



The Highline Park New York City, Source: Wiki Commons

Governance

In an era of reduced public spending in cities, there is growing consensus that inviting the private sector to invest in the public realm is necessary. The drawback, however, is that establishing lead roles for private sector bodies may set a precedent for 'letting government off the hook'. Achieving a balance between private involvement and the public good is challenging; private funders generally don't want governments to make decisions with their own money, but governments are reluctant to cede control over public space.

In terms of partnerships, community groups and some developers bring forth imaginative and thoughtful ideas to improve the public realm, only to see them watered down or rejected outright. Toronto has a history of squashing forward-thinking, innovative ideas, and yet there is no shortage of ideas of how to build a vibrant public realm. A combination of top-down and bottom-up efforts is essential to create viable partnerships that spark political will to drive change.

The coming together of multi-sector partners may offer fresh perspectives, but assembling sustainable partnerships around this model is a challenge. The means to fulfill these aspirations are met with contextual challenges, such as the social and cultural expectations about the function of public spaces, and questions over the stewardship and maintenance of the public realm.

"Changing the governance structure is a challenge. Lots of people agree that more diffuse and decentralized governance is the way to go, but this is a change people may not be ready for." (Director, urban non-profit sector)

Recommendations

1. Public and Private Resources targeted for the public realm should support existing local groups with plans and frameworks in place, such as BIAs, while expanding opportunities to bring new voices into the discussion about alternative partnership models.
2. The City of Toronto should integrate stronger partnership practices into policy. Greater flexibility in partnership models is needed so that the aspirations of stakeholders are reconciled, rather than undermined. If the city does not consider ways to reorient its procedures for working with others, then the current system will remain inhospitable to external partners.
3. The city of Toronto should continue to strengthen communication efforts around policy areas such as planning. City divisions must better communicate their policies and objectives and on appropriate uses in a non-technical manner so communities can access them freely.