

## WALKING TOURS

**Take a tour of your hidden neighbourhood**

You're in it every day, but do you really know your own community? This weekend's Jane Jacobs walks may be an eyeopener

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**DAVE LEBLANC**

FROM FRIDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL

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A strange sight: four sets of ears, all cocked downward to a sewer grate at the corner of Highfield Road and Walpole Avenue in the Gerrard India Bazaar neighbourhood.

But there it was, the unmistakable rushing sound of a stream — in this case, one branch of Ashbridge's Creek, which once flowed from points north through Monarch Park down to Ashbridge's Bay.

Stepping back onto the sidewalk, Diane Dyson explained to this writer, his wife and Jane's Walk executive director Jane Farrow that the lost creek is responsible for the architectural change in housing on Highfield between Walpole and the railway tracks.

Rather than the usual early-20th-century workers' cottages and bay-n-gable semis, here are wide, plain, postwar homes built after the marshy land was made habitable by diverting the stream underground. It's all very fascinating, as is the tidbit about another marsh that once filled the depressed land near the time-capsule tavern the Ulster Arms on Gerrard Street East.



[Enlarge Image](#)

Diane Dyson, left, and Jane's Walk executive director Jane Farrow tour Gerrard St. East in a preview of this week's neighbourhood tours. There are more than 70 free Jane's Walks scheduled for the Toronto area tomorrow and Sunday. (DAVE LeBLANC)

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Ms. Dyson, a 17-year Highfield Road resident, has agreed to give us a sample of "Greenwood-Coxwell: A Neighbourhood of Many Names," a two-hour Jane's Walk she will lead with Doug Fyfe on Sunday at 3 p.m. ([www.janeswalk.net](http://www.janeswalk.net)).

It's a neighbourhood that the legendary urban thinker Jane Jacobs, who passed away in April, 2006, would have enjoyed immensely. A messy collection of homes in various states of repair, the Greenwood-Coxwell neighbourhood houses a spicy mix of older, working-class poor, young artsy couples avoiding expensive Leslieville, and a large Chinese population, all shopping and bopping to the

Bollywood beat along lively, colourful Gerrard.

More importantly, all of this cheek-by-jowl living and retailing makes for hundreds of "eyes on the street," which for Ms. Jacobs was the key to any neighbourhood's safety and vitality.

It was demonstrated to Ms. Dyson daily by "The Sheriff of Highfield," also known as Darryl, a long-time resident. He and his wife would monitor life on Highfield Road from their front porch, and if something didn't look quite right they'd do something about it.

We walk next along Woodfield Road, which Ms. Dyson explains began life as the old farm road to the Ashbridge estate (still extant at 1444 Queen St. E.) and end up at the Roden Junior Public School at 151 Hiawatha Rd.

While we gaze upon a large, brutalist concrete building from 1969, it's worth noting that there has been a Roden School somewhere on this property since 1907. For the 100th anniversary, pupils painted a mural of the neighbourhood street grid and mounted it on a concrete wall in the schoolyard. In its open-concept classrooms (it's one of only three schools in Toronto to feature these), almost two-thirds of the more than 350 children don't consider English to be their primary language.

On our way down to Gerrard, Ms. Dyson points to a house that starred in a television decorating show, another where one of the "sadder chapters" in the neighbourhood's history took place — the abuse and death of little Jeffrey Baldwin in 2002 — and another where one year she had to cast her ballot in a kitchen-cum-polling-station.

With spicy curry and smoky incense blending in our nostrils, Ms. Dyson highlighted Gerrard's unique businesses. With samosas ready in the window is BJ's Supermarket, which stocks equal amounts of Canadian and South Asian products to serve both neighbourhood old-timers and newcomers.

She shows how the area's many different houses of worship coexist. We debate which restaurant serves the best Indian or Pakistani food. And finally, she tells the story of how a first-generation business, traditional sari store Nucreation, spawned a second-generation store across the street, Rang, a funky boutique with untraditional, sari-inspired throw pillows and home décor.

We also discuss crime and "collective efficacy" — a broken-windows theory put forth by Harvard professors Robert Samson and Felton Earls — and how the simple act of chatting with one's neighbours can make a huge dent in the statistics.

And that's what works about Jane's Walk: Rather than a formal, talk-at-you lecture, it's a conversation among curious people who want to better understand a neighbourhood.

"People, I think, have an instinctive sense that there's a lot more happening in Jane-Finch or Dorset Park or Scarborough Village than they read about in the newspaper, but they don't know how to meaningfully go and know the neighbourhood," Ms. Farrow explained over coffee at the newly opened Sideshow Café, which shares space with a 1914 vaudeville theatre operating as a circus training studio ([www.centreofgravity.ca](http://www.centreofgravity.ca)).

"You can maybe go to Yorkgate Mall and eat in the food court, but it's not really going to engage you in the community," Ms. Farrow said.

"A lot of my job —which is actually the fun part — is going out into the community and saying, 'You have an awesome story to tell here: Tell me what this secret pet cemetery is; tell me what the best barbecue joint is, or the place where you got the worst haircut of your life; or where you play soccer in the hydro fields,' and that ends up being what people really like about Jane's Walk."

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## Jane's Walks

There are more than 70 free Jane's Walks scheduled for the Toronto area tomorrow and Sunday, as well as ones in Markham, Mississauga, Burlington, Hamilton and Guelph. From a Toronto-only event in its first year, 2007, the "street level celebration" has expanded to more than 20 cities in Canada, and about the same number in the United States, and there is a possibility of India's Mumbai and Goa signing up.

The best way to participate is to get out of your comfort zone by picking an area you'd never think to explore. Maybe it's an area that intimidates you; maybe it's a place you think too desolate to foster a sense of community, whatever, you'll never truly know a place until you explore it on foot. As Jane Jacobs once said, "You've got to get out and walk."

### Some highlights:

**Flemingdon Park:** From Farmland to Wonderland of Diversity

**Scarborough Village:** Proud and Resilient

**Jungle Jaunt:** Lawrence Heights is Not What You Think, a tour led by students from what Ms. Farrow says has been mislabeled "the worst school in Toronto," Sir Sandford Fleming Academy.

**North Kipling:** Towers in the Ravine

**Peanut Plaza** and Forest Manor Walk, hosted by the Iranian Women's Organization of Ontario, City Councillor Shelley Carroll and Bob Pletch

**Thornccliffe Park:** Toronto's Most Vibrant Neighbourhood, with Jane Pitfield

**Yonge Street is Flaming,** with Jane Farrow and Gerald Hannon

"You want to do Cabbagetown, knock yourself out," Ms. Farrow says. "But here is your chance to get into the 'burbs and get over your smug, anti-suburban thing because it's really happening out there, there's awesome people, great stories and fascinating architecture."

**For a full list of walks, go to [www.janeswalk.net](http://www.janeswalk.net).**

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