagement in practice, beyond the reports and policy documents. **We want to create a toolkit of best practices in youth engagement that are actionable and can be shared with others.**

Through this work, we spoke with 11 industry professionals who shed some light on what youth engagement looks like on the ground. Here's what we learned:

## **We heard that youth engagement is challenging.**

There are educational barriers that limit who is most able to engage in the planning process, oftentimes youth don't make the cut. Youth are a diverse bunch, with diverse backgrounds and needs; our engagement with them must reflect this reality. The flexibility of the planning process can be a blessing and a curse: youth engagement can be selectively employed, but is not strictly enforced.

## **The good news? Getting started on youth engagement is relatively easy.**

Planners and engagement specialists can leverage existing skills to bring youth into the conversation. We can create new organizational structures that are more welcoming to youth, and in turn, more welcoming to all. We can work to support youth and adults as they build their capacity to understand urban systems. This capacity is the key to successful intergenerational interventions. We can take an interdisciplinary approach that benefits from rich partnerships. We can leverage and deepen our networks as we seek to better engage with youth.



**There is a whole suite of tools and strategies to engage youth.** After speaking on their challenges that impact their work, and the guiding principles that ground it, our respondents explored a range of specific tools they have used in their youth engagement practice. From them, we heard about various collaborative, arts-based, intersectional and youth-led approaches to engagement. Tools that are highly deployable to engage with youth in a variety of situations.

**Youth have high standards for digital communication and events.** Our respondents also shed light on the need for graphically rich and relevant communication campaigns. These must be highly curated and respectful of how youth navigate communications and consume content on social media platforms. Digital engagement events must likewise be designed to meet the needs of a generation of youth who grew up tapping, swiping and liking.

**Don't forget about feedback and follow-up.** This toolkit ends with a brief section detailing the importance of a robust feedback and follow-up process, as informed by our interviews. Youth benefit from these processes, as they exemplify how professionals value their time and input. They also serve to shape the design of future engagement opportunities; good feedback collection and follow-up makes for youth friendly engagement design.

## 2. Introduction



Cities are dynamic environments; urban spaces change to reflect the needs and perspectives of their users. As planning professionals, we are tasked with evaluating and understanding the processes of change. For many planning and engagement professionals, our roles go beyond the built environment, as we support communities in their navigation of urban spaces. Our work involves a steady negotiation between professional jargon and accessible language; all in an effort to allow more members of our communities to understand and thrive in changing environments.

As an organization, Urban Minds furthers this work by engaging and working with young people; a group generally underserved by the traditional planning processes and the frameworks that underpin them. Through our efforts, we generate opportunities for youth to engage in the city and community building processes in impactful ways. Core to our understanding of youth engagement is the value that youth bring to the planning table and the need to prioritize deep, meaningful engagements with young people.

### 2.1 Youth approach to planning

This process, described by one interview respondent as a “youth approach to planning”, recognizes that youth are current and future users of urban spaces and should therefore be granted opportunities to be participatory in the planning process. Such an approach acknowledges the long time horizons for many large-scale urban development projects. A youth approach to planning and engagement, being innately future-focused and cross-generational, has the potential to generate resilient, intersectional and robust solutions to urban issues.

Furthermore, such an approach recognizes the capacity at which youth are able to support and learn from their communities. Youth are primed for active participation, feedback and critical thinking thanks to their lived experiences in the educational system. As community builders, this is a resource we should be leveraging responsibly.

## 2.2 Previous research and policies

This original piece of research was generated through a series of semi-structured studies with industry professionals (see Methodology in the appendix for further detail); it presents ideas collected from this research process. This work builds on existing literature, including the range of youth engagement strategies and relevant documents, crafted by various stakeholders including communities, municipalities and organizations.

Cities including Toronto, ON<sup>1</sup> and Airdrie, AB<sup>2</sup> have undertaken comprehensive consultation programs to craft strategic plans for engaging youth; these documents are informed by youth perspectives and suggest opportunities and gaps for how these municipalities may work to engage youth more thoroughly. These documents tend to end with a series of recommendations, expanding on how such a document may impact the work that planners and urban professionals are doing. Other municipalities, such as St John's, NL<sup>3</sup> and Hamilton, ON<sup>4</sup> have taken a more pragmatic approach, integrating more actionable items and tools that may be used for engaging young people.

In addition to documents produced by municipalities, other organizations have produced documents that expand on the benefits of youth engagement. Some take a broader approach, outlining how youth engagement can be leveraged to strengthen communities<sup>5</sup>, while others take a targeted approach by describing a series of case studies in which youth engagement has had a tangible impact on a community or initiative<sup>6,7</sup>. Some of these tools are crafted by think tanks or non-profits and are aimed at policy makers and municipal leaders; they seek to arm them with the proper tools to integrate youth engagement into their field of work<sup>8</sup>.

## 2.3 Purpose of this toolkit

This toolkit aims to take on a more actionable approach, by building on the work done by Urban Minds, fueled by our core values. It is an exploration of the current state of youth engagement in practice conducted through 11 in-depth interviews with respondents working in or adjacent to urban planning and community building. This work acknowledges the due diligence that various stakeholders have



undertaken in the crafting of youth engagement strategies and similar policy frameworks, as outlined above, and seeks to deepen our understanding of what it takes to engage youth in meaningful and impactful ways.

The toolkit serves to illustrate the challenges and opportunities that planning allied professionals face in the operationalization and implementation of such policy documents in ways that relate to their work. Beyond challenges and opportunities, this toolkit presents a range of best practices for youth engagement along with a series of examples illustrating contemporary approaches to youth civic engagement. Urban Minds hopes that this record of youth engagement in practice will support practitioners as they grow their youth engagement practices and continue integrating youthful voices in the city and community building processes.

# 3. Challenges to Youth Engagement

We know that youth engagement is a complex, nuanced process, involving various stakeholders. It is not uncommon for professionals involved in the process to navigate various sociopolitical barriers as they continue integrating youth engagement principles into their work. Many of these challenges stem from the historical undervaluation of youth and their perspectives in city planning. Many of our respondents spoke to some of these challenges in relation to their work; these are outlined below. It must be mentioned that this list of challenges is not exhaustive; any professional seeking to engage youth must attempt to understand any additional context-specific challenges.



## 3.1 Current processes make participation difficult for the inexperienced

There are significant gaps between the civic education that the general public receives at the secondary school level and the actual planning and engagement processes that take place for most projects. Unless the participant has formal postsecondary education or training in related fields, or has the privilege and capacity to negotiate through the structures and processes, it is difficult to participate in these processes. Furthermore, these processes differ from project to project. Without knowledge or previous experience, youth participants may not fully grasp the intentions, expectations and outcomes of each process.

## 3.2 There is no universally accepted framework for the term “youth”

Among respondents, no single consensus on the life stages being served by “youth” programming was apparent. All of our respondents acknowledge the transitional nature of life stages that may belong in the “youth” umbrella and the need for targeted and well designed programming and services. This toolkit was crafted through interviews with professionals each having different functional definitions for the term “youth”. As such, their approach to youth engagement reflects their perspective on this cohort. The label “youth” is age-specific but youth engagement processes need to consider more than only their ages. Their cultural, socio-economic, sexual and political identities inform their valuable contributions to civic life and our engagement efforts need to recognize this richness.

### 3.3 Youth may be dependents, which limits them

Youth as participants in any engagement process may be limited by their dependency. Their agency, mobility and financial standing should be considered in the planning and design of engagement strategies. Youth in various transitional life stages may have a range of commitments (i.e. education, employment, activism, etc), which they may need to prioritize for their wellbeing and livelihood.



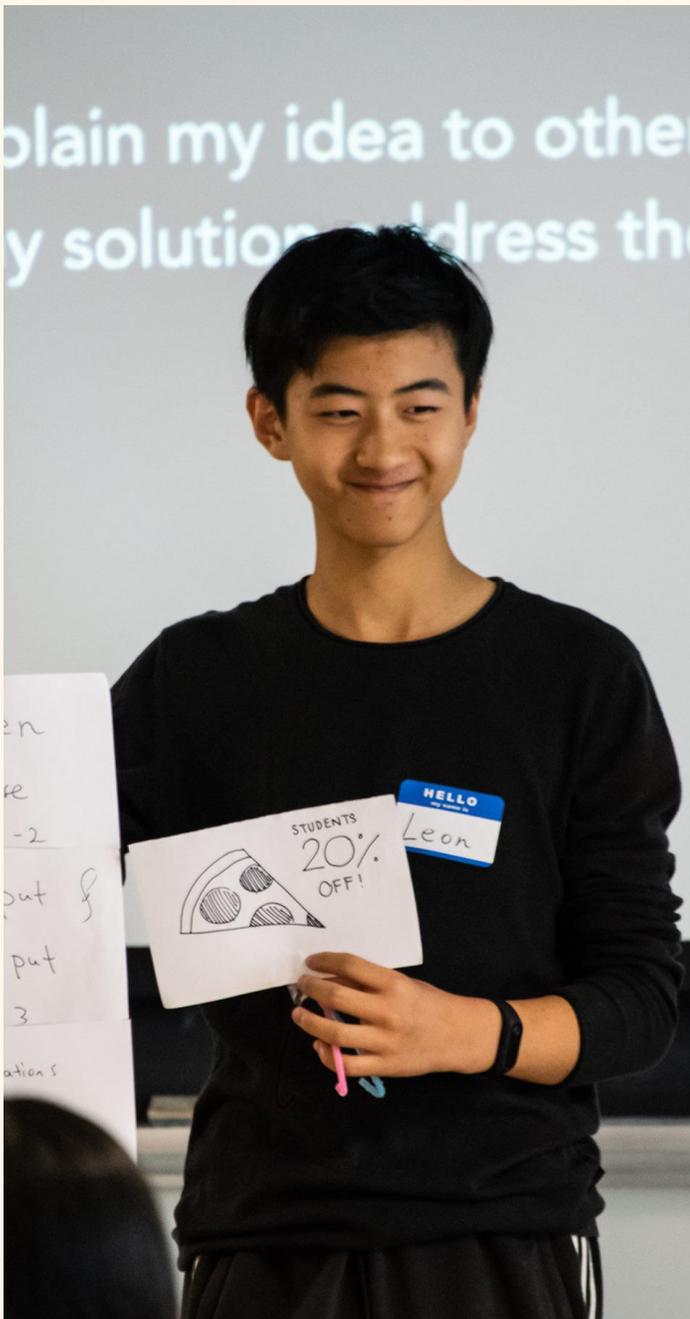
### 3.4 There is a need for intersectional spaces, for youth, by youth

Due to spatial and other barriers, youth are limited in terms of the spaces they occupy. They often remain in adult-dominated or adult-designed spaces that may not be conducive to their desired uses. Policing and surveillance are of concern in these spaces especially when deployed against Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour (IBPOC) and marginalized youth communities.

### 3.5 Youth engagement strategies are not operationalized consistently

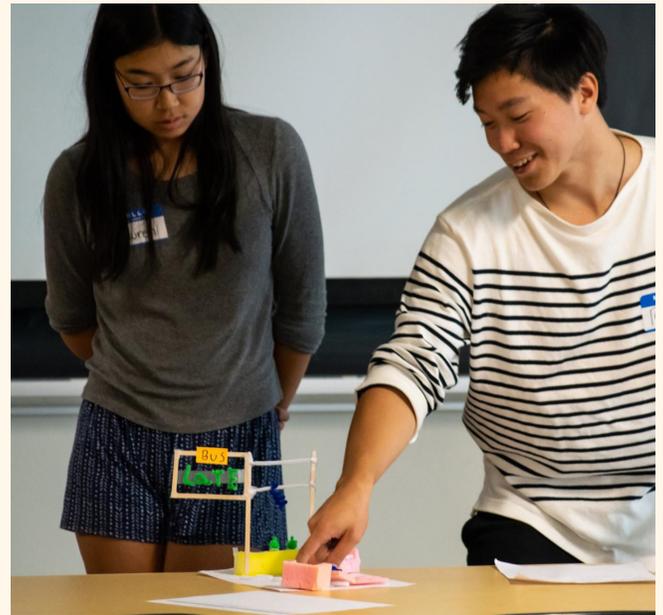
Youth engagement strategies and policy documents have been produced by a range of municipalities. These robust documents are rich in expertise and play an important role in youth engagement design and delivery. However, many of our respondents have suggested that these documents are not always used to their full potential beyond their publication; some not having been put into action. There is a need for these policies to be deployed uniformly. One respondent expressed their thoughts on this matter as follows:

“So project by project, maybe people are doing different things. But there isn’t a holistic system like our official plan and the Planning Act, and everything [that] says you must include all these forces, but the operationalization of it is left up to the municipality, and then in the end, it’s left up to the planner. So if there’s no guiding framework, if a municipality doesn’t take engagement seriously and put resources [into] it, it’s not going to happen.”



### 3.6 Existing organizational structures are not always leveraged extensively

Respondents suggested that certain existing youth-driven organizations, like youth cabinets and youth councils, are not leveraged to their full extent. Planners should rely on existing organizations and services so as to avoid the duplication of programming. Certain other tools that could be inclusive of youth, such as advisory and working groups, are not always regulated. This leaves their deployment up to the project leaders. There is an opportunity to build youth groups and further integrate them systematically into the planning process.



### 3.7 Traditional engagement strategies may not be appealing to other communities

Some respondents expressed the challenges they face in attracting marginalized communities to more traditional engagement settings (e.g. Public Information Centres or PICs). One respondent explained that participant demographics are tracked by their municipality and that the lack of participant diversity is a recurring issue. Some participants may not feel comfortable in such settings, others may not feel adequately represented, others still may feel as though they do not have the appropriate lived experience to comment and/or participate. One respondent expanded on this as follows:

“It can be, I think, for a young person, trying to voice an opinion that is not popular amongst the majority of people that do attend those meetings, which are Caucasian males, who are homeowners over the age of 65, or 55. That it’s a very intimidating space for anybody, really, anybody that has an opposing opinion.”

### **3.8 Engagement is trust-based; embedded power dynamics must be observed critically**

Planners and engagement professionals should consider who is leading engagement opportunities, and how their position will be viewed and experienced by participants. Successful engagements hinge on the development of mutual trust and open communication between facilitators, organizers and participants. It is essential to consider how the presence of certain stakeholders may alter the outcomes of an engagement opportunity (e.g. law enforcement agents participating in discussions with IBPOC communities). In any case, effort should be made to share power between relevant stakeholders, with a focus on redistributing power towards highly marginalized participants.

### **3.9 Innovative engagement strategies are not universally perceived as favourable**

Some of our respondents suggested that non-traditional, innovative approaches (such as some of those outlined later in section 5), may be harder to implement. There may be barriers with securing funding for more human resources. Additionally, non-traditional outputs may not be valued by traditional means of data collection and analysis. Planners should continue to explore these opportunities while finding ways to streamline data and feedback collection from less traditional engagement events. This is required so as to support their value and have them influence the outcomes in planning.



### **3.10 Organizational barriers may impact the feedback and follow-up process negatively**

The planning process is complex and involves a variety of stakeholders; often various actors are involved through the course of a project's lifetime. Larger projects may require information to be handled by multiple teams. The silos between teams and actors may negatively impact how information is shared with participants in the form of feedback and follow-up materials. In certain circumstances this may be further impacted by confidentiality and privacy policies. These policies may limit the degree to which external actors can understand a project's process, as well as the ways in which their feedback has influenced a project. Youth should be seen as an integral stakeholder, and their involvement throughout a project's life course should include feedback and follow-up processes.

For more information:  
[urbanminds.co/CitiesForYouth](http://urbanminds.co/CitiesForYouth)