

# CIP Awards for Planning Excellence 2012

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## Public Spaces, Activity and Urban Form Strategic Framework

**Primary Contact:**  
**Mark Sterling, MCIP RPP**  
**+1 416 971 4931**  
**mark@andco.com**

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**ORIGINAL**



UNIVERSITY OF  
SASKATCHEWAN

Regional and Urban  
Planning



*City of*  
**Saskatoon**



**Sweeny  
Sterling  
Finlayson & Co  
Architects Inc.**

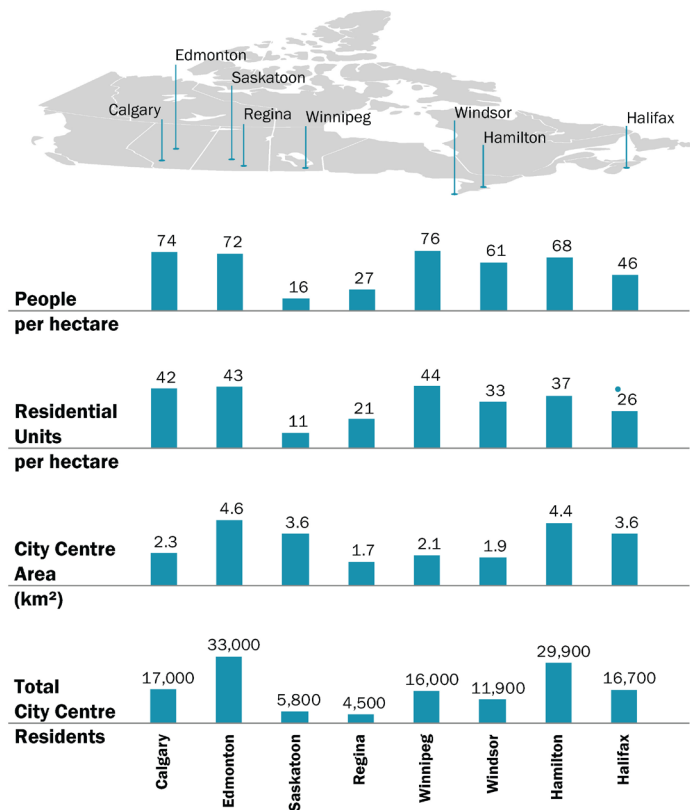
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# Summary

## The Public Spaces, Activity and Urban Form Strategic Framework is Phase 1 of the new Plan for Saskatoon’s City Centre.

## The Framework provides a rationale to support and assess future plans, projects, programs and policies that promote public life through good urbanism in the City Centre.

**\* Saskatoon’s City Centre has a lower population density than any of the other sampled cities**



(Diagrams are excerpts from the City Comparison section of the report)

Like many cities Saskatoon has experienced declining central densities, suburban sprawl, increased commuting and more knowledge intensive labour. Today fewer people use public space for their day-to-day living and many of Saskatoon’s public spaces have lost their original function as social places. Over time, automobiles and privatized functions have displaced softer social activities and the city has lost valuable public space.

Saskatchewan cities are transforming. Part of that transformation is a growing creative culture among citizens, professionals and decision-makers. The public is advocating for a much stronger sense of place in the public realm. With that comes a demand for urban quality and the exceptional design of public spaces, particularly in the downtown area. In response to the desire to create a healthy and dynamic city centre, the City initiated the Public Spaces, Activity and Urban Form Strategic Framework — the first phase of a new City Centre Plan for Saskatoon. The City Centre study area

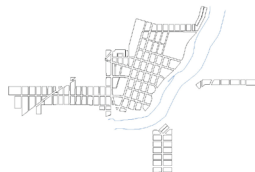
comprises 3.6 square kilometres and encompasses the original downtowns of Saskatoon, Nutana, and Riversdale, as well as main streets leading into the centre. Saskatoon’s City Centre has a lower population density than any other city centre in comparable Canadian cities.

The Strategic Framework represents a deliberate and timely shift in attitude toward planning and designing our cities. It emphasizes public life as a leading priority for the creation of successful cities by standards of economy, environment, culture, society and health. An objective of the study was to provide a methodological and empirical foundation to quantify and qualify the public space and pedestrian-related conditions found within Saskatoon’s City Centre. A second objective was to provide recommendations to guide subsequent phases of the City Centre Plan grounded on the evidence-based methodology and analysis. The Framework provides a rationale to support and assess future plans, projects, programs and policies that promote



### Edmonton

<b>4.6 km<sup>2</sup></b>	Area
<b>32,996</b>	Residents
<b>19,852</b>	Households
<b>72</b>	People per hectare
<b>43</b>	Units per hectare
<b>862,544</b>	Urban area population
<b>135x275 m</b>	Typical block size
<b>36 m</b>	Typical main street width



### Saskatoon

<b>3.6 km<sup>2</sup></b>	Area
<b>5,804</b>	Residents
<b>3,911</b>	Households
<b>16</b>	People per hectare
<b>11</b>	Units per hectare
<b>202,425</b>	Urban area population
<b>90x150 m</b>	Typical block size
<b>30 m</b>	Typical main street width



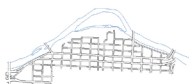
### Winnipeg

<b>2.1 km<sup>2</sup></b>	Area
<b>16,019</b>	Residents
<b>9,202</b>	Households
<b>76</b>	People per hectare
<b>44</b>	Units per hectare
<b>641,483</b>	Urban area population
<b>70x145 m</b>	Typical block size
<b>43 m</b>	Typical main street width



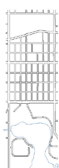
### Hamilton

<b>4.4 km<sup>2</sup></b>	Area
<b>29,909</b>	Residents
<b>16,221</b>	Households
<b>68</b>	People per hectare
<b>37</b>	Units per hectare
<b>647,634</b>	Urban area population
<b>90x110 m</b>	Typical block size
<b>33 m</b>	Typical main street width



### Calgary

<b>2.3 km<sup>2</sup></b>	Area
<b>16,966</b>	Residents
<b>9,674</b>	Households
<b>74</b>	People per hectare
<b>42</b>	Units per hectare
<b>988,079</b>	Urban area population
<b>85x150 m</b>	Typical block size
<b>24 m</b>	Typical main street width



### Regina

<b>1.7 km<sup>2</sup></b>	Area
<b>4,458</b>	Residents
<b>3,433</b>	Households
<b>27</b>	People per hectare
<b>21</b>	Units per hectare
<b>179,246</b>	Urban area population
<b>85x160 m</b>	Typical block size
<b>40 m</b>	Typical main street width



### Windsor

<b>1.9 km<sup>2</sup></b>	Area
<b>11,904</b>	Residents
<b>6,348</b>	Households
<b>61</b>	People per hectare
<b>33</b>	Units per hectare
<b>278,765</b>	Urban area population
<b>60x115 m</b>	Typical block size
<b>34 m</b>	Typical main street width



### Halifax

<b>4.6 km<sup>2</sup></b>	Area
<b>16,683</b>	Residents
<b>9,560</b>	Households
<b>46</b>	People per hectare
<b>26</b>	Units per hectare
<b>282,924</b>	Urban area population
<b>33x95 m</b>	Typical block size
<b>32 m</b>	Typical main street width

public life through good urbanism in the City Centre. Future data collection and analysis conducted using the same methodology will monitor the impacts and outcomes of civic investment in public space. The Framework will also act as a baseline to assess the increased quality of the public realm over time.

The Strategic Framework utilizes a methodology for recording and understanding public life in urban context. The report is based on a range of data sources including the Canadian Census, City of Saskatoon tabular and GIS data, on-the-ground observations and intercept studies conducted by researchers from the University of Saskatchewan. The findings, portrayed in the charts, maps, and illustrations in the report, were generated from data using a methodology that can be repeated in future years to assess changes to the quality of public life in Saskatoon's City Centre. One of the greatest outcomes of the project has yet to come, and that is the longitudinal database evaluating dynamic

interplay between public spaces, activity and urban form that will result from this pioneering study.

Often conventional planning practice produces disparate reports that study urban issues in isolation: traffic, housing, retail studies all produced at different times. The Strategic Framework captures a wide range of issues for one year (2010) using comparable maps and graphics revealing connections between aspects that define the City Centre. The Framework is an evidenced-based approach to planning that acknowledges that in order to plan and design our city centres it is imperative to first understand the relationship between public space, activity and urban form.

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## How the Framework meets the evaluation criteria



The Public Spaces, Activity and Urban Form Strategic Framework – Phase One of the new Plan for Saskatoon’s City Centre – was undertaken as a pioneering collaboration between the City of Saskatoon, the University of

Saskatchewan, and a private consultant, Sweeny Sterling Finlayson &Co Architects Inc. (&Co), completed in 2011.

**The project involved two main components: 1) research design and field data collection (completed in 2010), and 2) data analysis and representation, and recommendations presented as ‘opportunities’** for guiding the remaining stages of the city centre planning process. The first component was completed by two faculty members (Drs. Jill Gunn MCIP and Ryan Walker MCIP) and 12 senior student researchers of the Regional and Urban Planning Program, University of Saskatchewan, with assistance from close to 50 community volunteers. The second component was undertaken by the planning consultant team at Sweeny Sterling Finlayson &Co Architects Inc. in Toronto, under the leadership of Mark Sterling MCIP, with support from personnel at Stantec in Saskatoon. Staff at the City of Saskatoon, under the leadership of Rick Howse MCIP, contributed to both components and managed the project with guidance from a steering committee comprised of representatives from City departments, the University of Saskatchewan, Meewasin Valley Authority and the business improvement districts based in the city centre. The Public Spaces, Activity and Urban Form Strategic Framework was adopted by Saskatoon City Council on November 21, 2011.

**The Framework focuses on urban quality and the public life of Saskatoon’s city centre.** Urban quality is a concept that is used to evoke place characteristics that make public spaces feel comfortable, safe and attractive. Sunlight, places to sit, trees, food, diversity and the presence of other people, in part, make attractive places. Urban quality is critical to a diverse and vibrant public life, which in turn is a key feature of successful cities and urban economies.

**The project examined the public spaces and urban form of Saskatoon and analyzed the activity of people in those spaces.** The Framework includes a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between the physical environment, socioeconomic factors and public life. Socioeconomic analysis included such data as land values, population distribution, public events, entertainment destinations and social demographics. Our team collected data on the ground that describes public spaces and the buildings that surround them such as building frontages, surface parking, seating, cafés, views to nature and the South Saskatchewan River valley, trees and other factors that provide a spatial framework for urban activity. Public life was measured by recording the activity of people at ground level including sitting, walking, playing, standing and talking, or cycling. The report analyses a range of indicators to draw relationships between the public space and public life of the city centre, communicating findings through charts, graphs, photography, information graphics and cartography.

**The first part of the study included a research design and methodology that provided the empirical basis for understanding how the public realm in Saskatoon’s City Centre is working now,** with data gathered during June and November 2010, the shoulder seasons at the transition to both summer and winter. It was premised on the idea that to plan and design improvements to streetscapes, public spaces, and pedestrian and cycling networks in the city centre, it was imperative to first understand how these elements of the public realm currently work. Furthermore, efforts to extend the vitality of public life in the city centre would be most pragmatically directed at prolonging activity outward from the shoulder seasons. The team conducted research about the history of urban form, public space and planning in Saskatoon. Previous and current planning studies were reviewed including the Official Community Plan, economic studies, and traffic and transit studies. The project team examined methodologies used elsewhere and developed or adapted a range of replicable methodologies to empirically measure urban quality, public space use, pedestrian and cycling movement including quantitative and qualitative data gathering techniques.

The Strategic Framework includes the following chapters:

*Introduction:* Outlines the approach to the study and describes how the City Centre fits within the larger city context.

*Urban Life:* Describes and analyzes demographic distribution and geographic locations of people, services, and amenities to describe how people live, work, shop and visit the City Centre.

*Public Space and Movement:* Records and analyzes the movement of people within the City Centre by mode including pedestrians, bicycles, transit and vehicles.

*Public Activity:* Illustrates and analyzes the distribution and quality of public spaces in the City Centre and their relationship to public life.

*Opportunities:* Outlines opportunities based on the analysis above to achieve the community's vision for the future of the City Centre, which would include an abundance new development, employment, open spaces, cultural attractions and lively streets in the heart of Saskatoon, animated by people in a high quality public realm.

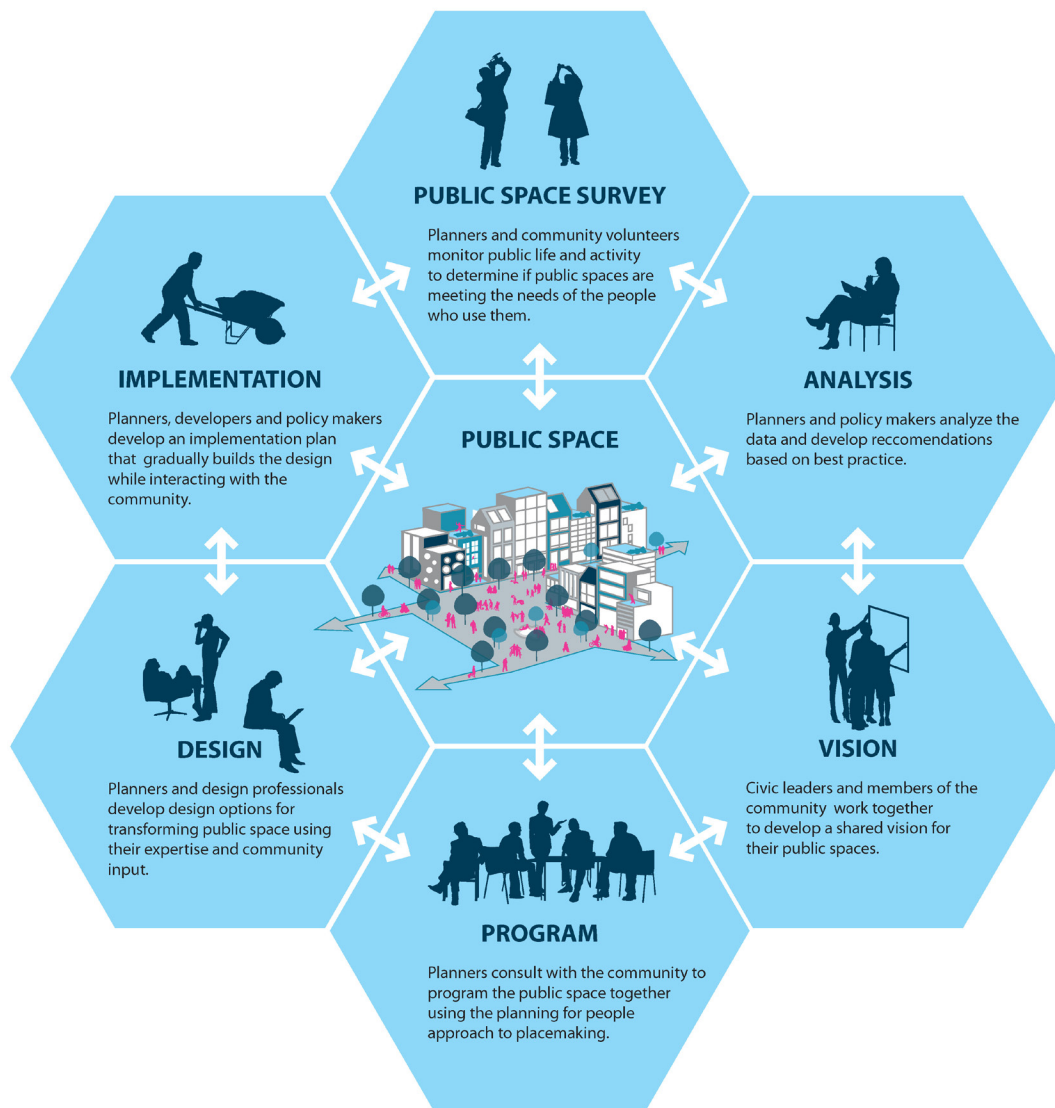
*Appendix A: Public Life Data:* Presents a rich dataset from surveys and observations of pedestrian traffic, stationary, and recreational activities that articulate the present state of public life in the City Centre.

**The Strategic Framework, Phase One of Saskatoon's new City Centre Plan, provides an empirical benchmark, a methodology, and a partnership model between City and University to sustain longitudinal evaluation of future trends and activities, and monitor the progress and success of people-oriented planning and design improvements in the city centre over time.** The data collection and analytic tools used for this study were designed in such a way as to ensure that a robust and replicable process is in place. It is intended that comparable data gathering can occur in years following, and a longitudinal database on public spaces and activities can be maintained and shared between the City of Saskatoon

and the University of Saskatchewan to provide on-going evaluation of public space vitality and the connection between planning, design and programming interventions and outcomes attributable to them.

**The Public Spaces, Activity and Urban Form Strategic Framework equips planners with a set of tools to set performance targets** and to initiate targeted policies, projects and investment to improve the aspects of the public realm, give elected officials and city management the evidence needed to justify expenditure on city building projects, and demonstrate the impacts of improved urban quality to citizens and business groups. The Strategic Framework provides a solid foundation of data, analysis and well-articulated opportunities that the City of Saskatoon will build upon as it embarks upon the next two phases of its new plan for the City Centre, namely, the City Centre Plan itself, and the Master Plan for the Civic Plaza Precinct. It is a new and emerging planning initiative that precedes and supplements the next phases of the city centre planning process by providing a strong empirical analysis which informs a set of opportunities for the City Centre Plan to seize upon.

**Why is urban quality important in Saskatoon?** City centres are becoming complete neighbourhoods where more people are choosing to live and work, creating more diversity and vitality as they attract more people and investment. Skilled young workers and immigrant newcomers, increasingly, are looking for vibrant cities and neighbourhoods in which to live. There is a desire to find an authentic place with a strong identity and a diverse range of lifestyle choices. The best loved cities derive their image from the sum of their citizens' history, beliefs and aspirations, where people are emotionally connected to their community. City form and image are changing as the role of city centres evolve from solely civic and commercial activities to cultural and residential activities. A thriving city centre is a stimulus for the overall competitiveness and attractiveness of a city in the global marketplace that privileges qualitative distinction as an attractive force for the people who drive post-industrial economic growth. This qualitative distinction is what makes measuring and understanding urban quality important in Saskatoon.



## Innovation and Contribution to the Profession

Public space and urban quality studies have been transformative in some cities around the world, largely a credit to people like the famous urbanists Jan Gehl in Copenhagen and William Whyte in New York City. Gehl's work, for example, helped transform the City of Melbourne and other cities in Australia (e.g., Perth). Data-based empirical studies of 'how our public spaces work' in Canadian cities are not common, in spite of the fact that professional planners work diligently on a regular basis to try and improve cities through proactive and prescriptive means.

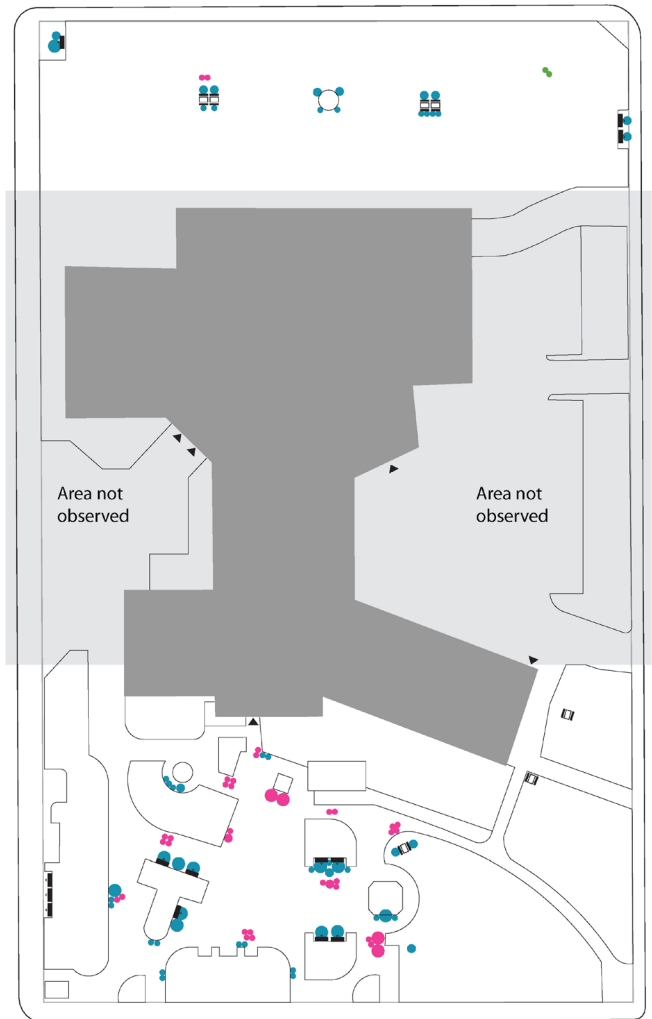
Prompted by rapid growth and development, across the city of Saskatoon but also acutely in the city centre, City officials teamed up with the Regional and Urban Planning Program at the University of Saskatchewan and other community stakeholders to carry out what is perhaps the first urban quality study of its kind in Canada. Specifically, this Phase One of the new plan for Saskatoon's City Centre promotes a planning process whereby the planning of Canadian city centres is driven by the opportunities presented for improving urban quality and the spaces of public life for citizens, driven by an empirically rich understanding of 'how the public realm of the city centre actually works.' The methodology and tools used in this project are transferable to other Canadian cities, and are also replicable over time in a single city.



24th St. E

3rd Ave. N

4th Ave. N

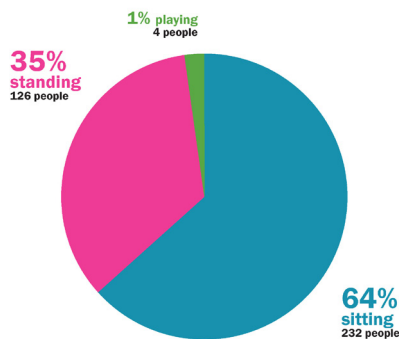


23rd St. E

Source: mapping based on information provided by the University of Saskatchewan.  
City of Saskatoon

## Summer Activity Total

**724** people



Activity Count  
Source: Field Survey  
Time: 10AM-4PM  
Date: June, 2010  
Weather: Fair  
\*Area in grey represents area not surveyed.

## Method

The conception of the project owes to a number of factors coming together in Saskatoon, a city captivated with a high rate of growth and a strong desire to engage in creative future-seeking approaches. In 2009 as part of the City of Saskatoon's process of embarking on a new City Centre Plan, the City along with a number of community partners (e.g., Regional and Urban Planning Program and Wilson Centre for Entrepreneurial Excellence at the University of Saskatchewan; Downtown Partnership business improvement district; Meewasin Valley Authority) organised a three-day visit by Danish urbanist Jan Gehl to discuss how Saskatoon might embrace an approach to urban planning that has made other cities (e.g., Melbourne, Copenhagen) so famous. His visit elicited full-houses at Saskatoon's downtown theatre at back-to-back evening presentations, and shortly after his visit elected officials and the administration were discussing the importance of including

a thorough examination of public spaces and activity in the city centre as a way to create a guiding framework for the subsequent stages of city centre planning. At that time the City of Saskatoon teamed up with the faculty at the University's Regional and Urban Planning Program to create a methodology together for Phase One of the City Centre Plan. The university faculty would devise a robust and replicable methodology and carry out a significant portion of the empirical work, while the team at Sterling Finlayson & Co would undertake a novel approach to analysis and presentation of findings, while working with project team members at the City of Saskatoon to articulate a set of opportunities that will now guide the process of city centre planning through its final phases which include the completion of a new City Centre Plan and a master plan for the Civic Plaza precinct.

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## Clarity of Goals and Objectives

The City of Saskatoon established clear goals and objectives for the project. The purpose of the Plan was to develop a new comprehensive Plan for the downtown and adjacent areas situated along important corridors to the City Centre. The Plan is intended to create the vision for the City Centre, and ensure the downtown remains the heart of commercial, office, retail and high density residential uses in Saskatoon. The Plan will also serve as the foundation for a sustainable city as Saskatoon plans for a population of 500,000. The study not only provides a snapshot of the current conditions in Saskatoon, it outlines opportunities to increase vitality and urban life that can be tracked over time. As a direct consequence, a secondary but equally important objective of the study was to outline the methodology used to collect the initial data. These objectives play a crucial part in the short- and long-term implementation strategies for the new Plan for Saskatoon's City Centre.

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## Overall Presentation

The Framework was envisioned to be approachable and understood by a broad range of audiences in both planning and non-planning contexts. Visualization in planning is an essential tool for understanding information and issues in a compelling manner. The study was designed to provide accurate data interpretation in an accessible and legible way. Sweeny Sterling Finlayson &Co developed cartographic, and infographic techniques to visualize data from a wide variety of sources using the same graphic language. This methodology bridges the traditional silos of civic departments and jurisdictions by compiling a wide variety of information in the same language within one document. Key observations, statistics and facts are highlighted in the observation and analysis and qualitative information is illustrated by photographic evidence of the concepts discussed throughout the report. Since its completion, the study's has been cited by newspapers, and internet publications as well as internal city departments.

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## Implementation

The implementation of the Public Spaces, Activity and Urban Form Strategic Framework is occurring by setting the parameters for the new city centre plan and plan for the civic plaza precinct, and then by re-visiting the data in subsequent years to understand the impacts and outcomes in the city centre attributable to subsequent private and public realm improvements. The Phase One Strategic Framework is a new and emerging planning initiative that precedes and supplements the more traditional planning efforts of creating a new plan for the city centre and civic plaza precinct. For example, the City of Saskatoon's Request for Proposals for Phase Three, the creation of a new City Centre Plan, indicates the following under the scope of work: "The New Plan for City Centre will develop a recommended strategy for future development in the City Centre based on the information and recommendations identified in the Strategic Framework document (Phase 1)..." City staff and management are already using the document as a resource on a wide variety of ongoing initiatives within the City Centre.

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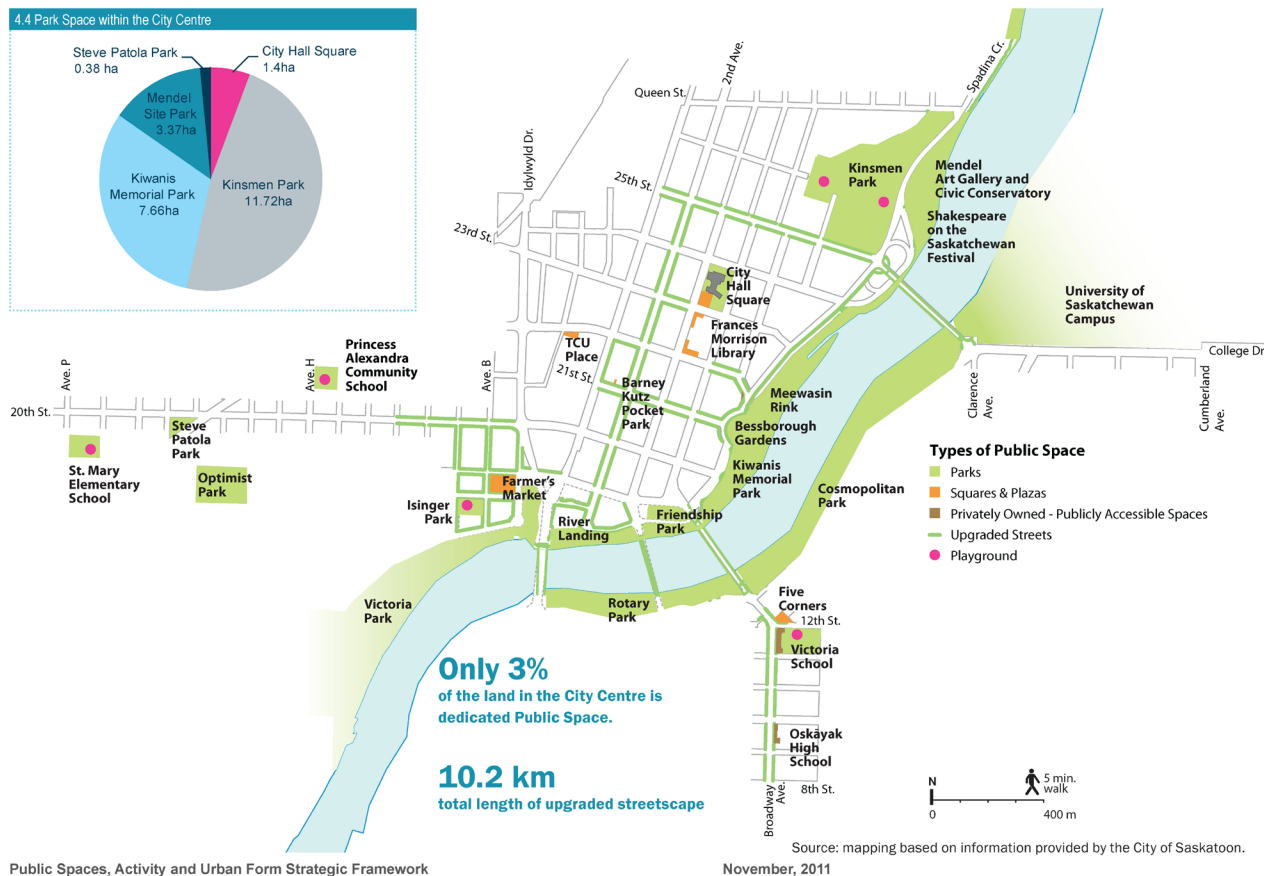
## Public Engagement

Undertaken concurrently with the Strategic Framework study, a public consultation component was implemented through a broad, comprehensive community engagement initiative entitled "Saskatoon Speaks". A significant component of the community vision exercise was focussed on the City Centre. Community perspectives were incorporated into the analysis of the Framework document. The analysis and synthesis of this information resulted in the development of the following vision statement to guide future phases of the project:

"The community's vision for the City Centre recognizes that there are abundant opportunities for more development, employment, open spaces, cultural attractions and lively streets in the heart of Saskatoon."

In addition alternative methods of public engagement were incorporated into the study that included on-the-street observations and intercept studies conducted by the University of Saskatoon. All stages of the work were refined through engagement with the Strategic Framework Steering Committee that included members from city administration, business improvement districts, the Meewasin Valley Authority, and the University of Saskatchewan.





Public Spaces, Activity and Urban Form Strategic Framework

## Sustainability

The Strategic Framework focuses on the analysis of a wide range of issues surrounding broad sustainability goals that include social, economic and environmental sustainability. The study emphasizes urban quality and compact living as a sustainable goal and promotes a live-work city centre where travel is reduced and active transportation and transit are encouraged. It presents methods specifically geared towards Saskatoon to measure and evaluate two main themes in creating urban life: mixing uses that pertain to everyday life as well as establishing a multi-faceted approach towards providing a comfortable walking, biking, sitting, conversing and lingering environment in a cold-climate city. For instance, the focus on Saskatoon's public spaces emphasizes opportunities for winter activities, complimented with case studies that illustrate the range of tactics in use in other cold-climate cities. Other public realm strategies include the expansion of the green network as a direct natural extension of Saskatoon's prized riverfront into the city grid. Live/work hubs in the City Centre encourages a synergy of creative communities, while reducing the need to commute. The methodology for recording this data is provided in the Strategic Framework, which provides the tools to upkeep a continued feedback loop between new projects and how well they sustain urban life.

A cultural shift is clearly occurring in Saskatoon planning, and it is happening quickly. The pioneering piece is the Public Spaces, Activity and Urban Form Strategic Framework for the city centre, its methodology, the opportunities it articulated, and the partnership between City and University planners that ensures continuous championing of this shift in urban planning.

The project has received broad public support and recognition and has been referred to colloquially as the 'downtown atlas', forming a living data source of interest to cycling groups (e.g., Saskatoon Cycles), business improvement districts (e.g., Downtown Partnership, Riversdale Business Improvement District, Broadway Business Improvement District), organisations representing older adults that are interested in understanding areas of focus for improving the age-friendliness of Saskatoon's downtown (e.g., Saskatoon Council on Aging), and youth-driven environmental organisations (e.g., We Are Many). These prospective users of the report are in addition to its core purpose which is to complement and inform the subsequent phases of the City Centre Plan.

Given the strong focus on cultivating a public demand for a more ambitious focus on public spaces, activity and urban form, the partnership between City Hall and the University of Saskatchewan, and the widespread acceptance and involvement of the public, the adoption of the Strategic Framework seems assured.