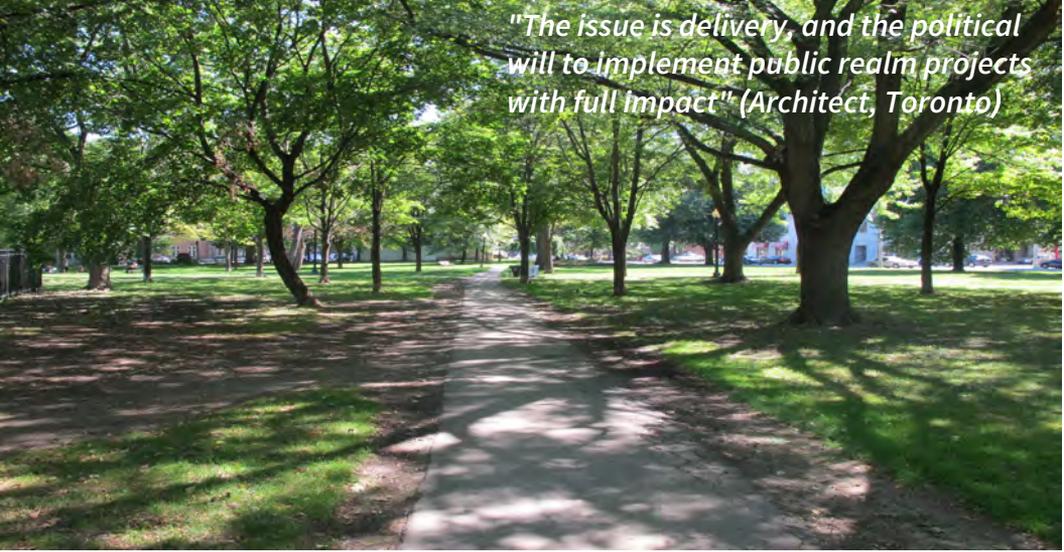*"The issue is delivery, and the political will to implement public realm projects with full impact" (Architect, Toronto)*

Allan Gardens Park, Source: ERA Architects

The Public Realm

This research brief highlights key findings from a report that investigated opportunities and challenges associated with making investments in the public realm. City Builders in Toronto are brimming with ideas to catalyze equitable and engaging public spaces, such as parks, squares, and markets, but are often constrained in executing them. The complex regulatory and governance environments of municipal governments do not always match the aspirations of project leaders and partners.

The report calls attention to the confluence of influences that shape the process and outcomes of public space projects, and connects best practices from other jurisdictions with perspectives of city builders and urban enthusiasts in Toronto: planners, developers, city councillors, as well as actors from the non-profit and philanthropic sectors.

The report also shows that as Toronto continues to densify, there is a strong need to develop a public realm that places emphasis on connections in space. This will require long term priority setting of how to best target policy areas(e.g. Section 37) and partnerships to ensure the highest standards are achieved for Toronto's public realm. Participants involved in the research strongly believe that visions for the public realm need to include areas outside of the downtown to ensure an equitable spatial order of the city.

Key Messages

1. The issue of silos at city hall has created a circular debate that leads to blaming wars, rather than change. All stakeholders - public and private - need to be open and flexible to approaches that work with government, not around them. Waiting for more resources isn't always the best approach to achieving success. Instead, maximizing existing people and resources is often the most appropriate starting point.

2. Uniform procedural and policy standards that treat everyone the same ignore variation in skills, time, and resources, across different areas of the city. A more enabling and supportive system would put citizens at the centre of policy decisions and build investment around their aspirations and innovations.

3. Interventions in the public realm should be grander, more frequent, and rooted in local context and history. The city should encourage private developers to play an active role in the forming of the public realm, such as more emphasis on setbacks and open space. Design solutions adopted in the public realm should have a strong rationale with clear, measurable objectives.