

Wellness by Design: Integrating the Planning of Green Spaces to Enhance Health Outcomes for
Senior Black Women

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Abstract

This study aims to explore Senior Black Women's (SBW) intersectional lens of race, sex, age, and gender, by amalgamating wellness and planning urban green space (UGS) issues. Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) principles supported the research in understanding SBW lived experiences as systemic barriers, such as spatial injustices, finances, social exclusion, and housing, which are based on racial constructs, which can affect one's ability to age well. Senior Black Women's voices are underrepresented in the sphere of planning green spaces and political decision-making processes, as limited academic literature exists that combines the different variables. Using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the study highlighted how green space infrastructure (benches, lighting, washrooms, signage), green space perception (positive and negative), and capital investment for parkland are additional hindrances in the Black community. The evolution of cities relies on planning strategies that navigate the lines between development and resilient communities that address inequality, age-friendly landscapes and exclusion. The discourse from the participants amplified the symbiotic nature of city planning and well-being, suggesting that incorporating culturally responsive planning, community consultation, and environmental education practices can enhance the ideal of sustainable communities. Future city planning could be reimagined to encompass social reform policies, integrate public health initiatives and sustainable development goals.

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Foreword

This research emerged as my curiosity for the outdoors grew since the COVID-19 pandemic. The inability to engage outdoors left a feeling of wanderlust. As I enjoyed different types of green spaces, I rarely encountered Senior Black Women and the broader Black community. This absence prompted me to examine the realities of planning green spaces and the health implications of this demographic. Senior Black Women's knowledge, personal narratives, and grace are advantageous for society, yet their voices are often underrepresented and silenced within the public realm. As I am a member of the Black community, researcher, and aspiring planner, I aim to showcase Senior Black Women's opinions and perspectives in a manner conducive to their resilience and lived experiences.

As part of the Master's in Environmental Studies (MES) Planning stream requirements at York University. This study fulfills the academic and professional expectations, as this research project reinforces York's guiding academic principles of integrative learning strategies, autonomous study, social and environmental justice practices, and socially engaged research that connects theory and practice. This study explores and responds to those objectives by examining how planning policies and practices intersect with the lives of Senior Black Women in accessing and engaging with urban green spaces. In addition, this research is also grounded in narratives from planners to understand how the development of green spaces is a caveat of legislative planning acts, developers' land concessions, and best land use practices. Their input helps conceptualize the intricacies of planning cities. Furthermore, the integration of GIS maps within the qualitative study supported the geographical spatial data analysis of Toronto's green spaces.

This research stands on the shoulders of Senior Black Women and planners, whose vision for society is shaped by equity, inclusion, community engagement, and a holistic approach to well-being. This work serves as a call to be bold, think outside of the box, and reimagine the urban city.

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“You may not always have a comfortable life and you will not always be able to solve all of the world's problems at once but don't ever underestimate the importance you can have because history has shown us that courage can be contagious and hope can take on a life of its own” (Obama, 2011, para. 40).

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Introduction

We need trees in our streets, plants in our gardens, and flowers on our balconies. We need nature as our neighbour all the time (Mair, n.d.).

Nature surrounds our human existence. We are not separate entities that live in cities that can survive without the fundamental systems that nature bestows. Planning of urban green spaces (UGS) and urban green infrastructure (UGI)¹ is the integration of “a network of natural and semi-natural areas into the urban fabric” (Lang & Taylor, 2018, para. 1) and is paramount for building sustainable communities, Greenhouse gas reduction, and promoting wellness (Toronto and Regional Conservation Authority, n.d.). The connection to our green environment has beneficial health outcomes through improved physical mobility, decreased stress levels, improved mood (Zhang et al., 2024a), strengthened community capacity (Alaimo, 2016, p. 302), supports carbon sequestration (Hawken, 2017; Sopiana & Harahap, 2023), and promotes social justice and equity outcomes (Patalagsa et al., 2015). Giannico et al. (2021) understood that the “proximity and accessibility to green spaces have proved to reduce the likelihood of obesity, cardiovascular diseases, and overall all-cause mortality” (pp. 1-2).

The benefits of urban green space² integration are plentiful. However, the distribution of those landscapes is not equally partitioned in the discussion about marginalized communities. The domination of space by virtue, by its very nature, created political arenas that were inclusive spaces for “whites,” while Black people were construed as unwelcome and the “Other.” The burdens of slavery, financial inequality, segregation, and the displacement of Black people and the benefits of land acquisition, free labour, and generational wealth for white citizens reflect white imperialism ideology, which constituted how space, race, and place shape our societal landscape.

¹ Wang et al (2024) defines UGI as “a network of green spaces, including parks, green roofs, urban forests, wetlands, and green corridors, integrated within the urban fabric to support ecological processes, enhance biodiversity, and provide multiple benefits to urban communities” (p. 2).

² Accordingly, to Kingsley (2019) “green space describes what may be referred to as green infrastructure, natural spaces, open space, or engineered green spaces. There are diverse sizes, types and functions of green spaces, including: Public spaces such as parks, conservation areas, greenways, trails, urban and rural forests, street trees, community gardens, school grounds, shorelines and ravines; and Private and institutional spaces and infrastructure such as gardens, green roofs, green walls, cemeteries, golf courses, and other outdoor spaces” (p. 132).

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Narrowing the scope of the “Other” to Senior Black Women,³ engagement with green space has a different contextual significance, as their intersectional identities of race, gender, age, and sex manifest a different lived experience compared to elderly white women. Generational trauma, environmental racism and stigma, socioeconomic disparities, psychological scars, and structural barriers can be attributed to settler colonial legacies that impact how the broader Black community perceive urban green spaces. By focusing on their lived experiences, cultural perspectives, and historical contexts, this study highlights how UGS can serve as sites of healing, community building, and empowerment. Furthermore, conversations about urban green infrastructure provide a framework for understanding the principles behind green space design through planning approaches and community-led participatory initiatives that ensure equitable access.

This research highlights how urban green spaces have historically operated as instruments of spatial inequality, racial discrimination, and environmental injustices disproportionately impacting the wellness of Senior Black Women. It further argues that planning initiatives that are conducted with the voices of the community are critical steps forward in redefining green space stereotypes, negative narratives and transforming the use and perception of how the Black community integrates with the outdoors.

Research Questions

1. In what ways do urban planning and design of green spaces shape the experiences of Senior Black Women in accessing and utilizing these landscapes for wellness?
2. How do Senior Black Women experience green spaces while finding enjoyment, enhancing their well-being, and overcoming barriers?
 - a. How can green spaces support Senior Black Women’s physical and mental wellness?
3. How can the planning community engage Senior Black Women to access green spaces?
 - a. How does community-led planning of green spaces impact Senior Black Women's wellness?

³ Senior Black Women will be capitalized throughout this research paper to emphasize their importance.

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Chapter Breakdown

The **Introduction** explores the conceptual relationship between Senior Black Women, green spaces, planning, and wellness. This underrepresented community exists on the margins of society as their intersectional lens cannot be separated into simplistic fillable boxes. Their lived experiences and narrative within urban green spaces need greater visibility to address disparities and explore how planning UGS can support age-friendly communities.

Chapter One: *Literature Review* encapsulates pertinent primary and secondary source information that showcases different precedents that blend the overarching theme of green space utilization to Senior Black Women, wellness, and planning regimes that examine the design of green spaces. The synthesis of each component positions the notion that green spaces historically were not neutral domains. Systemic, socioeconomic, and institutional barriers implemented by settler colonialism perpetuated the notion of the “Other,” which divided whites from Black people. In addition, the discourse examines how historical planning policies led to the devaluation and extractive nature of the Black community, which affects Senior Black Women. Moreover, this chapter assesses modern-day land use planning developments in relation to green space integration to support age-friendly communities. The purpose of this study is to understand how green spaces can become an integral part of Senior Black Women’s reality. I argue by shifting the rhetoric and perception of outdoor green spaces as white-only domains, a new paradigm can emerge—one that reimagines these spaces as inclusive environments for Senior Black Women, promoting holistic wellness of the mind, body, and soul, while actively challenging the false narrative that Black communities lack interest in outdoor spaces. Moreover, the theoretical framework that accompanied the study focused on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Geographies of Race (CGR) to explore Senior Black Women’s lived experience in green spaces.

Chapter Two: The second chapter, *Methodologies and Methods*, outlines the researchers' design methodology that provided the framework to investigate the interconnection between Senior Black Women, planning of urban green spaces, and wellness. The study employed semi-structured interviews to gather participants’ perspectives. In total, the study concluded with five Senior Black Women and three planner participants. Thematic analysis

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drove the research, as this approach is widely used in qualitative research for its flexibility and systematic identification, organization, and offering of insights into patterns of meaning, or *themes*, across datasets. In addition, planners' perspectives were examined to understand how green space development is implemented through Planning Acts and the concession of land by developers. Moreover, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) maps were used to visualize and analyze spatial patterns of green space distribution concerning marginalized communities.

Chapters Three and Four: *Results, Discussion, and Recommendations* present key findings from interviews with Senior Black Women and planners using thematic analysis. The results brought attention to the importance of wellness, community engagement, social support systems, planning policies, and systemic barriers. Senior Black Women participants emphasized the power of changing one's mindset in recognizing the internal and external benefits of green spaces. Planners explained how the Planning Act and other planning policies influence land use and green space development. Overall, the findings illuminate the connectivity between UGS and Senior Black Women's wellness, contributing to a deeper understanding of their symbiotic relationship. The discussion section interprets the results from the participants' interviews and contextualizes the information by comparing existing academic research. Through the analysis, any unexpected findings, limitations, and practical implications were disseminated to address the real-world implications of green space integration for Senior Black Women.

Lastly, the recommendation section outlines a call to action for planners, stakeholders (government, policymakers, outdoor recreational providers) and participatory approaches from within the Black community to better support Senior Black Women in urban green spaces. By addressing structural and social determinants, these recommendations aim to strengthen social integration, age-friendly environments, health equity, and overall well-being for Senior Black Women.

The **Conclusion** underscores the importance of nature not only as a place we call home but as an enduring landscape that supports health outcomes. Canada's aging population continues to be actively involved in community organizations, recreational activities, political realms, and the job force. However, aging in place within cities does not always constitute experiencing equitable landscapes. Senior Black Women experience inequalities within green spaces that influence their well-being. The research findings draw attention to the need to

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critically examine planning policies that prioritize the built environment, compared to green spaces. Planners discuss land use development through the lens of developers, and how they may prioritize profit, often treating green space as a secondary concern. Incorporating community consultation with Senior Black Women cultivates new streams of knowledge, acknowledges their cultural heritage to the land, and addresses the historical and structural inequalities that have shaped the utilization of green spaces.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

1.1 The Balancing Act of Urbanization with Urban Green Spaces & Infrastructure

The art of planning cities is a multitudinal joint venture that involves numerous stakeholders from different sectors and industries to create a city that is functional, aesthetically pleasing, innovative, environmentally sound, and sustainable. Influential thinkers such as Ebenezer Howard, Le Corbusier, and Ernest W. Burgess created planning theories that still influence how we view the relationship between urban design principles, communities, and the environment.

In 1925, Burgess created the Burgess Model or Concentric Zone Model, which proposed that individuals would live in zones similar to concentric circles, dependent on their social status and geographic location to the urban core. The Concentric Zone model divided the city into five rings⁴, as illustrated in Figure 1 (see separate document titled *Supplementary Figures*). This framework represented the imagery of urban growth during the 20th century, where wealthier elites would live in the outer rings and build large houses (Adulla, 2022, para. 6), and working-class and lower-income individuals occupied the inner commons. As cities continued to grow, urban renewal planning policies were not conducive to the Concentric Zone model ideology. This model was isotropic and monocentric in nature and did not account for polycentric movements of the public. Heynen (2003) stated, “urban environmental landscapes that result[ed] from these processes [economic, political, and cultural] tend to favor the urban elite at the expense of marginalized individuals and groups” (p. 982). This led to the gentrification of the inner core to commandeer prime land for redevelopment and to displace marginalized communities.

Geddes's theology of city planning was polemically criticized and underrated in his era. Other theorists and intellectuals did not grasp the ideology of incorporating the natural environment into a city's landscape. Kianjaya (n.d.) expands on Geddes' planning framework, stating,

⁴ According to Adulla (2022), the Concentric Zone consists of "the central business district, the zone in transition, the zone of workingmen's homes, the residential zone of middle-class homes, and the commuter zone of the upper class" (para. 3).

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Sir Geddes's city concept included open green spaces, parks, gardens, trees, and blue infrastructure. He believes that the well-being and magnificence of a city, working with and in collaboration with nature, was essential.... As a result, nature was included in his town plans as an essential component of the urban environment.... Not just to beautify a city but also as an essential component and presence in the built environment, building alongside nature and treating nature as an essential component of the cityscape's physical contour (para. 2).

The incorporation of nature into this new planning paradigm reconstructed the parameters that constituted city planning and living.

Examining planning from a holistic perspective, the amalgamation of the built form and nature-based solutions (NbS) supports planning initiatives that focus on environmentally sustainable cities. David Suzuki (n.d.) defined nature-based solutions (NbS) as “protect, sustainably manage, and/or restore natural or modified ecosystems, address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, and provide human well-being and biodiversity benefits” (para. 2). Appendix A (see appendix in separate document titled *Supplementary Appendices*), provides a realistic example of NbS connection to the natural environment and the city core (Nature-Based Solutions, n.d.). Weaving NbS principles into city planning in alignment with urban green spaces (UGS) and urban green infrastructure (UGI) supports United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) initiatives and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This integration promotes climate change mitigation practices, safeguards urban biodiversity (Brink, 2011; Sopiana & Harahap, 2023), supports carbon sequestration (Sopiana & Harahap, 2023), and complements the social integration of human ecosystems (communities and families) (Duvall et al., 2018). Furthermore, studies have shown that communities with abundant green space have better air quality, cooling attributes (Di Marino, 2024), positive health outcomes, and cultural ecosystem services (Weidmüller, 2024). Other benefits range from improved climate change benefits (noise and temperature reduction, shade, reduced anxiety, and food security) (Kingsley, 2019).

Modern-day planning approaches have migrated to encompass the natural environment to build holistic communities that are innovative, sustainable, and environmentally sound. Approaches such as the integration of social welfare components, economic elements, cultural

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factors (Mell 2016; Sopiana & Harahap, 2023; Duvall et al., 2018) can enhance biodiversity and support ecosystems (Brink, 2011) and encourage the advancement of age-friendly communities. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there are eight dimensions⁵ of well-being to support age-friendly communities. These domains ensure seniors' ability to safely navigate their environments without hindrances, stay healthy, and engage in society. Guo et al. (2019) adds that “urban parks benefit seniors both physiologically and psychologically, in addition to improving their well-being” (p. 1). A study by Zhang and Li (2024) found that parkland contributes to community life, the happiness of citizens, and a venue to gather for social interaction.

However, as cities continue to expand vertically and to the periphery, the concrete jungle presents a contrasting divide that pits the natural environment against urbanization. Urban renewal developments formulate unique challenges, such as environmental degradation of “pristine grasslands and forests” (Sopiana & Harahap, 2023, p. 1), economic disparity, and social inequality (Sopiana & Harahap, 2023), which have negative effects on Senior Black Women and marginalized communities health outcomes.

Defining the parameters of UGS is essential to the conversation with SBW about wellness. Kingsley (2019) defines green spaces as:

Green infrastructure, natural spaces, open space, or engineered greenspaces. There are diverse sizes, types and functions of greenspaces, including: Public spaces such as parks, conservation areas, greenways, trails, urban and rural forests, street trees, community gardens, school grounds, shorelines, and ravines (p. 132).

⁵ WHO's (n.d.a) eight dimensions to age-friendly communities intersect and consist of:

1. Outdoor Spaces and Buildings: Ensuring accessible, safe, and well-maintained public spaces and infrastructure;
2. Transportation: Providing affordable, convenient, and accessible transportation options for older adults;
3. Housing: Promoting adaptable and affordable housing to support aging in place;
4. Social Participation: Encouraging opportunities for social engagement to prevent isolation;
5. Respect and Social Inclusion: Fostering a culture that values and includes older people in community life;
6. Civic Participation and Employment: Supporting opportunities for older adults to contribute through work, volunteering, or civic engagement;
7. Communication and Information: Ensuring that information is easily accessible in multiple formats for all older adults; and
8. Community Support and Health Services: Providing accessible healthcare and social services to support well-being and independence.

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Kingsley's definition is multifaceted and broad. Streamlining the definition of green space, Pietrzyk-Kaszyńska (2017) narrows the scope to distinguish between formal and informal green spaces. Pietrzyk-Kaszyńska (2017) proposed that formal green space “[are] well recognized, clearly demarcated, and managed and maintained forms of vegetation assemblages, namely: parks, allotment gardens, cemeteries, and forests. We classify green space as formal if it is included in the local authorities’ formal planning documents” (p. 86). On the other hand, her informal green space definition alludes to “[green spaces are] those covered with vegetation, usually neither designated nor recognized by governing institutions or owners as spaces for inhabitants’ use. Informal urban green spaces are often unintentional formations with an uncertain legal, socio-economic, and ecological status” (p. 86). Edward Wilson, the pioneer behind the hypothesis of biophilia, contends that “humans are genetically predisposed to be attracted to nature” (P, 2018, para. 3). Kingsley and Pietrzyk-Kaszyńska's definition of green spaces highlights the picturesque nature of the environment as venues for enhancing wellness.

Formal and informal community and private gardens can weave together different pedagogies from environmental justice, social activism, environmental sustainability, to community participatory action. Community gardening can improve physical activity (Raymond et al., 2019), reduce depression (Wilson & Christensen, 2012), improve mental clarity (Ferris et al., 2001), greater life satisfaction (Park & VanLeit, 2012), and strengthen social relationships (Same et al., 2016). Likewise, community gardens can incorporate cultural and environmental education practices by reconnecting SBW to nature, examining local and broader environmental issues (Cumbers et al., 2018), growing culturally specific foods (Admin, 2023, para. 13; Reese, 2019), alleviating the idea of “food deserts” (Bikomeye et al., 2021), which the term has been reconceptualized to be “food apartheid” (FutureBlack Female, 2025; NRDC, 2021), and being safe domains for social advocacy, while dismantling racial inequalities. Private gardens can create a sense of personal harmony, reflection, and reconciliation with the land as shown in Figure 2, A, B & C (see separate document titled *Supplementary Figures*).

Historically, green spaces represented unsafe venues where acts of violence, disturbing language, racist monuments and signage— all tied to century-old atrocities that impacted the Black community. The report “Race and Nature in the City Engaging Youth Of Colour In Nature-Based Activities”(2021) by Jacqueline Scott and Ambika Tenneti states, “outdoor

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recreation use and the perception of nature is strongly influenced by culture and cultural norms, but it is the normalising of the whiteness of culture that leads to issues of under-participation and under-representation of ethnic minority groups” (p. 12). However, as centuries have passed, green spaces have transformed into places of refuge, relaxation, socialization, physical activity, sustainable environments, and educational venues. These types of casual social interactions have fostered a sense of self-resilience, empowerment, and community bonds.

Framed by wellness, Social Determinants of Health and green space, the experiences of Senior Black Women are a combination of internal validation and external societal pressures. Their resilience, dedication, and drive to face adversity are commendable, yet the burden of having to endure constant hardships is also stifling.

1.2 Grounded in Nature: Exploring the Wellness Journey of Senior Black Women

Between the 15th and 19th centuries, the Transatlantic Slave Trade—spanning Europe, Africa, and the Americas—resulted in the forced displacement of thousands of Africans to various parts of the world. This system was marked by widespread atrocities and contributed significantly to enduring racial hierarchies, systemic health disparities, and the institutionalization of inhumane policies and practices. Carter and Forsyth (2010) highlighted the consequences of racism on Black health as “racism is experienced as a stressor which has a negative impact on the mental health of people of color” (p. 83). The ramifications left lasting repercussions on the wellness of the Black community as their connection to their ancestral home, land, culture, and people was dismantled. Navigating the seas of racism and space through the lens of Senior Black Women presents a picturesque triad of singular components that can be disseminated in assessing one’s overall wellness—whether that be through the fulfillment of pursuing positive mental and physical health outcomes, spiritual awakening, fostering deeper relationships, or reconnecting with the natural environment.

The definition of wellness, according to The Global Wellness Institute (n.d.), is “the active pursuit of activities, choices and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health” (para. 2). Wellness is constructed through the lived experiences that are accumulated over time. Stoewen’s (2017) article highlights eight wellness components —physical, intellectual, emotional, social,

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spiritual, vocational, financial, and environmental. Achieving optimum wellness involves active engagement, commitment to discovering oneself, and acceptance of life lessons.

Examining the spiritual dimension of wellness for centuries has functioned as a pillar of transcendence, enlightenment, faith, and hope for the Black community. Ellison (1983) suggested that spirituality does not exist apart from mental and physical wellness, but rather, spirituality integrates the parts into a cohesive whole. For example, the Black church strengthens community bonds, supports the youth, cares for the elderly, and preaches the sermon of kindness to your fellow peers. Hope et al. (2024) state:

Spirituality has played a major role in the lives of Black Americans. Spirituality functions as a significant psychological resource and a critical source of resilience for this population. For example, sermonic traditions based on liberation and defiance theology provide a spiritual framework for coping with adversity, social, political, and economic marginalization, and racism (p. 2).

One's search for their spirituality is a journey of many miles, and according to Heintzman (2000), leisure activity can summon a spiritual awakening by "being aware and being open" (p. 58). Urban green spaces can counteract social isolation, which can safeguard seniors' cognitive and physical wellness. Foster et al. (2023) reiterated similar observations, contributing to existing knowledge about Senior Black Women's diminished health outcomes. Concerns ranged from upbringing (including education and living conditions), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), memory loss due to trauma, and various forms of abuse (financial, physical, verbal, and emotional) and reluctance to seek professional help. Examining the concept of psychological health, Conner et al. (2010) analyzed the difference between whites and Senior Black individuals seeking professional help. Areas of concern related to receiving inappropriate diagnoses, seeking support for depression, and inadequate treatment approaches as the prevailing underlying issues of racism, discrimination, prejudice, and poverty. The lack of resources to cope with stressors—including psychological, social, and financial factors—also contributes to deteriorating health outcomes in comparison to their white counterparts. In the examination of SBW and aging, Versey and Gibbons (2025) stated, "Black women are increasingly aging-in-place alone" (p. 4), which represents a complex and saddening imagery. The observation presented reflects Hassin (2023) sentiments "while older adults often face poverty, older women — who tend to live

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longer than men — are particularly affected by it” (para. 6). The rationale behind Versey and Gibbons (2025) and Hassin’s (2023) rhetoric encompassed the reality of SBW, as dearth and death of their spouses/partners (Jackson, 1976; Löfgren, 2022) and the death of friends (Enssle et al., 2020) occur within their life, as the longevity between genders continues to widen. Furthermore, Baker et al. (2012) conveyed that seniors start to experience loss, “physical and social, such as losses in vision, mobility, cognitive capacity, and in social support provided by kin and friends” (p. 2). Wellness can be perceived as a pyramid of intersecting elements that support one’s continual growth.

An often-overlooked aspect in discussions of the Black community is the Senior Black Women and the stereotypical rhetoric of the Strong Black Woman Archetype (SBWA). Baker et al. (2015) effectively argue that the Strong Black Woman Archetype is defined as follows:

The Strong Black Woman Archetype is a cultural ideal that portrays Black women as strong, self-reliant, nurturing, resilient, and invulnerable to psychological or physical challenges. This ideal intersects identities as a woman and as a Black person, thereby representing a unique collection of experiences, expectations, and standards that differ from those of either white women or Black men (p. 53).

The representation of the Strong Black Woman Archetype (SBWA) is two-fold. Older women embodying this archetype are often depicted as matriarchs—respected keepers of cultural knowledge who are actively sought for guidance. In contrast, younger women associated with the SBWA are characterized by resilience, independence, leadership, and emotional stoicism. This notion places undue stress on Black women, and is tied to increased illness, and other negative health outcomes (Platt & Fanning, 2023; Subhan & Johnson, 2023; Wood, 2013). Baker et al.’s (2015) work draws attention to the lack of empathy in recognizing that Black Women should not always be considered to be the SBWA, as pressure from society continues to add undue burdens of idealism, which can be overwhelming. Moreover, SBW often lacks the space and grace to express weakness, failure, depression, or other mental and physical health struggles and emotions that are more readily accepted and supported in other communities. Examining the experiences of SBW through an intersectional lens—one that embeds socio-economic challenges, systemic inequalities, and racial dynamics, sheds light on the importance of understanding the

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SDOH. These non-medical⁶ factors play a critical role in shaping health outcomes and influencing overall quality of life.

1.3 The Colour of Green: How Race Shapes Access to Nature

The Black community in Canada has been confined and defined by race, space, and place, through government development planning policies, “as well as the absence of policies” (Waldron, 2020, p. 733), political discourse, discrimination, segregation, and redlining practices. George Lipsitz (2007) explores the interconnected realities of race and spatial dynamics, asserting that “the concept [of] “racialization of space” [helps in explaining] ... how differences related to race, income, class, and other social identities are spatially organized in ways that create hierarchies and relations of domination and subordination among various groups” (p. 734). Lipsitz’s (2007) concept illustrates how racism shapes spatial inequalities, by privileging white communities through access to valued opportunities and resources, while visible minorities continue to face and experience institutional and structural racism, and bear the burden of its historical practices and policies.

Space extends beyond the three physical dimensions that are perceived through the human lens between the user and the utilizers (Davis, 2019). The neutrality of space is non-existent, as space continues to be produced and/or redefined through complex political, structural, cultural, and economic processes. According to Teelucksingh and Masuda (2014), spatial environments—such as governments, institutions, and communities are shaped and maintained by their particular interest and power relations. Lefebvre (1991) stated:

Perhaps we shall have to go further, and conclude that the producers of space have always acted in accordance with a representation, while the 'users' passively experienced whatever was imposed upon them inasmuch as it was more or less thoroughly inserted into, or justified by, their representational space.... If architects (and urban planners) do

⁶ Social Determinants of Health include factors such as, Income and Income Distribution; Education; Unemployment and Job Security; Employment and Working Conditions; Early Child Development; Food Insecurity; Housing; Social Exclusion; Socioeconomic Status; Neighborhood and Physical Environment; Social Support Networks; Healthcare Access and Quality; Economic Stability; Gender; Race; Disability; Work; Immigration; and Globalization (Raphael et al., 2020).

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indeed have a representation of space, whence does it derive? Whose interests are served when it becomes 'operational'? (pp. 43-44).

The ideology of space is not neutral. By integrating UGS into the conversation, green spaces can be analyzed as a visible power-wielding segregation tool that places marginalized communities at a disadvantage. Teelucksingh and Masuda (2014) articulated that the segregation of spatial venues can “become normalised and tied to systems of power, including some urban planning processes and the workings of the patriarch” (pp. 301-302).

The history, location, and character of UGS reflect European, anthropocentric ideology within the built form that idolizes English picturesque and Victorian gardenesque landscapes (Ignatieva et al. 2015), while embedding white supremacist symbolism and rhetoric (Mowatt, 2009). Cities that were considered urban were defined as “dirty, unhealthy, filled with lots of immigrants and people of color,” whereas green spaces were perceived as “clean, quiet and for White people” (Asmelash, 2021, para. 10). This connotation of whiteness and elitism was exhibited when architect Frederick Law Olmsted displaced over 1,600 Black, Irish, and German residents to build Central Park in 1857 (Murphy, 2024), and through the segregation of leisure spaces such as national parks (Robertson, 2022). These segregation policies extended beyond the outdoors to include land allocation, policing, and park placement (Murphy 2024).

The notion of Black individuals in the environment enjoying their right to freedom has a negative connotation, as social gatherings or frolicking (Denkmire, 2022) is often viewed as suspicious, unwelcome, and feared. Resilient Sisterhood Project (n.d.) rationalized how green spaces, and the Black community experience disparities.

Blue and green spaces are important community gathering sites, areas for outdoor exercise, and places that can promote overall well-being. However, racism, housing policies such as redlining, and overall neglect of Black communities have all contributed to a lack of accessible blue and green spaces (para. 15).

Redlining of neighbourhoods was a visible tool of segregation in the United States and Canada (Bikomeye et al., 2021; Harris & Forrester, 2003). Neighbourhoods that identified as racial or ethnic were classified as “unsafe,” which meant development, investment, and monetary funds were “redlined” (Murphy, 2024, para. 14). Harris and Forrester (2003) addressed Canada’s redlining policy, by stating, “the suburbs were the places where redlining first became possible”

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(p. 2662). The reversal occurred within white neighbourhoods, where land-use developments and investments were seen as “safe,” and led to an increase in infrastructure, park allotment, and pristine housing.

This disparity in representation and inclusion continues to be tied to racist doctrines that manifest the construct of white supremacy in UGS. Lee et al. (2020) discussed how the quality of parks, recreation spaces, and facilities in the Black community was of inferior quality and limited. Furthermore, the exclusion of Black communities from political power in planning and decision-making processes, combined with the strategic placement of neighbourhoods and parks, financial instability in housing, and the displacement and seizure of land, has contributed to a legacy of socio-territoriality, manifesting in 'do-not-enter' regimes that mark and marginalize Black spaces.

1.4 Spatial Segregation of Black Communities through Environmental Racism Regimes

Since the 1980s environmental racism has been analyzed, discussed, and dealt with more vigorously in the United States than in Canada. Environmental racism is a human-made mechanism that is anchored to historical white supremacy practices and policies, settler colonialism, systemic barriers, and patriarchal hierarchies that transcended space, place, and time. White settlers' ideology manifested the notion of the “Other” to describe and divide whites from non-white citizens. Through the easily divisible racial bias of the “Other,” the prevalence of segregation through spatial containment (Nelson, 2000) was practiced. These approaches included housing discrimination, law enforcement policing, employment barriers, diminished municipal services (Gosine & Teelucksingh, 2008) school locations, education, and land development. All were acceptable practical tools to keep out the undesirables, mainly Blacks. Furthermore, Gosine and Teelucksingh (2014) state, “marginalised citizens’ right to claim space and to play a role in urban development emphasized the need to democratise city spaces and forms of resistance” (p. 303).

Civil rights activist Dr. Benjamin Chavis Jr. played a pivotal role in launching the environmental racism movement in the United States, bringing national attention to the intersection of environmental injustice and racial inequality. He pioneered and coined the term

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that laid the foundation to recognize how environmental racism shows up in a community and what legal mechanisms were used to wield decision-making power. The book by Gosine and Teelucksingh (2008), revisits Chavis environmental racism definition as “the intentional siting of hazardous waste sites, landfills, incinerators, and polluting industries in areas inhabited mainly by Blacks, Latinos, Indigenous peoples, Asians, migrant farm workers, and low-income peoples (in the United States)” (p. 4). Chavis was the original protagonist who recognized the correlation and causation of environmental racism in Black communities. Bullard’s (1996) article added additional insight and stated, “environmental racism refers to any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color” (p. 497).

Canada’s environmental racism tensions and disparities within the public domain are swept under the proverbial rug, pretending like they do not exist. Or the impact on marginalized communities is minor, which continues to perpetuate the white supremacy ideology that Canada is an idyllic multicultural country. Canada’s Angel Complex of “that doesn’t happen here,” or “we’re not like them” (Black Law Students’ Association of Canada, 2020, para.1) is a naive rationale that does not hold weight in the greater scheme of environmental racism in Canada. Prime examples of environmental racism tragedies impacting Black communities in Canada include Africville, Nova Scotia, Hogan’s Alley in British Columbia, and Little Burgundy in Quebec. Cole and Foster (2000) remark that environmental conflicts “tended not to be about nature, per se, but about land use, social impact, [and] human health” (p. 22). The threads that intersect each community's demise were the municipality's legal right to implement planning policies that redeveloped land and used terms such as “urban renewal” or “slum” as a linguistic tool to displace the Black community for the betterment of the whites and the cityscape.

The City of Halifax implemented a planning policy called Proposal Fourteen, a master plan document outlining the removal of the Africville settlement, as depicted in Figure 3 (see separate document titled *Supplementary Figures*). The word “slum” held political power as shown in Appendix B (Civic Planning Commission, 1945, p. 55; see appendix in separate document titled *Supplementary Appendices*), which affected the livelihood of the Africville citizens. Moreover, the Halifax municipality neglected its duties to the Africville citizens by not providing the city’s services of water, roads, and housing, as shown in Figure 4 (see separate

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document titled *Supplementary Figures*), even though Africville residents paid into the tax base. The implementation of new Zoning By-laws ignited the downward spiral of Africville to accommodate Halifax's new city planning vision, as shown in Appendices C and D (Civic Planning Commission, 1945, pp. 155–156; see appendix in separate document titled *Supplementary Appendices*). The effect of planning policies, degraded municipal services, and industrial factories surrounding Africville led to adverse environmental implications, economic plight (Jackson, 1976), displacement, and concerning health outcomes.

Social Determinants of Health (SDOH): The Canadian Facts, by Raphael et al. (2020), highlights how one's health is influenced by external factors—such as income, employment, education and housing. Social exclusion is one of many SDOH principles and is categorized into four lenses: Denial of participation in civil affairs, Denial of social goods, Exclusion from social production, and Economic exclusion. Social exclusion is tied to power relations and dynamics as a method of division and calls attention to the plight that marginalized communities experience, such as Africville. Exclusionary tactics that control public services dictate how the “Other” can live.

The next section explores how the environmental justice movement evolved and its relevance to marginalized communities.

1.5 Exploring Environmental Justice: Equity, Impact, and Advocacy

The historical nature of environmental justice (EJ) is primarily tied to the Civil Rights Movement in the southern United States from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (Cole & Foster, 2000, p. 20). The Civil Rights movement ignited change through numerous protests, activists, and community members rallying in the face of adversity. Marginalized women were impacted, as they stood at the frontline of environmental racism practices and policies. These practices heightened racial disparities affecting their SDOHs, their families, and their community. Through environmental justice movements, concerns about environmental racism were publicly vocalized and denounced.

Environmental justice is not a conventional, linear, easy-to-define paradigm that brings about social change and awareness. Indigenous communities and activists argue that the first EJ

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acts “occurred 500 years ago with the initial invasion by Europeans” (Cole & Foster, 2000, p. 20). The conventional EJ definition primarily focused on nature, wilderness, land, animals, and water. Van Horne et al. (2023) defined EJ as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of laws, regulations and policies that affect the environment and/or public health” (p. 2). Van Horne's (2023) EJ definition is comprehensive; however, the infusion of the personal element is accentuated through Bullard's (1996) and Heynen's (2006) rationale. Bullard (1996) eloquently stated, “environmental justice embraces the principle that all people and communities are entitled to equal protection of environmental and public health laws and regulations (p. 493) while Heynen (2006) added “the place you work, the place you live, the place you play” (p. 6) into the conversation.

Before 2024, Canada had no federal environmental justice statutes addressing the intentional or unintentional actions of municipalities and corporate entities (manufacturing, chemical, and commercial industries) to secure land in close proximity to marginalized communities for hazardous waste sites, garbage dumps, and industrial use (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2023; Ecojustice, 2020; MacDonald, 2023; Waldron, 2020a). As of June 20, 2024, Canada moved the EJ and racism pendulum and passed Bill C-226, National Strategy Respecting Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice. The objective strategy centers on addressing environmental racism practices in Canada that continue to be systemic barriers to marginalized communities.

1.6 Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Geographies of Race (CGR)

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a crucial framework for understanding how systemic racism influences SBW access to resources, primarily focusing on UGS. Black communities historically faced and endured systemic exclusion from well-maintained parks, recreational facilities, and community gardens, which hindered and limited opportunities to enhance one's physical and mental wellness and participate in alternative community engagement activities. Derrick Bell investigated the complexities of CRT in the 1970s. He recognized that racism is not just an individual problem—such as “blaming the victim” (Crewe,

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2021, p. 416), but an institutional and systemic social, political, and economic problem.

According to Long et al. (2014), subjugation of marginalized communities affirms the idyllic imagery that “whiteness” is ideal and “privilege and access to power is assumed” (p. 1784). The continuation of white supremacy rhetoric of privilege and power creates harmful environments for Senior Black Women to navigate.

Harris et al. (2023) describe four tenets of CRT as:

1. Tenet one – recognizes that our society is “colourblind” by not acknowledging the legacy of discriminatory practices.
2. Tenet two – “interest convergence” the underlying principle depicts that racism advances white agendas through political, social, and economic values.
3. Tenet three – race is a social construct formed from the generational legacy of slavery and biogenetics ideology.
4. Tenet four – the unique voice of people of colour. The ability of People of Colour to share their stories and lived experiences with white individuals to open a broader dialogue and discourse of racial narratives and inequalities (pp. 8-9)

Critical Race Theory challenges the dominant narrative of racial colourblindness by illuminating how racism is embedded in public policies and laws (Harris et al., 2023). The impact of CRT on Senior Black Women manifests in spaces such as economic disparities, health inequalities, and social and psychological wellness. Critical Race Theory equips SBW with the linguistic framework and justification needed to advocate for social reform in all institutional sectors.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a leading CRT scholar who coined the term intersectionality, emphasizes the need for structural changes in how society constructs and perpetuates racial narratives. In her seminal article, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” (1997), she states, “any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (p. 26). CRT offers a vital framework for examining how structural and systemic racism shape the lives of SBW in urban environments and society. Through the intersectional lens of SBW, factors such as race, age, sex, and gender converge to create unique and compounded disparities across social, spatial, and institutional contexts. SBW often navigate public spaces and services—such as healthcare, housing, and quality urban green spaces (UGS) at a disadvantage, as exclusionary policies have

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historically failed to consider their lived realities. Their lived experiences are rooted in the legacy of racial and gender exclusion, where social systems and the planning sphere failed to incorporate SBW voices into city buildings. CRT emphasizes that SBW voices and perspectives should be at the forefront in challenging dominant frameworks by illuminating how power dynamics operate in society. Acknowledging the perspectives of SBW and integrating their knowledge and lived experiences into age-friendly community design and inclusive planning policies helps ensure they receive the visibility, respect, well-being, and dignity they rightfully deserve. CRT ignites conversations surrounding the impact of systemic issues that constitute our present-day societal norms.

In her article *At the Crossroads: Critical Race Theory and Critical Geographies of Race* (2010), adds another layer to CRT by inserting Critical Geographies of Race (CGR) into CRT discourse. The incorporation of this theoretical framework brings the spatial dimension of race and place to the forefront, as the spatial domain is not a neutral entity that exists outside of racist practices and policies. Price (2010) states “people and places that are racialized or otherwise stigmatized are literally and figuratively erased from the official landscape” (p. 153). CGR is also expressed by Lipsitz in his seminal text, “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape” (2007). He argues,

The lived experience of race has a spatial dimension, and the lived experience of space has a racial dimension. People of different races in the United States are relegated to different physical locations by housing and lending discrimination, by school district boundaries, by policing practices, by zoning regulations, and by the design of transit systems. The racial demography of the places where people live, work, play, shop, and travel exposes them to a socially shared system of exclusion and inclusion (p. 12).

The implications of CRT and CGR for understanding the experiences of Senior Black Women can be contextualized through historical and political regimes—such as redlining, urban renewal policies, and socio-territorial segregation—that have contributed to long-term environmental deprivation and spatial injustice. These policies and practices have contributed to socio-territorial divides, where Black communities, especially older women, face limited access to quality healthcare, employment, and educational opportunities, as well as exposure to environmental hazards like poor air quality, inadequate housing, and lack of UGS. The compounded effect of

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these factors shapes the lived experiences of SBW, who often bear the brunt of both racial and gendered inequalities within urban spaces.

By examining these issues through the lens of CRT and CGR, we can better understand how these structural forces continue to shape the lives and well-being of SBW, influencing everything from health outcomes to social mobility.

Conclusion

Urban planning plays a pivotal role as a mechanism that shapes the built environment and the lives of Senior Black Women. The principle of benefits and burdens within urban development can be examined through the disparities between whites and Black people. Black communities were systematically denied equitable access to public services, financial institutions, parkland, and housing. These inequalities were systematically conceived, introduced, and maintained through white supremacy ideology, political figureheads, and public perceptions. The legacy of spatial injustices and environmental racism within Canada disproportionately impacted Black communities.

Urban planning, along with the Social Determinants of Health and wellness, can significantly affect one's ability to thrive—both physically and mentally. These factors can hinder community building and the accumulation of generational wealth. Advancing urban planning design and policies requires new perspectives that inherently incorporate inclusive principles, environmental sustainability rhetoric, anti-racism policies, and age-friendly practices. Promoting wellness within the Black community is not only a matter of public health but also one of respect, civil liberties, dignity, and justice.

Chapter 2: Methodology and Methods

2.1 Research Methodology

This qualitative study examined how the placement of green spaces, influenced by planning policies, affects the overall wellness outcomes of Senior Black Women. According to Bryman et al. (2012), qualitative research methodology focuses on the meaning of individual words and non-numerical data. This research approach was best suited for this study as the lived experiences of Senior Black Women are subjective and require an inductive understanding. Their nuanced experiences allow for flexibility in how their realities are conceptualized. This veers from the standard quantitative research approach, which typically begins with a general principle and theory in data analysis.

This study was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, which is segmented into phases such as familiarization with data, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a final report. The final phase of writing a report linked the research questions and key themes to the data obtained from Senior Black Women (SBW) and planners, drawing on the role of urban green spaces in supporting one's wellness. This approach is both structured and flexible, making possible the examination of SBW themes such as experiencing social exclusion, understanding the complexities of structural and institutional barriers, and addressing challenges related to access and safety. For planners, the narratives were tied to planning policies, development of green spaces through actions from developers, capital investment, parkland dedication, community engagement, and green space design. These themes were developed inductively, enabling a comparison between users (SBW) and implementers (planners), thereby capturing nuances that are uniquely shaped by lived experiences. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, GIS maps were incorporated to enhance the conversation and visually represent urban green space in contrast to senior women and visible Black minorities. The spatial mapping allowed for an in-depth understanding of Toronto's green space distribution while garnering valuable insights that can strengthen planning policies.

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In addition, the research examines how race, place, and space intersect in the lives of Senior Black Women through CRT and CGR theories. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow for the collection of rich data that captures participants' experiences, thoughts, perspectives, and challenges. This research highlights the experiences of this underrepresented demographic by providing insights to guide current and future planners in addressing the needs of Senior Black Women who use and navigate green spaces.

2.2 Research Philosophy

This study follows an interpretive research philosophy, which emphasizes the meaningful nature of individual realities. The interpretive paradigm views these realities as socially constructed perspectives shaped by human actors, which are subjective (Ryan, 2018). Hermeneutic phenomenological philosophy aligns with the aim of this paper in understanding SBW intersecting factors such as race, gender, age, the historical racial constraints of exclusion in outdoor spaces through planning policies, and the impact of those policies on their health. This approach not only allows for social and cultural insight but also the ability to interpret the embedded meaning that is unique to this demographic. This study is important as Senior Black Women are often underrepresented in decision-making processes, social policies, planning and political discourse. As a Black woman, researcher, and part of the broader Black community being studied, I am aware of the privilege and honour to present SBW voices to the public, as my insider perspective provides a gateway to cultivate deeper cultural insight. At the same time, self-awareness is central to this approach: I am aware of how my personal position, lived experiences, and assumptions can influence how the SBW narratives within the study are analyzed and interpreted.

2.3 Research Design and Approach

The study population consisted of Senior Black Women (Afro-Canadian, Afro-Caribbean, African, African-American, Afro-Indigenous) 60 years and older, of all abilities, who venture into green spaces, living in the Greater Toronto Area. The approach that resonated with the research was the inductive approach, as it aims to gather and examine data before

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constructing a theory (Bryman et al., 2012). This approach allows for exploration into the lived experience of Senior Black Women engaging with urban green spaces for wellness. This approach does not apply predetermined or prefabricated theories; the research allows for meaning to be procured from the SBW voices. The flexibility through open-ended questions avoided imposing existing theories and assumptions about Senior Black Women and the outdoors. This bottom-up approach revealed nuances and insights such as barriers, access, age, race, and safety.

Furthermore, the guiding principles that supported the discourse with Senior Black Women were also applied to planner interviews about urban green space development. Themes emerged highlighting how policy, public expectations, capital investment, and park design can create friction between balancing community ideals with land use constraints. Inductive reasoning supported content-sensitive discoveries from SBW and planners that may not have been showcased through other research methods.

Thematic analysis was used to explore the lived experiences of Senior Black Women. Bryman et al. (2012) define thematic analysis as examining “what is said rather than how it is said” (p. 267). This approach provides a space and opportunity for Senior Black Women to communicate their stories that resonate across cultural borders and time. This approach explores the essence of wellness through the utilization of green spaces and can support social activism dialogue (Riessman, 2002). In conjunction with thematic analysis, the Geographic Information Systems (GIS) platform was incorporated to examine spatial geographies. The geospatial data variables included: location of green spaces in Toronto, visible minorities, and senior women 60+ years old.

The sampling approach that was implemented to locate participants focused on purposive and snowball sampling. According to Babble et al. (2010), purposive sampling is “a type of nonprobability sampling in which you select the units to be observed based on your judgement about which ones will be the most useful or representative” (p. 182). Purposive sampling was the initial design methodology relied on by the researcher for conducting outreach to secure SBW participants. Purposive sampling is narrow in scope, intentional and selected participants provide rich data, and knowledge based on their lived experience. During the interview phase, securing SBW through purposive sampling became rigorous, as community outreach approaches became

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stagnant. To counteract the diminished engagement, a revision in strategy was implemented by the researcher to include snowballing (referral) sampling methodology. According to Babble et al. (2010), snowball sampling is “a nonprobability sampling method often employed in field research whereby each person interviewed may be asked to suggest additional people for interviewing” (p. 182). By leveraging SBW participants to engage within their personal network, they help identify hidden SBW prospects that were not part of the initial outreach. Through the referral process, trust was built, allowing SBW to openly share their opinions on the subject matter.

The initial sample size projected for Senior Black Women consisted of six to eight participants and three to four planners, and concluded with five Senior Black Women and three planners. The materials that were used in the creation of this research include audio recording and transcription software (Zoom, OtterAi, and Taguette), a notebook, pens, and a laptop.

2.4 Data Collection Methods

Interviews were conducted between February and April 2025. Informed consent forms and interview questions were sent to Senior Black Women and planner participants prior to scheduling their interviews. Participants emailed their signed consent form to the researcher, and after reviewing, a Zoom link was sent with their confirmed interview date and time. Each interview was conducted through Zoom. Participants were informed that the session would be recorded with video and audio for the researcher to analyze and transcribe. The interviews did not exceed an hour and were conducted in a private setting to ensure the comfort of the participants and the researcher. An introductory script was read to all participants at the start of each session, outlining the objective of the researcher’s study. Participants were informed that they had the right to refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the interview at any point. Identical procedures were applied to planner participants. The same procedures were followed by planners. Each interviewed participant received a \$25 gift card as an honorarium.

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2.5 Recruitment Process

The recruitment strategy that was implemented to obtain Senior Black Women participants focused primarily on community outreach to Black organizations and businesses such as community centres, churches, and community organizations within the GTA. Other recruitment strategies incorporated the researcher's network (LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram), connecting with family and friends, and lastly, word-of-mouth advertising to share the purpose of the study and connect with a broader audience. For planners, the strategy utilized focused primarily on personal connections through the Black Planners & Urban Association (BPUA) and word-of-mouth. The sequence that was employed to obtain participants for this study included:

Senior Black Women

1. Creation of a flyer that highlighted the descriptive nature of potential participants
2. Create a database of Black businesses to contact in the GTA
3. Creation of an email message that has an attached copy of the flier with the description of the purpose of the study, with the researcher's contact information
4. Contact local businesses about this research project and ask for permission to advertise and distribute the flier
5. Creation of interview questions specifically for Senior Black Women
6. Provide participants with consent forms and interview questions before their interview
7. During the interview process, an audio recording was implemented to be transcribed at a later date and time. The participants' identities and statements will not be disclosed; their input will be coded
8. Participants will be sent (hard copy or email gift card) a \$25 honorarium to Tim Hortons after the interview
9. Participants, if requested, will receive a copy of the final report

Planners

1. The creation of a planner's database from different designations and experiences to contact in the GTA and ask permission if they want to participate in this research study
2. Creation of interview questions specifically for planners

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3. Creation of an email message that has an attached copy of the flier with the description of the purpose of the study, with the researcher's contact information
4. Provide participants with consent forms to read and sign
5. During the interview process, an audio recording was implemented to be transcribed and analyzed at a later date and time. The participants' identities and statements will not be disclosed; their input will be coded
6. Participants will be sent (hard copy or email gift card) a \$25 honorarium to Tim Hortons after the interview

2.6 Data Analysis

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method, allowing SBW to share their perspectives on wellness, green space, and aging. In addition, interviews with planners provided insights into planning principles and how they intersect with the needs of this demographic. Bryman et al (2012) described thematic analysis as a qualitative methodology and analytical framework used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns or themes within the data. This framework was used to analyze the interview data collected from Senior Black Women and planners. The transcripts were analyzed using an open coding system, which generated parent and child codes. This process enabled the data to yield richer insights and perspectives.

The inclusion of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) maps complemented the narratives discussed by SBW. These spatial maps indicated the proximity or lack thereof green spaces relative to senior women and visible minority populations. The addition of GIS maps, layered onto spatial data from the 2021 census, enriched the study by visually representing the codes and themes extracted from SBW interviews within geographic contexts. Combining SBW narratives with geospatial data illuminated environmental disparities, particularly in marginalized communities. This interdisciplinary approach provides a shared framework linking perceived realities with spatial inequalities, serving both as a visual tool and a critical instrument for analyzing environmental concerns. To protect participants' anonymity, pseudonyms were used throughout the study.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to York University's research mandate. The submission of the Research Ethics protocol, informed consent form, the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS) certificate, interview questions, and research flier was analyzed and approved before conducting community outreach to locate research participants. Once ethical protocols were approved, informed consent forms were provided to all participants outlining the details of the study, risks, procedures, and benefits. The participants will be informed of the potential risk, and if participants decline to participate, those participants will not be penalized and can at any time withdraw from the study. The risk assessment was minimal, as the participants, Senior Black Women, and planners' insights will be sharing their lived experiences through semi-structured interviews. If participants were triggered by sharing their experiences, counselling information was provided. Participants were informed that their identity and audio-recorded conversations would be kept confidential. Participant information was de-identified through a coding system when transcribing and within the body of the research. Data storage, informed consent, audio, and video-recording will be kept securely and destroyed 1 year after the conclusion of the study.

2.8 Limitations

The contextual constraints that emerged from conducting this study are crucial for understanding the limitations that may influence the interpretation and generalization of the results. Initially, the recruitment strategy relied on internet-based outreach to secure Senior Black Women participants, which proved to be limiting. Having access to the internet was an assumption from the researcher, and the outreach platforms of Instagram, LinkedIn, and Facebook may have been outside their typical social media usage. Community outreach through non-profit organizations that work with seniors and Senior Black Women generated better results and engagement. Inquiries from the prospects were handled directly to clarify the purpose of the research and build rapport and trust. Focusing initially on Senior Black Women aged 65 and over, based on the Canadian retirement age, limited the sample. The age range was later lowered to 60 to increase participation. The original restriction may have excluded other interested voices living in the GTA and created gaps in representation.

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In addition, the researcher assumed that the participants could use the Zoom application. This technological application may be new among some seniors, as technology can be a contentious issue. Additionally, conducting interviews online assumed that all participants had access to a personal computer, which may have excluded individuals who were otherwise willing to participate. Through other lines of communication methods, such as in-person or by telephone. Nevertheless, the Zoom platform was instrumental in facilitating the interviews and served as the primary data collection tool.

Moreover, the Taguette application was instrumental in analyzing the transcripts, but it had limited functionality compared to NVivo. Furthermore, the incorporation of GIS was an invaluable visual representation highlighting the relationship between green spaces and Black communities, including SBW. The data obtained from the Census Tract 2021 application, comprising gender with age, was divided into two distinct categories for analysis. As the data field was restrictive to Female+ 60 to 64 years old and Female+ 65 plus years. The interpretation of the maps revealed opportunities for further refinement for accuracy and clarity. This allows for an intuitive understanding of the data and spatial inequalities in the distribution of green spaces. Finally, incorporating a broad survey to gauge the visitation and experiences of Senior Black Women with urban green space, or lack thereof, could have garnered higher-quality data. However, time was a constraining factor. Moreover, the interview questions could have been more refined to procure deeper insights, and some may have contained biased or leading language that aligned with the researcher's intended outcomes.

The next chapter explores the insights and lived experiences of Senior Black Women as they navigate urban green spaces. Their narratives illuminate critical issues such as accessibility, safety, and inclusion—issues that are often overlooked in mainstream planning discourse.

Chapter 3: What They Said, What It Meant, Listening Between the Lines: Senior Black Women Perspectives in UGS

Senior Black Women who participated in this study provided excellent insight into their lived experiences, engagement strategies, perceptions, and barriers with urban green spaces. The discourse shed light on the realities of urban green spaces as venues for respite but also spaces of caution. The breakdown of this chapter is divided into eight primary sections that address SBW demographics, narratives from their birth country, the benefits of engaging with urban green spaces, the ideology of inclusive green spaces - what does that mean for SBW in society, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, how SBW are environmental informal educators, and lastly discussion and recommendation.

3.1 Profile of Respondents

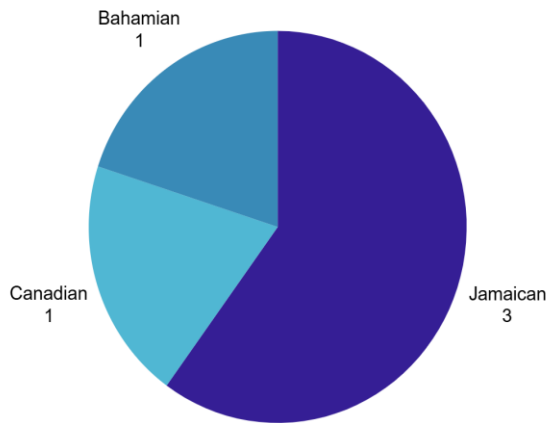
This section constitutes the profile of the SBW participants, starting with their birth country, age classification, employment status, housing accommodations, and their city of residence. The sample size consisted of five SBW living within the GTA.

3.1.1 Birth Country

Participants were asked about their place of birth, either in Canada or abroad, as shown in Figure 5. Three participants, Ailah, Zuri, and Ayo, were born in Jamaica; Kaya was born in the Bahamas, and Siara was born in Canada. The non-Canadian-born participants moved to Canada later in life.

Figure 5

Birth country

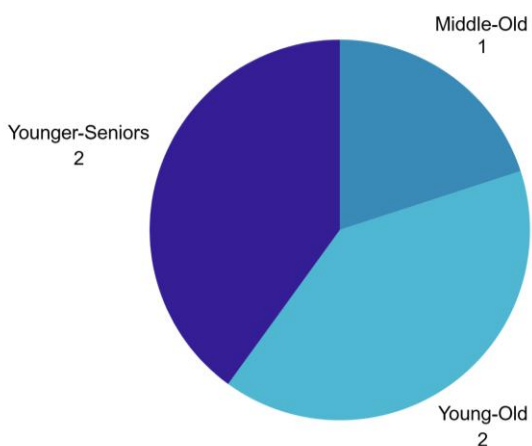


3.1.2 Age Classification

The overall age range for the participants was between 60 to 83 years old, as shown in Figure 6. Narrowing the scope, three categories were disseminated, which include: younger-seniors (60-65), young-old (65-74), middle-old (75-83) (Lee et al., 2018, p. 1).

Figure 6

Age classification

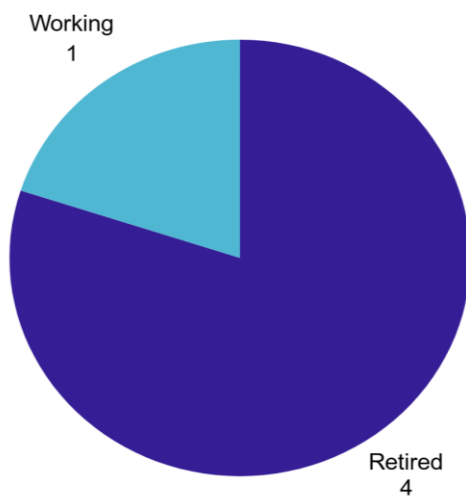


3.1.3 Employment profile

All participants identified their current employment status, as shown in Figure 7. The vast majority of participants, Siara, Kaya, Ailah, and Ayo, are retired, and only Zuri is working full-time.

Figure 7

Employment profile



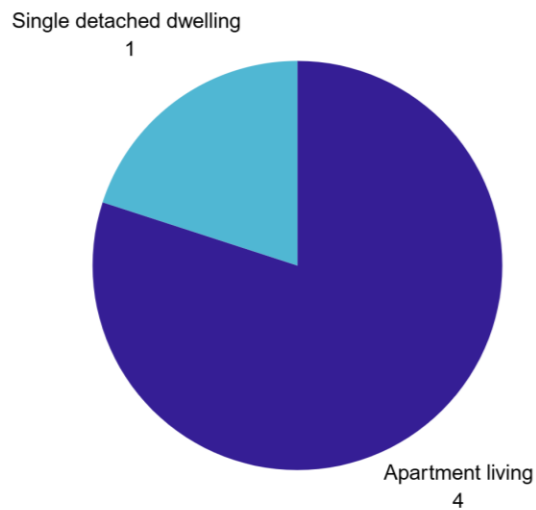
3.1.4 Housing Type

Four participants, Ailah, Siara, Kaya, and Zuri, reside in apartment dwellings, and Ayo lives in a single detached dwelling, as shown in Figure 8.

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Figure 8

Housing type

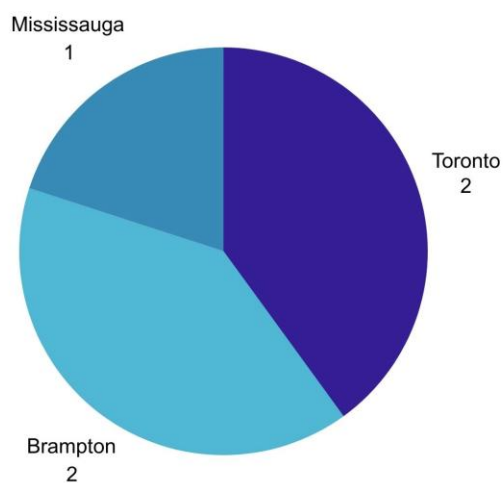


3.1.5 Location

Two participants, Ailah and Siara, reside in Brampton, two participants, Kaya and Zuri, reside in Toronto, and Ayo resides in Mississauga, as illustrated in Figure 9.

Figure 9

City of residence



3.2 Roots of Connection: Senior Black Women's Narratives of Green Spaces in Their Countries of Origin

This section invites Senior Black Women to share their memories of growing up in their native country and their relationship with green space. Participants expressed deep heartfelt expressions that stimulated their senses, recalling their younger adolescent days of playing in nature with friends, visiting their aunties' homes and established city gardens, or picking fruit from the trees. Raphael et al. (2020) articulate that "early childhood experiences have strong immediate and longer-lasting biological, psychological and social effects upon health" (p. 23). The unconscious nature of being young and thriving without constraints of adulthood enhances one's wellness and SDOH. Morsy and Rothstein's (2019) article explores the theory of "stress" and "toxicity" on African-American adolescents' hormones, which can impede overall wellness (mental and physical). The experiences that SBW expressed through their inner childhood are free from those stressors, as nature was a compelling instrument to venture outside and socialize with the community that resembled their heritage.

3.2.1 Memories of Home

For the SBW who expressed their views about growing up and interacting with green spaces, their sentiments revealed the "positive nature of nostalgia," where happy memories of one's past brought about positive emotions that influence one's overall wellness (Smeekes & Jetten, 2019). Thinking about one's native home—the old times, with friends, and family, local smells, noise, and scenery—is all part of building memories and growing up. Immigrating to a new country has its burdens and complexities of integrating and assimilating into society, learning new norms and language, navigating "culture shock," and understanding the silent, invisible cues that bond people together. In contrast, memories of home can offer a sense of ease, comfort, and connectivity to one's cultural identity (Tahmaseb-McConatha, 2024).

Ayo, Kaya, Ailah, and Siara shared their lived experiences of growing up in their birth country and green spaces. The three non-Canadian participants, Ayo, Kaya, and Ailah expressed that there was no separation of green space and home, or green space and the neighbourhood. Green space was all around and ingrained into their daily activities.

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Ayo stated, “It is different because ... when we were back home, we just went outside, and we were right there. But we had it right there.... So, it is different there than here” (personal communication, March 10, 2025). Ayo explained that there was no separation of green spaces. Being born in Jamaica, the environment was conducive to lush greenery. Ayo observed that there were “Lots of trees and lots of yard space, so lots of playing ground. And at that time, as a child, you saw it only as a playing ground ... as a child, in Jamaica it's your yard, it's your [playground]” (personal communication, March 10, 2025). Ayo’s narrative intersected green spaces, and her ability to access those landscapes. She stated, “But we had it right there ... I can't even really tell you how many acres we have, acres and acres and acres of land. So, it is different there than here” (personal communication, March 10, 2025).

Kaya reiterated similar thought patterns to Ayo. Kaya, who grew up in the Bahamas, realized that she “Didn't conscious[ly] think about green space back then” (personal communication, February 23, 2025). For her, it was not a separate space that you made time to visit - green spaces were ingrained into the fabric of the community. The similarities persist throughout the participants’ dialogue. For example, Ailah shared her perspective on green spaces and said: “I have experienced a lot of green spaces ... [I] spent most of my childhood years [in Jamaica] the parks that [I] experienced back home were basically fixed up nicely that we could walk through” (personal communication, February 24, 2025). Although Siara grew up in Canada, her adolescent experiences are closely aligned with the memories shared by the foreign-born SBW. Siara stated, “When I was growing up, not my yard, but the yard next door, they had pear trees, apple trees, and peach trees there. So that was always very beautiful. You saw the people [and] you saw the green space. And it was beautiful” (personal communication, February 19, 2025).

Memories of home for SBW often serve as a vital source of cultural pride, belonging, and a grounding force. Recollections of food, landscapes, and community preserve a sense of identity that can deepen SBW's resilience, pride, and value in the face of adversity.

3.3 Wellness Through Nature: Insights into Green Space Use and Its Benefits

Stoewen's eight dimensions of wellness, along with The Global Wellness Institute definition described earlier, provide insight into the narratives that SBW bestowed about the benefits of UGS and their pursuit of wellness. SBW's thoughts and perspectives ranged to various degrees and were advantageous to the study objective.

3.3.1 Mental Health Approaches

Wyatt and Ampadu (2022) linked mental health and the Black community through their intersectional rhetoric that combines racism, discrimination, and navigating oppressive institutions that cause multiple layers of stress, and the associated effects can lead to diminished well-being and SDOH. Barton and Rogerson (2017) presented the idea that green space can “reduce socioeconomic health inequalities, facilitating activity and promoting better mental health and well-being” (p. 81). The investigation of green space and mental health through the lens of SBW is multidimensional, as their lived experience is unique.

All participants described the benefits of interacting with green spaces. Participants understood that urban green spaces hold immense power as nature is a place of reprieve, harmony, and balance. Siara described green spaces as venues to relieve stress by proclaiming, “Yes, it does, especially if you're stressed out about things [as] so many of us are. It's a way of getting away from the stressors of the day” (personal communication, February 19, 2025). Reconnecting with nature centres and balances one's mental outlook as the hustle and bustle of life can be very stringent and exasperating. For Ailah, Ayo, and Kaya, the time spent in green spaces attuned itself to internal reflection and mental clarity. Ailah mentioned, “For mental [health], it gives me time to think of breathing in the fresh air [and] enjoy. [I] look forward to getting the walk and enjoying this space instead of being locked up inside the house. It clears your mental body” (personal communication, February 24, 2025). Similar to Ailah's stance on mental clarity, Ayo proclaimed, “Yeah, well, most definitely it does [have] an impact on one's overall wellness. Mentally it clears your mind” (personal communication, March 10, 2025). Mental health strategies have evolved, as research has shown that the outdoors can be a place of relief. The connectivity of green space and mental health demonstrated a positive correlation to

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enhance health outcomes as a preventative measure. As individuals can experience a reduction in mental distress, anxiety, depression, and dementia (Barton & Rogerson, 2017).

Kaya's observation continued to connect the positive effects of green spaces and wellness. Her message was clear – "I do, I really do. I'm not sure if you are just spending time in green space sitting, it's going to do anything for you physically, maybe, [but] certainly mentally" (personal communication, February 23, 2025). Zuri concluded the conversation with a mindful message about mental health and green space connectivity:

Absolutely, green spaces are critical to human health. When you have trees in a local park, you're more likely to go sit on a bench under the tree and hang out in the park. So, you feel better because you're outdoors (personal communication, March 10, 2025).

The interface between green space and mental health is a vital strategy in the realm of healthcare. Therapeutic interventions can support wellness initiatives that target the entire individual and not just the apparent illness. Entering nature can bring a sense of peace, clarity, and balance, which was underscored throughout the SBW narratives.

3.3.2 Physical Health

Ailah, Zuri, and Ayo expressed their thoughts about the physical benefits of access to green spaces. Through their discernment, the ability to be physically active is paramount to aging well.

Ailah emphasized how being mobile helped support her body's functionality, by expressing that "It helps my body physically, my body and my knees. I get stretched and I feel comfortable" (personal communication, February 24, 2025). The ability to continue to be physically active as a senior woman is vital to retain muscular tonnage as women's bone density diminishes over time (NCOA, 2024). Ayo's experience centred on her weight loss journey – "Physically, it has caused me to lose weight. It has caused me to keep fit. I'm not as sluggish as I used to be" (personal communication, March 10, 2025). By facing health challenges head-on through green space applications, Zuri encapsulated her feelings and noted that "So absolutely, green spaces are important for mental and physical health" (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

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All three of these participants highlighted the significance of green space in their physical health as a positive approach to continuing to live to the fullest and aging well. However, it is important to recognize that historically, the primary demographic used to study health outcomes only focused on white men (McKoy, 2023), who are “economically privileged populations” (Parker et al., 2002, p. 407). Modern-day research has shifted to include Black Women in medical field conversations, which presents a new outlook about medical care. Their intersectional lens—especially race—has ties to racial stressors, health disparities, misdiagnosis, which lead to poorer health outcomes such as weight gain, heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, and high blood pressure, all associated with the Black community (McKoy, 2023). The ability to stay active in older age is a positive countermeasure.

3.3.3 Spirituality

Religious institutions are not bound by the gospel alone; they provide healing, emotional support, and daily activities for seniors as an act of servitude (Parker et al., 2002). Hope et al. (2024) reported that “African American emerging adult women reported they harnessed spirituality to navigate their daily lives in predominantly white environments and that spirituality helped them cope, make sense of uncertainty, and receive direction and hope” (p. 3). As such, spirituality within the context of the Black community plays a crucial role in wellness.

Participants’ faith in the unknown [higher deity] adds a dimension of wellness that recognizes that the universe and our existence are not bound by human concepts and control. Kaya and Ayo emphasized the role of green spaces in their spiritual practices. Kaya’s perspective, “[She] think[s] [green spaces] do give you a lift [of] your spirit” (personal communication, February 23, 2025). Through Kaya’s spiritual belief system, she incorporates the admiration of God and the gift of nature into her walks.

Talk about the value of wandering around with nowhere special to go, but just to have some time in the outdoors and to appreciate, you know, I find that I said that this is God's gift. It's all God's gift, right? So, especially the ladies in the church, I think that they might appreciate that this is God's gift. We just don't know how lucky we are that we actually have it available to us (personal communication, February 23, 2025).

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Kaya's message resonates with Ayo's sermon – "I use my walking time to meditate. I sing, I'm a Christian, so I talk to God, I pray. Most importantly for me, I use that time for that" (personal communication, March 10, 2025). Blazer (1991) presented the theory that as individuals age, their ability to connect with a higher power is revered as a spiritual awakening: "spiritual elders are perceived to 'understand the nature of things' and to have magic powers" (p. 61). As SBW progresses in age, revelations about life, one's purpose, and meaning can support spiritual self-transcendence, as spirituality is composed of an individual's belief system they have developed over time.

3.3.4 Socialization

Socialization for senior citizens takes on a different connotation as their peer groups and "social support provided by kin and friends" (Barker et al. 2012, p. 2) diminish over time, as health concerns are pressing issues and complex realities. SBW participants recognized that socialization through green spaces can ignite conversations, rekindle old friendships, while having the ability to observe nature and explore neighbourhoods.

Kaya articulated that "If someone encourages you, perhaps [to] come with me, let's do such and such. You might be inclined to go" (personal communication, February 23, 2025). This parallels Zuri's statement, "Absolutely, you're more likely to do something if somebody you know is already doing it" (personal communication, March 5, 2025). Lanning's (2024) composition about the benefits of seniors' interaction with green spaces for socialization purposes connects Zuri's and Kaya's opinions. Lanning (2024) understood that green spaces can foster social interaction, share stories, and combat loneliness.

Siara's explanation merged the perspectives of socialization with building strong, long-lasting friendships that transcend time – "You do develop very good friendships.... There are some women from the Caribbean that we are still friends [with]. We attend one another's functions and that type of thing" (personal communication, February 19, 2025). Moreover, Siara dived deeper into explaining her rationale to say,

Sometimes it's just to be able to go meet some of your friends, sit down, you know, some older people ... you know [have] a little snack and stuff in the field and socialize for an

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hour or two and go back home. That makes you feel good (personal communication, February 19, 2025).

Both Ailah and Ayo described walking through green spaces as a way to connect with both new and longtime friends. Reflecting on this experience, Ailah shared,

Yes, but if [you] say, you have a friend, and this friend is utilizing the [green] space, you know, daily and finds it beneficial to him or her. I think we all should, you know, we should tell our friends and tell our neighbours that this is what we are doing today and so on. And then when you have a good friend or a good walking partner, you know, you enjoy walking together (personal communication, February 24, 2025).

Knight et al. (2018) tackled the same principle in their study and recognized that seniors who enter urban green spaces with a significant other, a partner, visit parks more often. In the case of Ayo, she started her leisure activity participation through engagement with her son. Ayo explained,

Like my son, that's a good example; he started walking. I said, hey, what are you doing? [I came] along with him for the first day. And then it's like, oh, so I called another friend, I called another friend. Next thing, you know, there's four or five of us walking down the road (personal communication, March 10, 2025).

The engagement of peers, family, and friends to partake in leisure activity in urban green spaces with a senior cohort is a paramount testament to building relationships and continuing to be physically active while enjoying one's later stages of life. The constraints of having a job or raising children shifted to the next generation, and seniors have more freedom and time to indulge in personal growth. The International Council on Active Aging, seven dimensions of wellness⁷, highlights how wellness intersects with concurrent spheres that support the ability of seniors to age well. Research studies have shown that wellness through nature reduces stress, positively elevates emotions (mood), improves physical fitness through leisure activity, and shared stories can be influential by engaging in urban green spaces.

⁷ According to ICAA (n.d.) "wellness is derived from our ability to understand, accept and act upon our capacity to lead a purpose-filled and engaged life. In doing so, we can embrace our potential (physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, social, environmental, vocational) to pursue and optimize life's possibilities. The wellness dimensions overlap and coordinate to provide rich environments for living. Wellness becomes a framework that is valuable for serving the wants and needs of a person engaged in life" (para 2-3).

3.4 Green Space Inclusion: Addressing Social and Structural Barriers

This section explores the multifaceted barriers that SBW encountered in accessing and engaging with green spaces. These obstacles range from personal challenges, such as health issues, lack of social support, and time constraints—to systemic factors like financial insecurity, unstable housing, and inadequate green space infrastructure. Together, these factors create layered and compounding barriers that shape how, when, and whether SBW can benefit from the restorative efforts of green spaces.

3.4.1 Navigating Nature: The Role of Cultural, Race, and Gender In Spatial Equality

The Black community and the natural environment have intersected throughout history, from their ancestral homeland of Africa to the Canadian communities of Africville, Nova Scotia, and the “Shiloh community - the first black community in Saskatchewan” (Osobade, 2019, para. 1). Kimberlé Crenshaw’s rhetoric about intersectionality and systems of oppression, provides analytical insight into the experiences of Senior Black Women navigating green spaces.

Kaya reflected on the cultural dimension of green space usage and stated that “[It] might just be me, but I kind of think that maybe the Black community, especially the Black women, especially older Black women, may be more preoccupied with managing life challenges” (personal communication, February 23, 2025). SBW has dealt with racial disparities, silent or overt, economic plight (Jackson, 1976), caregiving, and other factors, which hinder one’s innate ability to advance through Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Focusing on basic human necessities in older age may be placed higher in the mind of SBW.

Ayo added the layer of traditional gender roles as a barrier for SBW enjoying green space: “It’s a culture thing, also that, especially a woman, I speak for a woman, you know, you come home, you cook, you take care of the kids” (personal communication, March 10, 2025). Patricia Hill Collins (2000) conceptualized the Black women’s experience by saying, “race and gender may be analytically distinct, but in Black women’s everyday lives, they work together” (p. 269). For generations, Black women have played vital caregiving roles. During slavery, they served their enslavers as household servants and childcare maids, while maintaining their own families and communities. Their collective strength and resilience shaped the Black community.

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Kaya further iterated that “Culturally, we talked about the other priorities and so on” (personal communication, February 23, 2025). In the last five years, the Black community has endured traumatic events that have reignited the rhetoric of racism. Ongoing surveillance and policing within public domains, disenfranchised schools, unequal employment (managerial roles and wage gaps) (Brooks, 2021), and the removal of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Have instilled a sense of survival instincts and prioritize core essentials of safety, housing, and food. These serve as limiting factors that SBW and the broader Black community continue to experience. While trying to thrive in society, which is reflected in Kaya's sentiment.

Kaya expanded her perspective by linking her UGS experiences to the affluent neighbourhood in the GTA, stating:

Certain neighbourhoods [there] have more older homes, single-family dwellings, and so they will have green space, [and] they have mature trees, and we don't necessarily. In those kinds of neighbourhoods, we live in anonymous apartment buildings, and so there's less of that (personal communication, February 23, 2025).

Park People (n.d.) iterated in their article the very notion of Kaya's statement –

If you live in a neighbourhood with plentiful parks and trees, then you also likely live in a neighbourhood that is whiter and higher income. Multiple studies show that lower-income, racialized communities have fewer green spaces, making these communities more vulnerable to climate change impacts (para. 5).

Tree canopy studies have illuminated the disparity in the amount of tree distribution within Black and racialized neighbourhoods, which equate to higher urban temperatures known as urban heat islands. Ayo deepened the conversation about cultural connotations and said, “Meanwhile, in our culture, it's more for us to stay by ourselves ... and mind your own business, you understand. So again, it's a cultural thing” (personal communication, March 10, 2025). Minding one's own business is a saying within the Black community, where further meaning is not needed. As the linguistic undertone is understood within all contexts.

The reality of green spaces and the Black community in the broader scheme holds discriminatory rhetoric and visuals. Recalling the domination and ownership of space through violence, intimidation tactics, and threats by the Ku Klux Klan preached white supremacy rhetoric.

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Siara described the uneasy feeling of not being welcomed in green spaces:

We need to be welcome; we need to feel that, like we have to be able to feel that we're treated as any other human being. That's really what [is] on my own mind. This is what we are actually asking for. I don't want you to make things different for me. It doesn't have to be. I'll make things different, but you have to treat me the same as you would treat yourself (personal communication, February 19, 2025).

The development of green spaces is for public pleasure. The experience that one has within those landscapes can produce lasting negative ramifications. Gibson (2025) said, “unsatisfying park experiences are likely to reduce visitation” (p. 1), or a thrill of excitement.

Ailah continues with Gibson’s (2025) statement:

[SBW] may say, well, I can do that at home, or I'm not really into that anymore, that type of thing.... I haven't gone anywhere and seen a lot of Black people sitting around in the park or in a garden space, and I don't know if it's part of it. I don't know, sometimes it's a comfort level that people don't have when they enter into these spaces (personal communication, February 24, 2025).

The process of occupying and claiming space for oneself and the Black community begins with entering and engaging with these landscapes. Machado (2020) conveyed, “even with all the racial violence associated with outdoor spaces, I want to believe that the outdoors is our best chance at that kind of visceral joy” (para. 13). Zuri's narratives referenced Machado’s (2020) vision for the outdoors and included the intersection of race, psychological health, and green space:

However, again, for most Black people, that psychological comfort in nature is not there [which is a] huge barrier. The psychology of don't know where [I need] to go, [I] don't see people like ourselves there, and the fear of, if I do go there, what am I going to encounter? Am I going to be safe? (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

The feeling of uneasiness within outdoor spaces does not require overt racial gestures. According to Harris (2019), code-switching for African Americans is “a performative expression that has not only helped some of us thrive in mainstream culture—but it has also helped many of us simply survive” (para. 9). For the Black community, code-switching is an ingrained safety measure when encountering white people in unfamiliar places. Avoiding any

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stereotypical Black visuals, vernacular, or tones (being loud) is conducive to staying safe, owning one's space, and trying to fit into the surroundings. Zuri concluded her feelings about the outdoors:

So, when we're outdoors, some of those images are circulating in our subconscious.

Yeah, the trauma, the fear. And therefore, the presence of dogs becomes another way that whites keep nature as a white space. Because dog ownership is racialized, i.e., 80% of the people and dogs are white, and most racialized people do not have dogs as pets. And therefore, the presence of dogs becomes another way that whites keep nature as a white space (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

Outdoor spaces for SBW can be harmonious if society does not participate in racial atrocities against the Black community. Zuri's statement about dogs, trauma, and fear is a real emotion that the Black community continues to be sensitive and vigilant too.

3.4.2 Unseen Struggles: Addressing Mental and Physical Health Challenges Facing Senior Black Women

Siara, Kaya, and Zuri communicated the reality of aging, as physical and mental health can deteriorate. Siara shared, "A lot [of SBW] certainly have mobility issues, but that's a major barrier for many" (personal communication, February 19, 2025) and "Yes, we see a lot [of seniors] now that have mental issues, such as different types of dementia" (personal communication, February 19, 2025). Ageism and health are connected as mental health in older age is oftentimes stigmatized, misdiagnosed, and undertreated. Mental health concerns vary as society's perspective of seniors, in general terms, can be seen as burdensome and less valuable, which can lead to reduced health outcomes.

Kaya and Zuri presented the perspective of negative physical health outcomes. Kaya explained that "First of all, I look at physical [health] because a number of us are not [in the] best shape" (personal communication, February 23, 2025). Kaya added, "At my church, there are senior women who walk with a cane, so they have mobility aids in some type of form" (personal communication, February 23, 2025). Zuri concluded with similar rhetoric of mobility concerns: "I think for seniors, health becomes an issue, health becomes a barrier. Yes, mobility becomes a barrier" (personal communication, March 5, 2025). Physical and mental barriers in older age are

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a worrisome reality, as the ideology of aging well is dependent on contributing factors from their earlier lived experiences, external physical attributes, and social environments.

A different connotation to health outcomes was presented by Siara, who explored the debilitating aspect of social isolation and senior abuse. Versey and Gibbons (2025) defined social isolation as “the lack of social integration” (p. 2). Social integration is the process of engaging with your community and/or peer group, which presents a sense of belonging. Siara talked about this problematic issue through the lens of family and SBW.

You have a family that has isolated you because they want you to look after their children, which would be that person's grandchildren. So that stops that individual from going over and being involved [in] a lot of things. Which is wrong (personal communication, February 19, 2025).

Considering the outlook that Siara mentioned, geographic location can be a restrictive factor, economic status, and caregiving constraints can limit access to senior-targeted community programs within the Black Community and other public services that support one's ability to thrive (NCBA, n.d.). Moreover, the notion of elder abuse and the Black community from Siara's viewpoint was startling. She stated, “There's a lot of abuse that's happening with seniors and within the Black community. If my family doesn't want me to tell others what's happening in the home, I'm not likely going to be able [to] socialize” (personal communication, February 19, 2025).

Elder abuse is a staggering affliction that can be perpetrated by peers, family, and friends. Elder abuse takes shape in different forms such as physical, mental, emotional, financial, and sexual abuse. Additionally, neglect—such as improper care of hygiene—rids seniors of their dignity. Ultimately seniors' rights and freedoms become restricted which constitutes elder abuse (Nice, 2024). Public Health Agency of Canada, (2025) recognized that “abuse affects 4 and 10% of older adults in Canada. Only one in five incidents of elder abuse comes to the attention of those who can help” (para. 1). Elder abuse is a silent pandemic in which power dynamics can be created by family, friends, social workers or personal support workers (PSW) that are not advantageous to seniors' health. To support seniors who may experience elder abuse, advocacy is paramount. The statements shared by all Senior Black Women hold significance, as 'barriers' are

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infinite and far more complex in reality, shaped continuously by individuals' evolving lived experiences over time.

3.4.3 Balancing Time Constraints and Maintaining Regular Routines

Time is an uncontrollable facet of life that is experienced by all. Time does not judge, time is everlasting, and time cannot be given back. How seniors use their time to fulfill their personal and spiritual well-being reflects their personal beliefs. Participants Kaya, Siara, and Ailah addressed the idea of time as a constraint for engaging in green spaces. Kaya mentioned, “I kind of think [SBW] don't have as much leisure time as other community groups may have or choose to have” (personal communication, February 23, 2025). Siara, who works with older Black adults and seniors, said, “They [SBW] are always [doing] things [like] babysitting their grandchildren, so they don't have time to spend around a lot of green space, because most of them are stuck inside” (personal communication, February 19, 2025).

Kaya's and Siara's message correlates to Ailah's thoughts - “So barriers would be just about if you're watching the kids” (personal communication, February 24, 2025). The acceleration of time for seniors can create a paradoxical meaning of life. Engagement in the outdoors may be of interest; however, seniors who haven't experienced these environments may feel uneasy as their internal self-image and personal storytelling negate their ambition to try new adventures. Furthermore, from the three SBW narratives, life can block you from new experiences as the grind to maintain your livelihood takes precedence over enjoyment.

The progression of thought evoked another concern about engaging in green spaces, which dealt with seniors' routines. According to the Meighenhealth (2024) article for the Salvation Army, maintaining a routine benefits seniors' health, such as reducing anxiety, supporting cognitive function, improving medication adherence, improving mobility, fostering independence, and other beneficial attributes.

The observations that Ayo and Kaya presented were about seniors and maintaining a routine, parallel to MeighenHealth's (2024) insight. Ayo stated, “So, when you get to the mature state of [being a] senior, [and if] you don't have that embedded in your mind to go and walk [relying on] somebody [to] give you that push [is important]” (personal communication, March 10, 2025). This sentiment resonated with Kaya's observation, “So [if] it's not a part of your

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regular routine, you don't walk on a regular basis” (personal communication, February 23, 2025). Ayo also emphasized that maintaining a routine is often shaped by an individual's circumstances.

So, the space is there, but it's not due to no fault of their own. Could be their work [or] as a single parent, they don't understand that in their own downtime, that they can do that because they're always in the hustle and bustle, they don't take advantage of these spaces (personal communication, March 10, 2025).

The lived experiences of SBW are framed by the tension between time constraints and the desire to maintain their routine. The decision to engage in leisure activities versus staying at home can reflect the perceived importance of work, as a means for building an economic nest egg in comparison to living on the financial edge. Financial instability doesn't provide time for personal enjoyment in comparison to retirees or economically stable individuals. In older age, life should be enjoyed to the fullest; however, balancing the demands of life and the pursuit of wellness may lead to long-term physical and mental health consequences for SBW.

3.4.4 Unequal Grounds: The Cost of Access To Equitable Green Spaces

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (2021) observed that “many Black women have to continue working because of declining income as they age” (para. 8). Financial constraints are a pressing concern for SBW as reduced income is associated with diminished SDOHs. Ayo, Siara, and Zuri tackled the construction of financial instability and older age as a barrier to access to green spaces for SBW. Their narratives highlighted issues such as the need to continue working in older age, limited pension income, and the overall affordability of engaging in recreational activities.

Ayo expressed two ideas relating to working past the governmentally stipulated retirement age of 65 years. Ayo stated, “Well, a lot of it would be financial, because if you're just working [for] a pension, especially if you come to this country and you haven't worked for many years, you don't have much of a pension” (personal communication, March 10, 2025).

Hindir (2025) provided linguistic evidence to Ayo's rationale - “Older racialized adults, the majority of whom are immigrants, often work out of necessity due to economic challenges or lack of financial security for retirement (para. 4). Financial security for marginalized communities falls short in the creation of wealth, as the discrepancy in wages because of gender

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and age, or job type entry-level or low paying has been studied and analyzed to be a reality and detriment for the Black community.

Hindir (2025) highlighted interesting facts about senior and marginalized women:

- In 2020, 38% of racialized individuals aged 65 and over had private retirement income, compared with 66% for non-racialized individuals” (para. 5).
- In 2020, 94% of non-racialized women were receiving Quebec Pension Plan (QPP) and Canada Pension Plan (CPP) benefits, compared with 69% of racialized women (Hindir, 2025, para. 6).

According to Spiteri (2023), the majority of Black women are concentrated within “healthcare and social assistance sectors” (para. 8). The income level for both jobs is dependent on what type of career path and advancement achieved. Managerial roles can be harder to access because of systemic and institutional racism in the hiring process. Ayo compounded her stance about finances and stated, “Senior Black Women are still working” (personal communication, March 10, 2025). Ayo then added the idea of SBW being exhausted from being employed at an older age.

When [SBW] come home, they're tired, because in Canada, we have no sort of age limit to say to retire, right? Unless you're working for a company that says you have to retire at 65, but there are a lot of Senior Black Women that are working, and it's because of financial issues. So, a lot of times they come home from work and they're just too tired to do anything (personal communication, March 10, 2025).

Many SBWs work until an older age out of financial necessity, often enduring physical and emotional exhaustion. Continued labour reflects society's systemic and institutional disparities that are tied to SDOH and the reduction of income earned as a choice.

Zuri and Siara deviated from the idea of SBW continuing to work in older age, but highlighted the economic issue about affordability, which Samayoa (2020) said, “and it's not strictly a matter of economics” (para. 10) of accessing green spaces. Zuri eloquently stated, “Black people aren't interested in outdoor recreation because of cultural values or cultural norms, bullshit. Black people aren't interested in outdoor recreation because they can't afford it” (personal communication, March 5, 2025). Siara’s statement resembles Zuri’s narrative. Siara stated, “Right, and again. I don't know what the cost of it will be, because, you know, in Canada,

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there are people who are on a pension, pensionable. They are very careful with their pension money. So, if it's a cost, that has to be considered" (personal communication, February 19, 2025).

The ability to invest and save for retirement is difficult as inflation of goods continues to rise, mortgage and rental payments are increasing, and paying into a company's pension may not be an option for all jobs. Any extra available funds may go towards other priorities (bills, food, phone) or saved for a rainy day. Green space activities may be an afterthought in the greater scheme of life.

3.4.5 The Housing Experiences of Senior Black Women and Urbanization

Housing, as a key SDOH, plays a critical role in shaping the health outcomes of Senior Black Women. Most importantly, housing is more than brick and mortar; housing is where you can create memories, share stories, and enjoy laughter with family, friends, and peers. Eating a good home-cooked meal can remind an SBW of back home.

The Canadian Human Rights Commission (2025) discusses housing as "everyone should be able to access housing that meets their needs without discrimination or harassment" (para. 2) and:

Adequate housing is more than just four walls and a roof. It is a place to live in security, peace, and dignity. It is central to physical and mental health, community, and sustainability. Having an affordable, suitable, and safe place to live helps people and families succeed and thrive (para. 1).

Drawing on the Canadian Human Rights Commission (2025) rhetoric. Zuri discussed the intersection of housing conditions within the Black community and access to green spaces. Zuri stated:

When I think of green spaces, most Black people's housing in Toronto is heavily racialized. Most Black people live in apartments, and it's like, where is the green space around the apartment? The carpet of grass does not say come and look (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

Zuri expanded on her earlier statement, explaining – "[Black people] who live in their apartments, there's no access to the green space in their apartment block."... and I live in an

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apartment” (personal communication, March 5, 2025). Reflecting further, Zuri shared, “Instead of a stupid grass, you [can] have a little community garden. We don't have access to that for Black people, because most of us live in apartments” (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

The impact of housing as a SDOH principle from Rapheal et al. (2020) perspective can be tied to health disparities - “high housing costs reduce the resources available to support other social determinants of health” (p. 29) and “housing insecurity is linked to income insecurity which in turn leads to illness and premature death” (p. 30). Socio-economic factors interplay with health and race, as exposure to housing inequities, discrimination, and affordability can lead to housing instability. Racialized neighbourhoods experienced gentrification to accommodate modern-day planning concepts that attracted affluent homebuyers and foreign stakeholders.

The GTA housing market consists of exorbitant real estate costs from initial downpayment, mortgage rates, and house values. Furthermore, rental costs are becoming unaffordable, and social housing is backlogged seven to twenty-one years, depending on the location. Housing is a core human right concept that the United Nations stipulates, while the idea of engaging in green spaces for respite can take a back seat as housing is an element of survival and health.

3.4.6 Engaging in Green Spaces: The Influence of Social Support Systems and Transportation

For Senior Black Women, independence, resolve, and taking charge of life is an inherited characteristic learned in youth. The reliance on others can be an uneasy feeling, as the aging process impacts one’s mobility and dexterity. Social support systems and transportation services play a pivotal role in seniors’ lives, to continue being active within the community.

Ailah, Ayo, and Siara identified that limited social support systems are a barrier to engaging in green space activities. Ailah discussed that “Without an external worker, like a PSW, her ability to go outside was significantly hampered” (personal communication, February 24, 2025). Shorter-Gordon (2004) presents an outlook of “leaning on shoulders” (p. 1), which means that, as we age, our ability to manage life's expectations by ourselves is a commendable resolve, but reality advocates the necessity of external support through the community or hired assistance. As the saying goes, “it takes a village to raise a child” (Obatusa, 2018, para. 2), and in

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this instance, the village supports seniors' ability to age well. The construct of the Strong Black Woman Archetype (SBWA), as previously mentioned, points to the self-reliant and resilient mindset of this demographic. However, age plays an integral role in how seniors traverse and engage in society.

Another barrier that was presented by SBW reflected the concept of transportation. Ravensbergen (2022) highlights that transportation via cars and seniors shift with age. Seniors “regulate their driving” (p. 1) or cease to drive altogether. Accessing transportation, whether by bus or car, relies on one’s overall health (physical and mental) and financial income. Seniors may be receiving government support through Old Age Security (OAS) or Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS). This fixed income may be distributed to other personal necessities (medical, food, bills) and not allow for non-priority expenditures such as UGS activity.

Ayo stated, “As a [senior] person, are they going to drive to it ... that senior person is not going to get in your car and drive unless [there is] a driver” (personal communication, March 10, 2025). Siara also offered her input into the conversation and stated, “A lot of [SBW] don't come out, because if they have mobility issues and that type of thing, [it is] harder to call trans help to come and go into a garden [space]” (personal communication, February 19, 2025).

The Canadian Constitution Act, 1982, Part 1: The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Accessible Canada Act (ACA), Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), and the Accessible Transportation for Persons with Disabilities Regulations (ATPDR) ensure that individuals with disabilities and seniors are not discriminated against due to age and have barrier-free access to public transportation. Even with the protection from the government, if SBW don’t feel supported, the notion of travelling to UGS, which is outside of their routine, may not occur. However, Ayo acknowledged the importance of social advocacy as an approach to rectify personal barriers – “If we don't have someone advocating for us, it's not going to get done” (personal communication, March 10, 2025).

The barriers that SBW presented impact their ability to freely move around their neighbourhood, community, and city. Factors of one’s “lifestyle and socio-demographic characteristics” (Lin & Cui, 2021, p. 2) are an integral perspective to examine, as seniors are not a homogenous demographic.

3.4.7 Signs of Care: Exploring Infrastructure and the Green Space Experiences of Senior Black Women

Strolling through High Park, glancing at the stunning cherry blossom trees, the manicured lawn and landscape shrubs, while walking uphill towards the cafe with no physical or visual concerns. It is a reality that the general senior population may not experience, as age-related health issues become more pronounced. Local community parks and parkettes can be an alternative source of green space engagement if the UGI is adequate and age-friendly.

All participants reflected on the physical nature and design of green spaces. Ayo and Ailah focused on safety as a barrier. Ayo stated, “So it is on the government to say, okay, this is designated as a safe place for somebody to walk like [an] elderly person if they don't want to go on the trail” (personal communication, March 10, 2025). Seniors, safety, and government investment into city Parks, Forestry, and Recreation departments are tied to park design that supports wider paths, rubberized surfaces, and ramps that enable seniors to comfortably enjoy the outdoors. Ailah shared her thoughts about safety and lighting.

My friend and I [were] talking and if we wanted to go [walking] ... you know, like after sunset in the summertime ... it's kind of dark [in] some areas, it's not fully lit, it could be a little bit better. Some lights, you know, are not very good. We would want to walk, then he would say to me.... It's not bright enough. And you don't know, because you know, there are sometimes not very good people; not everyone that's walking that late at night means well, so [it is a safety issue], yes (personal communication, February 24, 2025).

Venturing into green spaces as an SBW, lighting, and visible site lines are important safety measures in the prevention of crime (Kimic & Polko, 2022) and reduce the risk of falling. Kaya confirmed Ailah's sentiment by incorporating a story about a park close to her home, stating:

There is a park behind my building, and I walk through it very quickly at night. Nobody stops there, really; dogs will go out there. It's a beautiful park, it's lovely, it's for the children, but it is dark, and there are no washrooms there (personal communication, February 23, 2025).

Green spaces that are well-maintained are crucial for SBW to feel at ease while experiencing the outdoors. Kaya and Siara discussed dilapidated infrastructure, lack of seating areas that are shaded, and inadequate washroom facilities were discussed by Kaya and Siara.

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Kaya expressed concerns about the lack of washroom facilities in Toronto's public spaces – "You know [parks] that I've gone to... there's always parking if you need to drive. [However,] there [are] probably no washroom facilities. And that's a major issue in the City of Toronto. It's not the first [time] that people have talked about this" (personal communication, February 23, 2025).

Siara engaged with a similar observation, by saying "If you're going to Chinguacousy Park, [and] looking for a place that [has] shelter, then that's rather difficult, and you have a good walk for going to washrooms and things like that" (personal communication, February 19, 2025).

Bathroom facilities need to be accessible and clean. A critical component for seniors with disabilities who may have assistive devices is the size of bathrooms. Having a larger bathroom where PSW, family members, or caregivers can enter can entice seniors to continue visiting that particular green space. Exploring inadequate seating as a barrier was included in the conversation through Kaya's commentary.

Benches, benches, benches. For people to sit, especially if you're older, you may, you know, just want to have more of an opportunity to sit down [and] washrooms [are important]. I think benches are important. Um, that was the one thing that came to me: not enough space for people to sit down, and something lightning. I don't know why we don't have [more] in the parks at night (personal communication, February 23, 2025).

The availability of benches allows seniors to rest and socialize with peers (Kimic & Polko, 2022; Park N Play Design, 2024; Park N Play Design, 2023). If the distribution of benches is lacking or malfunctioning, the experience of sitting outdoors becomes problematic and dissuades seniors from participating in physical activity.

The barriers that Siara and Kaya tackled were a few areas of concern. Zuri's narrative centred around the disinvestment of public parks in Black neighbourhoods, the lack of signage, and washroom facilities. Zuri said, "Green spaces, if I think of the public parks in the Black neighbourhood, [there is a] lack of maintenance. So, it doesn't feel like, you know, why am I going to go there?" (personal communication, March 5, 2025) Furthermore, Zuri embedded signage into the conversation about Toronto's ravine network.

Even before I can go for a walk in the ravine in Toronto, even if I know that I can get there by the subway. When I turn up at the subway, where's the map to tell me that there's a ravine and a nature trail? When I get into the ravine, where is the signpost is to say, go

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this way, it's a two-kilometre walk. It will take you to this road, which will lead you to the subway. If I don't know where I'm going, if I don't know where I am, there is no map. There's nobody to tell me it's okay for you to be here. Why on earth am I gonna go down there? (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

Insufficient signage is a visible barrier to women's safety and the general public. Knowing how to enter and exit an unfamiliar place is a conscious survival mechanism that women have developed to feel safe. Lastly, Zuri noticed the lack of seating and washroom facilities –

And then when you get into the ravines, the lack of seating, and I think, as well, that depending on what nature looks like, the lack of washrooms. So, the lack of seating, the lack of washrooms, and limited mobility [and] for me, the structural barriers are crucial (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

The narratives from the SBW participants revealed how green spaces hold multifaceted, layered barriers that can impede them from entering these venues as a health benefit, as illustrated in the word cloud in Figure 10.

Figure 10

Green space barriers affecting Senior Black Women



Note. Word cloud designed by the researcher using Microsoft Word (Microsoft Word, n.d.)

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The encapsulated world cloud in Figure 10 highlights different terms that intersect in the lives of SBW. The terms of *gender*, *elder abuse*, *fear*, *trauma*, and *social isolation* draw attention to the personal emotional tribulations that add another dimension of SSBW susceptibility on top of society's racial tensions. Moreover, mobility aids and living costs illuminate economic barriers in accessing support services to assist in entering UGS. Furthermore, a barrier that may go unrecognized is rooted in family values. The concept of an SBW being caregivers for their adult children is a limitation in engaging in UGS, as their daily lives are consumed by child-rearing. Collectively, words have meaning, and in this case, they serve as visual representations of overlooked realities and barriers that SBW encounters. This emphasizes the demand for inclusive and trauma-informed practices in research and planning.

3.5 Rethinking Inclusion: Addressing Senior Black Women's Negative Experiences in Green Spaces

In Canada, racial tensions, discriminatory practices and policies are embedded in society's landscape. The natural environment can also be a place of division depending on one's race and ethnicity. This section presents key findings from the interviewees, all of whom shared negative experiences related to green spaces. Their narratives highlighted issues such as discrimination, racial tensions, and collective memories of historically oppressive events that occurred in or around green spaces. These personal accounts reveal how green spaces are often seen as places for recreation, leisure activity, and relaxation for non-marginalized individuals but can also serve as sites of racial exclusion (Davis, 2019), which shapes the experiences of marginalized communities.

3.5.1 Green Is Not Black: How Nature Is Used as Venue For Racial Discrimination

For Kaya, Siara, and Zuri, entering and experiencing green spaces continues to evoke negative outlooks that resonate with society's social construct, which aligns with Harris et al.'s (2023) four tenets surrounding race, space, and discriminatory practices. Kaya shared that during her walks through different neighbourhoods in the GTA, she often becomes acutely aware of

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being “The only one looking like me on that street” (personal communication, February 23, 2025). This racial awareness is a common experience for Black and marginalized individuals when navigating public spaces. Siara echoed similar sentiments, stating: “Okay, Black people are not always welcomed [in] places. I mean, that has not changed, you know, even though they tell us it has, it hasn’t” (personal communication, February 19, 2025). Siara explained further,

You don't belong... I haven't gone anywhere and seen a lot of Black people sitting around in the park or in a garden space, and I don't know if it's part of it. I don't know, sometimes it's a comfort level that people don't have when they enter into these spaces (personal communication, February 19, 2025).

Carratt’s (2022) publication reflects on Canada’s outdoor recreation segregation practices.

So, think of it this way — if you grew up during segregation and were not allowed to enjoy nature recreation, and access to parks was non-existent in your community, you would not participate in those activities and would find other things to do that were available to you (para. 4).

The commentary that Carratt (2022) offers continues to hold meaning in today’s society, as SBW may be only a generation removed from Canada’s segregation practices and racial discriminatory policies, as the last segregated school closure occurred in 1983, in Lincolnville, Nova Scotia.

Another narrative about the Black community that Zuri explored pointed to who is welcomed in green spaces. Society perpetuates a longstanding stereotype that Black people are not interested in the outdoors:

And so, we are interested in green spaces. We need green spaces, but there are so many barriers that block our access to them that it's easy to assume that, oh, we're not interested. We are interested, but these are the mountains that we have to climb to even get there. So, it's easier to blame the community. ... It's easier to blame the victim. Then look at all the structural issues, the racism, [and] fear” (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

Zuri’s message, in combination with Carratt's (2022) statement that for years “racialized communities still have less access to parks,” (para. 4) it is a communal understanding in the Black community that leisure recreational activity is not part of one’s lived wellness regime. Zuri provided further insight into the historical roots of racism in North America, explaining that

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enslaved individuals who sought freedom by escaping their oppressors were hunted down by slave catchers, who used dogs as instruments of subjugation. Zuri emphasized that within the Black community, there exists a “Collective memory of trauma and pain”(personal communication, March 5, 2025), a lingering effect of oppression and atrocities experienced by past generations. She elaborated on this perspective in great detail, suggesting that:

But big dogs running free still trigger the image of dogs chasing Black people. So, lynchings are not a Canadian story. However, there's a collective memory, something that Carolyn Finney talks about, a collective memory of trauma, a collective memory of lynching. So even though it's not [and] never [has] been the historical reality here [in Canada], we can associate with it because of the collective pain. So, when we're outdoors, some of those images are circulating in our subconscious, yeah, the trauma, the fear. When I think of dogs in the outdoors, slave catchers and their bloodhounds, slave catchers, [are a] feature of Canadian society, [and] history.... So again, there's a collective unconsciousness [about] those things. So even though I know that history, when I am tired, when I see the dogs, it hits that emotional, that collective thing (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

The collective pain and trauma that Zuri revealed were conveyed in Carratt's (2022) publication, where she stated -

[The Black community] are often subject to overt and casual racism within outdoor spaces and have had to adjust to the generational trauma left behind or the general distrust towards recreational activities that have been traditionally barred to them for so long (para. 4).

Green spaces are not Black is an interesting theory in revealing discriminatory and racial practices. However, within the Black community, green space usage takes on a different conceptual shape in comparison to their white counterparts (Lee et al., 2020). The Black community may use green spaces to connect with family members and friends by hosting a “barbecue or picnic” (Carratt, 2022, para. 6; Davis, 2019; Scott & Tennesi, 2021). Green is Black depending on the social and environmental circumstances in which one engages.

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Shifting the narrative, Zuri examined the perspective of advertising outdoor recreation after the COVID-19 pandemic. Zuri described how the media portrayed outdoor recreation to be a more inclusive space, showcasing various ethnic communities in their marketing campaigns –

Before COVID-19, you saw very few Black people in advertising and social media doing outdoor recreation. Post-COVID-19, you look at any environmental outdoor recreation, and they're flooded with diversity. So, I think that's good. You're seeing images of you in those nature spaces, but yet, still, there's [still] a disconnect in that. In the advertising, we are there, but on the ground, reality is that we are there only when we organize stuff for ourselves, by ourselves, and lead it ourselves (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

Zuri's theme about marketing resonated with Lee et al. (2020) article in their discussion on "Diversity, Inclusion, and Public Recreation Agencies", where they unearthed that "marketing literature has shown that racial and ethnic groups differ in consumer motivation and behavior, media usage, and response to market services (p. 92). Lee et al. (2020) message outlined that marketing departments should "tailor" their strategies to incorporate racialized communities' voices (pp. 92-93).

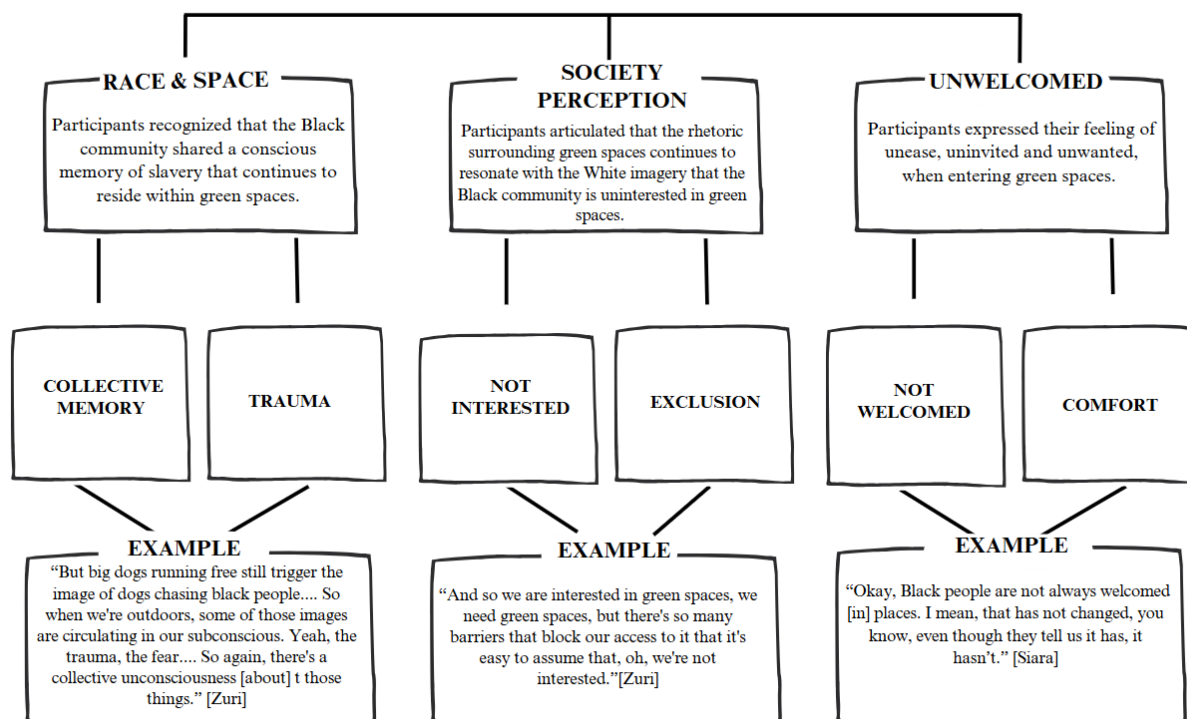
The nature of the participants' discourse aligns with the broader narrative of inclusion and exclusion in public spaces. In her book, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (2015), hooks reflect, "to me, the effort to speak about issues of 'space and location' evoked pain" (p. 145). This sentiment echoed throughout the discussion on entering green spaces, as it triggered emotions of being treated as 'the Other,' as illustrated in Figure 11.

The presence of words such as *trauma*, *collective memory*, *exclusion*, *comfort*, and *not being welcomed* in Figure 11 represents the importance of acknowledging how SBW experience green spaces through their intersectional lens, racial tensions, and CGR. The comments stated are a minuscule glimpse rooted in the legacy of outdoor spaces that are not "Black." These terms highlight systemic obstacles that restrict access to green spaces. As a visual narrative, Figure 11 paints a clear picture that represents SBW's lived experiences, illustrating how spatial exclusion and systemic barriers reduce their opportunities to fully participate and engage in UGS.

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Figure 11

Discomfort in green spaces: The experiences of Senior Black Women



Note. Chart created by the researcher as a visual representation of perspectives. Designed using Canva (Canva, n.d.)

3.6 Restricted Access: How COVID-19 Affected Senior Black Women’s Use of Green Spaces

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the health of individuals on a global scale. The pandemic not only disrupted physical mobility but also had a profound impact on people’s mental well-being, highlighting the importance of outdoor spaces for relaxation, socialization, and overall health. In this section, SBW shared their experiences of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their ability to engage in outdoor activities. Reflecting on the last five years, SBW expressed different topics ranging from government restrictions, health concerns, and changes to their daily routines.

3.6.1 Resilience Through Nature

Participants were asked to share their perspective on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their access to and ability to engage with green spaces for wellness. Their responses varied, with some describing feelings of social isolation as the disruption to their livelihoods felt both restrictive and overwhelming, while others expressed a renewed appreciation for the outdoors.

Siara started the conversation and discussed the impact of COVID-19 and how it exacerbated social isolation within the senior population, stating:

It's been devastating for a lot of seniors, especially since the pandemic. Seniors were isolated throughout that pandemic. Seniors [who] were more active would come out and socialize, you know, within their clubs.... They're not doing that now because they were isolated too [long]. They were shut down too long, and they sat down too long. Your ailments that you do have, arthritis, all the rest of it that has been exacerbated. [Now] you have to be poked around [to] exercise and socialize (personal communication, February 19, 2025).

Siara's narrative provided insight into not being able to engage in social activities (leisure walking, book club, swimming, etc.) because of COVID-19 restrictions. Moreover, Chatters et al. (2020) revealed that "being unable to meet regularly with church members, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, represents an additional challenge that places older Black adults at higher risk for experiencing social isolation and loneliness and associated mental health challenges (e.g., depression)" (p. 888). Siara's message is not a standalone theme, research illuminated that COVID-19 highlighted the disparity of the Black elderly through the principle of "double jeopardy—being both old and Black" (Chatters et al., 2020, p. 855) had significant repercussion on health and seniors who had "reduced immune system" (Chatters et al., 2020, p. 855) were more susceptible to COVID-19.

The opposite perspective was conveyed by Kaya and Ayo, as they recognized that COVID-19 changed their perspective and appreciation for green spaces, as the ability to venture outside was restricted. Kaya stated, "Since leaving the Bahamas and coming here, I certainly, certainly appreciate any green space, particularly after COVID" (personal communication,

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February 23, 2025). Kaya's message resonated with Poon (2023), statement - "The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the social and psychological benefits of outdoor access in cities around the world" (para. 2). Furthermore, Kaya expressed that her level of physical activity became a paramount initiative following the lifting of government stay-at-home policies. Kaya stated,

Yes, yeah, yeah, and [I] intentionally seek out new spaces, whether they are people's gardens, whether there's a community garden around here, and I walk through to see like [the] wild flowers, or, where they put local vegetables, native plants, and they want to encourage birds, butterflies and bees the whatever that is called, I love walking through there to see what's new, what's coming up, you know, I just love it. I do (personal communication, February 23, 2025).

Bikomeye et al. (2021) declaration about COVID-19 illuminated green space usage, "in the COVID-19 context, outdoor and greenspaces offer a safer place for low-risk social interactions" (p. 11). The message that Kaya, Poon (2023) and Bikomeye et al. (2021) recited is enduring, as the appreciation for green spaces as SBW were not constrained by COVID-19 implications.

In addition, Ayo expressed a similar narrative to Kaya's and emphasized the importance of prioritizing visits to green spaces as part of her physical fitness routine –

I walk, I walk in my neighbourhood. [There are] lots of trails, and I developed this walking [habit] about three years ago. But since COVID, I walk in my neighbourhood, and we [my son and I] have long, long, endless trails. And my son is also a walker, so he's lived in this area for over 20 years and didn't know anything about those trails until COVID-19 (personal communication, March 10, 2025).

Senior Black Women participants understood that nature is more than pristine green grass. Their gratitude for nature was elevated, as nature became a space for reflection and an outlet to manage one's mental and physical health.

3.7 Fostering Community through Green Space Engagement and Environmental Education

Black women reside in all dimensions of society. Their resilience, educational achievements, and social advocacy efforts in the fight for human and environmental rights are celebrated. Public figures such as Park Ranger Betty Reid Soskin, Hazel M. Johnson, Teresa Baker, Demiesha Dennis, Alicia M. Richins, and Louise DeLisle have significantly contributed to educating the public and marginalized communities about environmental challenges, while advocating for environmental justice. The advocacy approaches they promote today ensure that future generations can enjoy the same environmental luxuries that our society is currently experiencing.

3.7.1 Black Voices: The Conversation About Community Development, Organization, and Green Spaces

The University of Kansas, (n.d.), defined community organizing as “the process by which people come together to identify common problems or goals, mobilize resources, and, in other ways, develop and implement strategies for reaching the objectives they want to accomplish” (para. 5). While community development definition states, “locality development focuses on community building by improving the process by which things get done” (The University of Kansas, n.d., para. 11).

With those parameters in mind, Siara, Zuri, and Ayo’s conversation about community development and the integration of SBW voices emerged as a powerful approach for encouraging SBW to consider participating in green spaces. Siara shared, “The city has to engage older adults. Once we are 40, we just don't lay down and die” (personal communication, February 19, 2025). Studies have shown that seniors who continue engaging in social activities as they age enhance their social connectivity, which redefines the stereotypical model of old age (Löfgren, 2022; Suragarn, 2021). Siara enriched the conversation by amplifying the perspective about the Black community using their voice as a method of solidarity –

When Black people come out and they feel they have a voice, most of them, even if you have to prod them sometimes to get them to speak. Because there is a tendency I find with Black people that they don't really value one another [who] are on the same level with them. They seem to have certain people that they put on a pedestal, and they look up

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to them rather than looking [at themselves]. We are very strong as a matter of fact, if we [are] together, because sometimes you have to push people and say, look.... You can do lots of things.... We have to stand together, as a community (personal communication, February 19, 2025).

Siara's observation holds reverence for the Black community, as their will to endure, break barriers, and stand on principle illuminates the Black resolve.

Community engagement from Zuri's commentary echoed Siara's sentiments. Zuri highlighted – “Absolutely, you're more likely to do something if somebody you know is already doing it. And for the Black community, it will be somebody from the community organizing programs for the community, by the community” (personal communication, March 5, 2025). Zuri reinforced her statement and included strategies to mobilize the Black community and SBW to interact with green spaces –

Yes, you're doing it as a collective, reaching out to [the] community. You go to any of the small community centers, wherever we are, and say, okay, as part of our community outreach efforts, we're organizing these half an hour walks to the garden down the road, or the park, or whatever. It's led by a Black person. We know that it's going to be on fairly flat terrain. You know, bring a drink when you come. We'll go for a little half an hour walk. There's a group of benches, we'll sit down, have a little chat, [and] then we walk back. People will come, but without that engagement, without that community outreach, it's not going to work (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

Zuri understood the complexity of community organizing but also acknowledged the intrinsic value of togetherness and building a community from the bottom up with your fellow peers. Zuri highlighted that:

If green space integration [was] part of our mental health outreach. [Like having] a 10-week walking program, for four months, or three weeks. [The] walking program aimed at Black people, led by a Black person, Black people would sign up, Black seniors would sign up (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

The idea of *for us by us* can be seen as an exclusionary phase and tactic. However, taking and holding spaces that were once considered white is a step towards self-actualization, self-

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empowerment, and dismantling prejudices that align with CRT, CGR, systemic, and institutional lenses.

Zuri concluded her narrative by stating,

And the key thing would be that you can have all the best planning in the world. But without that community outreach for the Black community, it doesn't work. They will not come because they [are] not wanted or invited. Build it, we come in numbers, because we need nature (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

Zuri's statements depict and convey the fundamental elements of social advocacy and community outreach messaging. Without the engagement of the Black community and SBW, green space integration for wellness, social connectivity, and enjoyment will continue to stay the same.

Zuri transitioned the conversation to examine the principle of investing in the Black community. Zuri recognized that green spaces are accessible to SBW, but "Without the resources being given to the grassroots community groups, they have no access to them" (personal communication, March 5, 2025). Grassroots organizations, for example, Demiesha Dennis' company, called Brown Girl Outdoor World (BGOW), present an alternative narrative and experience while interacting with green spaces and being Black. Zuri emphasized this framework by stating,

And so, for Black groups, it's like, okay, so give us the money that we can organize. Whether it's a picnic, whether it's a walk, because if you're dealing with senior people.... Oh, you come, you go for [a] 15-minute walk, there's a blanket or benches or whatever, and we can sit and tell stories, you know. Do you remember this? Do you remember that? There is a program that is specially aimed at older Black people.... They are building a community (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

Building a program that is sustainable and engaging continues to be a tremendous task for any grassroots organization. The allocation of resources (money and time) is vital for continual success. Employment and Social Development Canada, (2025) recognized and acknowledged that investing in the Black community can support structural and institutional change and proposed a pledge of "over \$1 billion to uplift and support Black communities in Canada" (para. 1).

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Zuri further emphasized the emotional and historical complexities tied to nature for the Black communities, stating: “There will be that unease in nature, [that] is part of our collective memory. But again, if the outreach is done and the money is given to the grassroots organization, then half your problem is already taken care of” (personal communication, March 5, 2025). Zuri also reflected on the need for reimagining green space in urban settings, particularly for seniors living in apartments:

Whereas, if there was a program of transforming apartment green space, i.e., the stupid grass, into community gardens, into planting trees. Then, for senior participants, my green space might be I'm going to go downstairs and sit on the bench and be surrounded by flowers, and when I want to pee, I can go back to the apartment. But without that investment [it] doesn't happen (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

Community outreach programs usually come with a perspective of going to a destination within the public domain. However, the idea that Zuri presented about utilizing the green space within apartment complexes – reformatting the landscape to suit the inhabitants could be an influential climate change mitigation and resilient practice, while building community bonds.

Investing in the Black community is more than just money; it's the people, it's the youth. Linking SBW with the youth was Ayo's message – “I am for young people and older generations bridging that gap to see if they can help you know” (personal communication, March 10, 2025) and by “Forming, [a] group within your area, I always believe in bridging the gap. So, meaning if, the younger generation would just take time for the older generation [to] even start them up on something” (personal communication, March 10, 2025). Youth are the stewards who carry forward the hopes and dreams of past and current generations. Youth have taken on the role of social and environmental justice advocates like Greta Thunberg, or Canada's own Indigenous and Black youth leaders: Haana Edenshaw, Katie Yu, Stella Bowles, and Abhayjeet Singh Sachal. Their work and energy have ignited social reform through the implementation of new governmental policies.

3.7.2 Seeds of Care: Cultivating Health Through Community Gardening

Public community gardens are defined by the type of ownership, access, and degree of democratic control (Ferris et al. 2001), while having the ability to challenge dominant power

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relations and claim rights to the city (Ghose & Pettygrove, 2014). Bikomeye et al. (2021) conveyed that “community gardens improve community connectedness and social capital, increase engagement in civic activities and individual’s connection, to their cultural heritage and identity neighborhood (p. 11). The concept of biopsychosocial elements (George, 2013) can be associated with community gardens, where a holistic approach is undertaken to examine an individual's health and illness. The biopsychosocial model recognizes life's intricate ecology of psychological factors affecting health, such as stress, anxiety, beliefs, as well as social factors like social support and cultural influences.

Kaya, Zuri, and Siara felt that having space to garden or organize a community garden was important for SBW. Kaya said her “Appreciation for gardens, and even people's gardens, are planned ... And I spent a lot of time in the garden ... I actually know I came to appreciate gardens and green space much more” (personal communication, February 23, 2025). Kaya intensified her rationale – “Perhaps in the Black community, they may use them [gardens] for more practical reasons. You know, they may have a backyard garden, they may grow herbs, they may grow some tomatoes or something like that” (personal communication, February 23, 2025). Zuri reiterated Kaya’s sentiments through the admiration of a community space – “Where you have flower beds or the community garden, they say, come and have a look. See what's growing, notice the pretty flower[s]” (personal communication, March 5, 2025). The intrinsic meaning of gardening (community or private) is multidimensional, as the health benefits are available as a venue of relief, reduction in stress, and social connection.

Siara highlighted the educational aspect of community gardening, stating:

Well, I've been doing a community garden since 2009, an intergenerational garden....

You meet other people, from other countries ... and you learn from them things that they were able to grow here in Canada, that you thought you couldn't. So that was very interesting, [and] of course, you made friends (personal communication, February 19, 2025).

Siara’s observation is tied to formal green space, and environmental education practices, where you learn by participating and engaging with your peers. Siara also spoke about her past charitable impact of supporting local food banks, “[I] donate[d] four or five hundred pounds of produce” (personal communication, February 19, 2025). Siara incorporated another benefit of

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community gardens, as a venue for people with disabilities. “People here, we have people that come out in wheelchairs, ... they just enjoy being able to do something, even though they're still in that wheelchair” (personal communication, February 19, 2025). Community gardens present opportunities for individuals with disabilities to participate in activities that bring a source of pride, self-determination, and autonomy. Ben-Moshe and Magaña (2014) articulated perfectly that “people with disabilities should control their own lives and decisions regarding their lives” (p. 108). Each component amplifies the strength of building community bonds, supports food sovereignty (Citizen For Public Justice, 2018), and improves holistic well-being.

3.7.3 Environmental Sustainability: Giving Back to Nature

Wangari Maathai, a community activist, once stated, “you cannot protect the environment unless you empower people, you inform them, and you help them understand that these resources are their own that they must protect” (ThinkProgress, 2011, para. 5). The conversation with SBW participants about climate change and environmental sustainability resonated with Maathai quote and are part of global initiatives and summits that focus on reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, per the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.

Zuri, who specializes in outdoor recreation, shared her perspective on environmental collaboration through reducing the commodifying tendency of human beings by supporting initiatives that rejuvenate and replenish resources back into nature. She stated:

With the shift, in the last few years, I still do outdoor recreation, but I've also gotten involved in the more ecological side of things, as in spending time with various groups doing restoration, ecological restoration work in the ravines. And that's important, because it's a sense of, rather than just taking from nature as I go there to relax, it's about helping to rehabilitate. And that kind of work keeps me motivated when the climate crisis disasters feel too overwhelming (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

The extractive nature of humans on Earth's resources (Scott, 2020) shapes how our environment can sustain life as humans continue to pollute watersheds, increase GHG, experience extreme heat waves, and other environmental conditions. Environmental education and sustainability rhetoric can be traced back to the 1972 United Nations Conference on the

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Human Environment in Stockholm. Where global leaders engaged in environmental conversations for the first time in history, emphasizing "stewardship of the environment as our 'common home' and including an 'ethics of care'" (Reid, 2021, p. 785) perspective.

Throughout the conversations with all SBW participants about integrating green spaces into their lives for wellness, an underlying, often unspoken question of 'why' seemed to resonate within their narratives. Why do barriers still exist for Senior Black Women in navigating public spaces? Why does the Black community continue to face disparities in access to nature? How can we engage with green spaces without experiencing discomfort or unease? These questions point to the persistent, constraining forces of race, space, and place – an enduring “imaginary straitjacket” that continues to shape SBW's lived experiences in society.

Collectively, the discourse that was presented by SBW highlights the complexities of urban green spaces. Just like in nature, there are splendid colour schemes that showcase the different species of trees, animals, insects, etc.; the same can be applied to SBW. Their perspective on navigating UGS is a fascinating entanglement of nuances that reside in joy and community, but also a sphere of fear, trauma, and skepticism. By engaging in open dialogue and further research, the potential of new narratives can be discussed and formulated.

3.8 Discussion

This study highlights that green spaces are meaningful venues that are reflections of the Senior Black Women lived experiences. The insightful conversations with SBW exemplified the complexity of Black resilience, the embodiment of grit, and spirituality. Notable observations that protruded encompassed wellness, manufactured barriers, community development via capital investment to enhance or create green spaces in Black neighbourhoods and creating spaces for community discourse with political decision-makers.

3.8.1 The Unseen Struggles of Senior Black Women in Urban Green Spaces

The discussion on barriers was broad in scope. SBW examined all types of hindrances that affect their ability to integrate green spaces positively into their life. A key finding that became a predominant focal point focused on culture, race, and gender. Senior Black Women continue to be aware of their spatial surroundings (un)consciously when venturing into green spaces. Participants emphasized that the

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feeling of being unwelcome or not belonging to green spaces continues to be an uneasy emotion, as these venues may reside in areas and neighbourhoods that create a silent signal post of do not enter regimes. This aligns with literature that discusses nature as a venue of power that separates whites from Black people. Furthermore, green spaces can hold negative psychological connotations of trauma and fear (Davis, 2019), due to continual policing, surveillance, and acts of crime inflicted by police and public citizens, where the term Karen or Kevin was originally coined. Wyatt and Ampadu (2022) echo a similar viewpoint and include psychological stress that affects Black communities, which focuses on “economic and educational inequality, mass incarceration, racialized policing, and the killing of Black people by the hand of law enforcement” (p. 1). For example, Christian Cooper, who was engaged in bird watching in a public park, was confronted by a white woman, which turned into a racist incident and false accusation (CBC, 2020). This moment in time is not unique, as the conversation about race and space is framed in neighbourhoods, political offices, and institutions. The SBW group collectively recognized that instead of entering green spaces for wellness, avoidance may be the best practice and can be a coping and trauma response mechanism that is undertaken to safeguard their mental stability and physical body.

3.8.2 Green Spaces, Divided Places: Senior Black Women, Parks, and Spatial Gaps

Another emergent finding of UGS discourse centred on issues of access, poor maintenance, and UGS being limited within Black neighbourhoods, reinforcing spatial inequalities, condoning the reduction in usability, and exclusion. The implications underscore much-needed retrofitting, investment, and upkeep of green spaces.

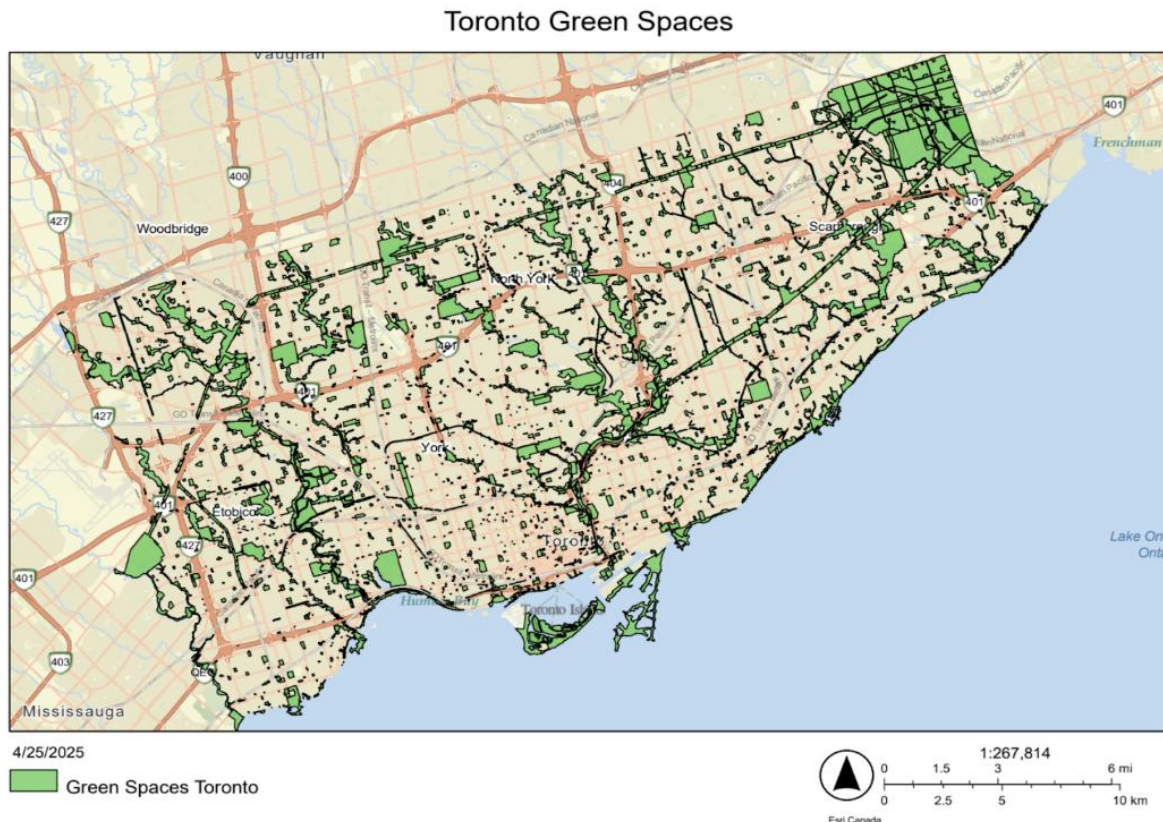
The City of Toronto is a single-tier municipality, and according to the Parkland Strategy (2019), it has over 1,500 parks encompassing 8,000 hectares of land, which totals 13% of green space (p. 2), as illustrated in Figure 12. The incorporation of GIS maps supported and analyzed the City of Toronto’s green space⁸ allocation in comparison to the narratives that were given by SBW. The Government of Canada census tracts data (2021) was utilized to analyze the geographical location of senior women 60+ and visible Black minorities.

⁸ Parks and Open Space Areas are the parks and open spaces, valleys, watercourses and ravines, portions of the waterfront, golf courses and cemeteries that comprise a Green Space System in Toronto (City of Toronto, 2023a, p. 4-11).

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Figure 12

Location of Toronto's green spaces



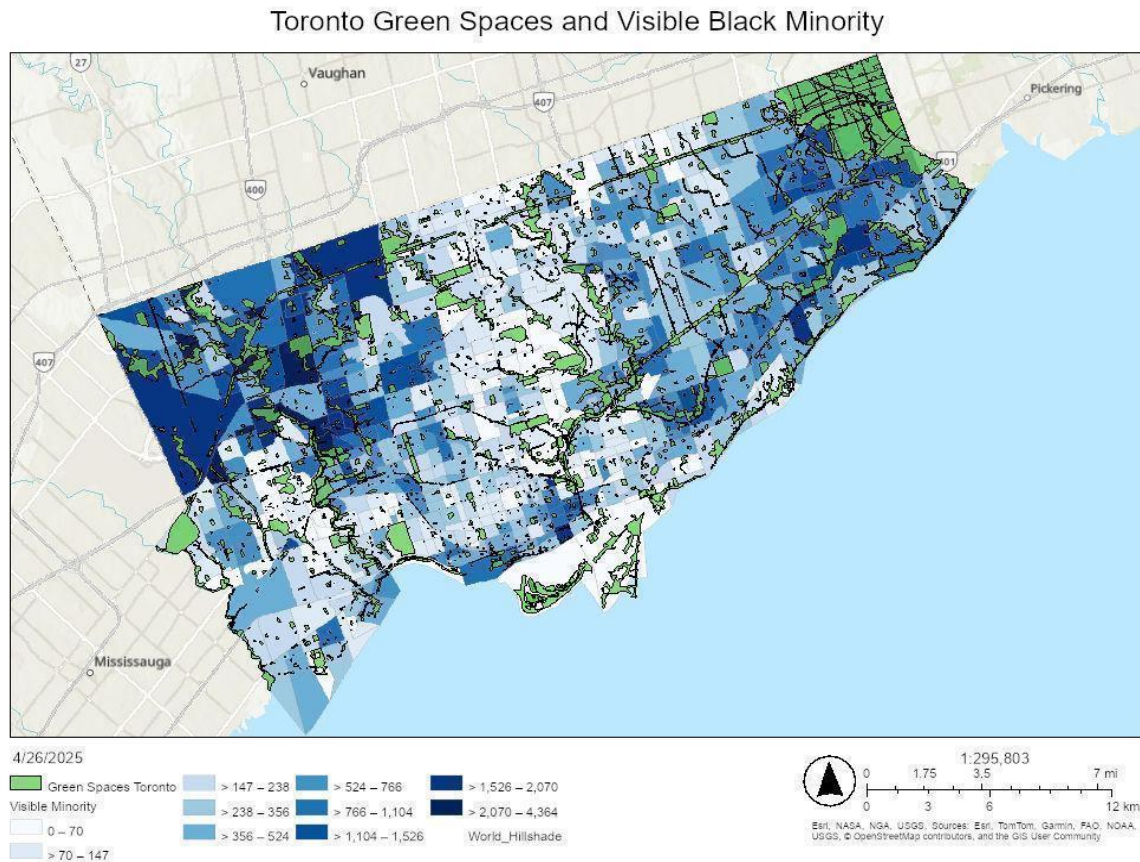
Note. Map created by the researcher using Simply Analytics, accessed via York University (Geographic Research, 2007). Green space dataset retrieved from City of Toronto Open Data Portal (City of Toronto, n.d.), with the base map and mapping tools provided by Esri (n.d.).

In evaluating the GIS map as shown in Figure 13, the dark blue equates to the high density of visible Black minorities in Toronto, in comparison to the lighter blueish white areas, and their proximity to green spaces. The analysis aligns with SBW rhetoric that showcased the disparity of green space allocation, and the same parameters can be applied to Figure 14, through the lens of senior women 60+. Take into consideration that the upper right quadrant is Rouge National Urban Park, which may skew the visual representation of both parameters (visible-Black minorities and senior women 60+).

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Figure 13

Mapping urban green space in relation to Toronto's visible Black minorities

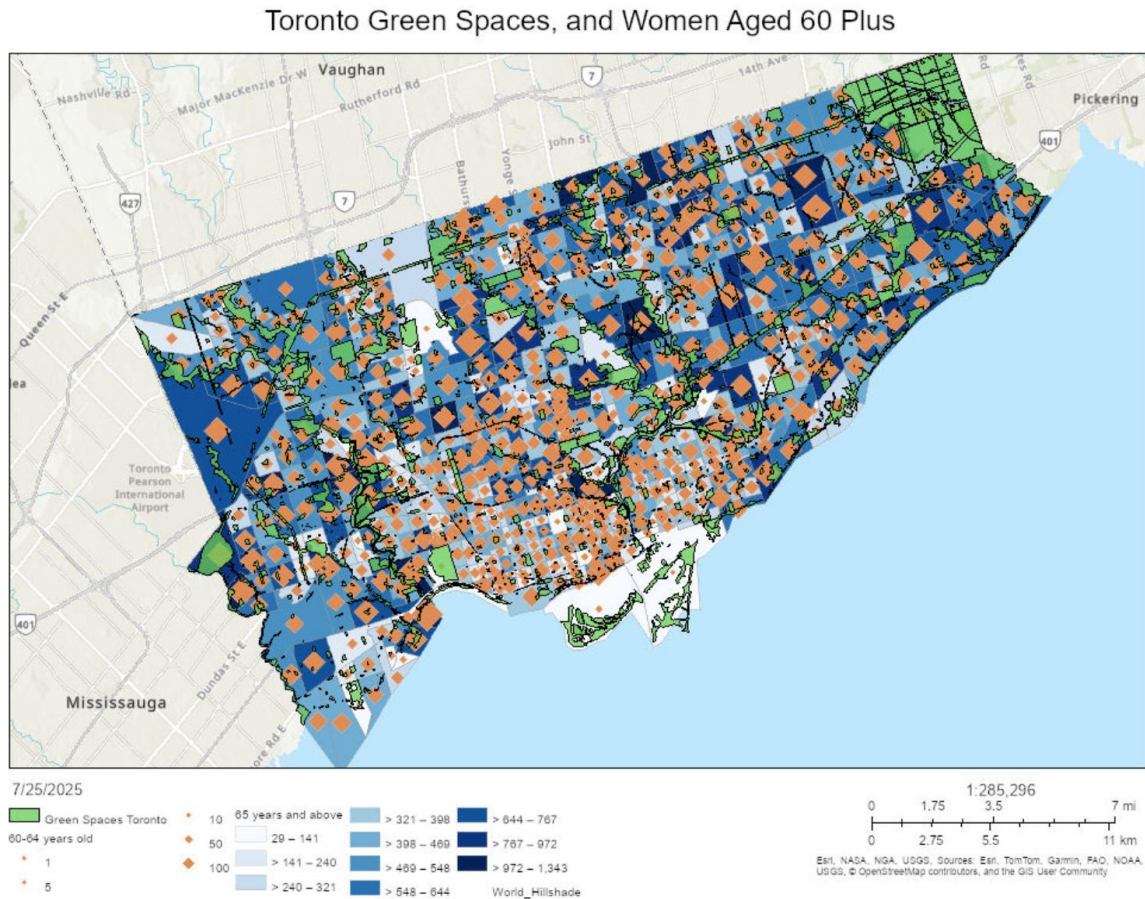


Note. Map created by the researcher using Simply Analytics, accessed via York University (Geographic Research, 2007), incorporating 2021 Census tract-level data on visible Black minorities from Statistics Canada (as cited in Geographic Research, 2007), and the City of Toronto Open Data Portal (2023), with the base map and mapping tools provided by Esri (n.d.).

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Figure 14

Spatial patterns of Toronto's senior women population aged 60 and older in relation to urban green spaces



Note. Map created by the researcher using Simply Analytics, accessed via York University (Geographic Research, 2007), incorporating 2021 Census tract-level data on females 60-64 and 65+ from Statistics Canada (as cited in Geographic Research, 2007), and the City of Toronto Open Data Portal (2023), with the base map and mapping tools provided by Esri (n.d.).

3.8.3 Parks, Promises, and Power: The Overlooked Value of Senior Black Women's Knowledge

In addition to the discourse on the location of green spaces, another key finding was participatory-led conversations with decision-makers and other individuals (planners, developers, city officials, etc.) who hold positions of authority in the creation and maintenance of green

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spaces. It was uncovered to be an imperative dimension of community inclusion and respect that can foster genuine dialogues that reflect SBW priorities and needs, embodying CRT fourth tenet, “the unique voice of people of colour. The ability of People of Colour to share their stories and lived experiences with white individuals to open a broader dialogue and discourse of racial narratives and inequalities” (Harris et al., 2023, pp. 8-9). Historically, environmental discourse has often excluded racialized people, particularly Black women. Allen et al. (2022) highlight this marginalization, stating that “Black women have traditionally been excluded from the environmental decision-making process” (para. 3), a reality that underscores broader issues of social injustice and environmental racism.

Additionally, Enssle (2020) connects the relationship between seniors and urban green spaces by emphasizing that “to create age-friendly green spaces where older people feel comfortable and welcome, older people need to be included in the planning process through active participation” (p. 40). Furthermore, investing time and monetary funds into the Black community is not a new ideology, but one that continues to spearhead conversations from micro to macro level within the political and public realm. Through participatory-led engagement and dialogue as a mechanism for social reform, alternative planning outcomes for green spaces may enhance cities’ alignment with United Nations Goal 11: Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. Moreover, engaging in grassroots organizations and developing community programs that focus on SBW, and green space activities were identified as strategies that can promote environmental education and wellness. As a method to facilitate social inclusion, promote equitable access, and overall community well-being.

3.9 From Insight to Action: Implications of Urban Green Space and Senior Black Women

The implications of the findings from this study are not surprising, as racial disparities, social exclusion, and discriminatory practices and policies continue to be rooted in institutional systems and public perceptions. If SBWs are not able to venture into nature for their wellness, social integration, and enjoyment, their health outcomes will continue to be affected because of racist structures, institutions, and policies. The rhetoric from the SBW is disheartening and egregious, as aging well should be a time of diminished stress, enjoyment, and fulfillment of

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one's dreams. Despite growing attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), there are still gaps in the conversation about SBW. Numerous studies have explored the benefits of urban green space integration on health (physical and mental) as we age (Gibson, 2018), but limited research has been conducted on SBW experiences. As oftentimes, this demographic is left out of these conversations and spaces.

Currently, the Government of Canada census tract is limited in scope in analyzing more than two variables, for example, 60+ and women, or visibly Black and women. Excluding the intersectional lens of race, age, gender, and sex—central to the experiences of Senior Black Women—limits a comprehensive understanding of how spatial exclusion in green space planning affects their lives and overall wellness. Failing to account for SBW's unique lived experiences and layered inequities reinforces planning practices that overlook their needs and perpetuate systemic barriers. The risk of continually perpetuating the same planning philosophy can expand the disparities of this demographic that do not meet the needs of this aging population and the UN Sustainable Goals.

The limitations of the study resonate within a few areas that consist of the limited respondent pool of SBW participants. A larger sample size could have led to a deeper intersectional analysis of the experiences of SBW and their access/connection to green spaces. Additionally, the questions posed by the researcher could have been narrowed down in scope to home in on particular areas of concern that SBW endures. Moreover, as a member of the Black community, the researcher may have underlying personal perspectives about green spaces, which may enter into the conversation with SBW. Additionally, the downloaded shapefile data from the Tree Equity Score Analyzer and the implementation of York University's ArcGIS software were intricate applications. The researcher's level of acumen with the software was limited at the time of implementation in creating maps for analysis. Furthermore, the displayed map information (legend) lacks nuance in the descriptive numerical values. While the parameters of the green space data were not exclusive to parks, ravines, trails, etc. The data included hydro field/utility corridors, golf course, cemetery, and other areas. A true representation of green spaces would need further investigation for future research. Lastly, a case study could have been incorporated to compare and analyze different neighbourhoods' green space allotment and location of SBW.

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Overall, SBW presented numerous frames of reference in the discussion on UGS. The observed praxis of their rhetoric, which is the heart of their storytelling, pertains to equity. Well-designed green spaces that support seniors' ability to navigate with ease, the location of green spaces within marginalized neighbourhoods, and the perceived connotation of being Black in the outdoors continue to be a point of discourse that needs further investigation and discussion.

3.10 Recommendations

Building on the analyses presented, this section outlines a set of recommendations aimed at Senior Black Women. These recommendations seek to address the challenges identified through the research and to promote more inclusive, accessible, and equitable urban green space planning that reflects the needs and lived experiences of Senior Black Women.

3.10.1 Reimagining Green Spaces: Investing in the Senior Black Women community in 2025

Enjoying the outdoors is a Canadian pastime. As summer approaches, spending time outside engaging in various activities such as hiking, fishing, canoeing, camping, gardening, or other leisure activities with friends and family is great. However, a closer look reveals a perplexing visual: the majority of people who reside in those spaces are mainly white. The persistent racial disparity reveals a structural imbalance with racialized groups notably underrepresented, as the outdoors still holds the perceived ideology of whiteness. Reframing the outdoors into one that is more inclusive and equity-focused can counteract historical green space narratives.

SBW participants highlighted that seniors are still active in the later stages of life. Community programs aligned with outdoor and environmental education initiatives should be led, created, supported, and funded by Black communities themselves, as well as by local municipalities and provincial and federal governments. This becomes a gateway of community strength, togetherness, and a placeholder for generational knowledge and networking opportunities. Moreover, Black led community programming can assist in the larger scheme of wellness by reducing social isolation and loneliness, as “an estimated 1 in 4 older people experiencing social isolation” (WHO, n.d., para. 2).

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An example of an SBW community program can consist of a summer gardening program that incorporates growing cultural food, sustainable gardening practices for all seasons, and the preservation of vegetables. Or a leisure walking tour of the community, or a particular communal city park. The purpose is to empower SBW by taking up space for them to learn about themselves, one another, and reconnect with the land. Alongside SBW community-led outdoor programming, tying in the youth bridges societal gaps, as youth are the stewards for tomorrow. Additionally, partnerships with government agencies such as Parks Canada, the Toronto Region Conservation Authority (TRCA), and the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks (MECP) are essential for addressing racial discrimination within park systems. Moreover, working with the broader park authorities can have a trickle-down effect on local park authorities in their pursuit of inclusion in their messaging and public outdoor participation levels.

Furthermore, partnering with businesses that specialize in outdoor recreation, such as Mountain Equipment Corporation (MEC), can play a key role in promoting inclusive engagement with green spaces. Involving SBW in the creation of social media content that highlights their stories and lived experiences as outdoor enthusiasts can help reshape dominant narratives. Inclusive and age-friendly marketing campaigns should feature seniors in diverse visual representations, showcasing their participation in physical activity and challenging stereotypes around aging. Integrating social media in these initiatives can also support wellness outcomes. As Quinn (2021) notes, social media platforms serve as versatile tools for connectivity, enabling users to reach global audiences, reconnect with friends and family, and even enhance cognitive functioning and fine motor skills.

The recommendations that are presented here are the tip of the iceberg in addressing the complexities of Senior Black Women traversing society, green spaces, and planning rationales. Maya Angelou once said, “My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor, and some style” (BBC, 2014, para. 10). With Angelou’s quote in mind, further research and investigation into this matter will need other academics, and public stewards to coordinate additional studies to uncover disparities, truths, and opportunities, while instilling hope and joy in the mind of the beholder.

The following chapter explores planners’ insight about urban green space design, creation, and implementation. The involvement of influential stakeholders, the integration of

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planning acts, official plans, and other planning documentation. Planners acknowledge that urban green spaces require context-specific approaches rather than standardized solutions. The involvement of the community is essential in creating safe, age-friendly venues which accommodate all abilities.

Chapter 4: Mapping the Mind of the Planner: Unpacking Planner Insights on Green Space Design

The natural environment is not constrained or confined by human-imposed boundaries of optimal use and management. In contrast, UGS are constructed by the collaborative efforts of developers, municipalities' vision, and city planners. This chapter focuses on planners' knowledge and perspectives, examining the various planning acts and their influence and relationship in the development of UGS. Furthermore, it explores how developer interests, capital investment, and UGS design, size, and location can affect and impact the utilization of these spaces. Moreover, planners address the need for community cooperation and consultation in the process of building healthy and sustainable communities that are innovative and inclusive for the public.

Three planners, Irene, Valerie, and Lazarus were interviewed for this study. Their professional backgrounds span both private consulting and municipal planning, with experience ranging from 3.5 to 17 years. Their field of expertise includes development applications, planned subdivisions, official plan amendments, policy, public engagement planning, parks, and transportation studies.

4.1 Planning Policy to Parkland: The Integration of Developers and Capital Investment

The integration and maintenance of parkland by government organizations are instrumental in the construction and formation of how communities perceive parkland development as a source of wellness. In this section, parkland, green space, and UGS will be interchangeable concepts.

Zhang and Li (2024) emphasized the importance of parkland, stating that:

Parkland provides numerous spaces for leisure and social activities, contributing to the quality of life and happiness of residents. Parklands are an important part of community life, providing a place for people to gather with family and friends and engage in outdoor activities (p. 18).

The planners examined the intricacies involved in the implementation of parkland from planning policies and developers to green space design as a comprehensive network of integrated mechanisms.

4.1.1 From Red Tape to Parkland: Planners, Developers and Policy

Land-use development is dependent on developers' site plan applications, municipalities' planning policies that dictate what type of land usage can be developed, the city's comprehensive plan, and the different intermodal planning departments. To garner a comprehensive understanding of how the Planning Act and Parkland dedication are connected, the illustration shown in Figure 15 (see separate document titled *Supplementary Figures*), obtained from the City of Guelph planning department, provides an overview. In Ontario, Parkland dedication is a tool that helps cities acquire land or funds from developers to build parks when building new projects. This Bylaw supports cities' growth while balancing the need for public outdoor space.

Parkland dedication through the lens of Irene and Lazarus provided supplementary information about the involvement of developers. Irene stated, "In the Planning Act, there are actual regulations on how to reduce the amount of green space or Parkland that's afforded to any one parcel by offsetting it with providing 5% [for residential developments] or cash in lieu [CIL]" (personal communication, February 18, 2025). Lazarus added the Parkland percentage for commercial sites into the conversation – "For commercial development, there's the parkland dedication requirements [of] only 2% of the land" (personal communication, April 7, 2025). Moreover, Lazarus continued to extrapolate his planning expertise and incorporated more in-depth rhetoric. He conveyed,

There are ways that developers can get around this. Some may see it more feasible to just pay the cash in lieu, and be able to just build on the land, and we'll be able to use that money towards other forms of [city] development (personal communication, April 7, 2025).

Lazarus's message about paying CIL into the parkland conversation capitalizes on the power dynamic that developers can implement to avoid utilizing their land for a non-profitable green space development. Lazarus continued his narration about developers by stating,

And green space development may not be exactly how we would like to see it implemented within that neighbourhood, and when it comes to maintaining accessible green spaces, or trying to build them ... we have a little bit of an issue where we combat

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what developers want. [As] there is still room to do ... better, I believe (personal communication, April 7, 2025).

The embedded connotations from Irene and Lazarus about developers' and parkland development reside in the underlying theme of profit. According to Villagomez (2025), a developer's pro forma serves as “think of it as the financial blueprint for a development project—it lays out the estimated costs, revenues, and potential profits before a single brick is laid” (para. 1). Developers are in the real estate business, optimizing their land for revenue. Kuminoff and Pope (2014) and Kronenberg et al. (2023) made a compelling remark about capitalization and green spaces - “developers are interested in the fact that people are keen on living close to urban green spaces – and especially that they are willing to pay for it” (p. 1).

Irene’s outlook aligned with Kronenberg et al. (2023) statement, stating that “Generally, developing land is an economic exercise on the private side” and “When you look at maximizing your parcel fabric, green space is a net loss” (personal communication, February 18, 2025). The core idea about capitalization and developers can be understood by Lazarus' message, where he said, “[Developers] won't be able to pull in as much money as like a residential development or commercial development” (personal communication, April 7, 2025).

Both planners underscored that green space planning is at the mercy of developers' vision for their site. While planners have to consider the best interests of the public, and follow cities' official plans in building healthy communities, economic growth, environmental protection, and transportation corridors. This was echoed in Lazarus’s statement, saying, “Ideally, we would want more green spaces, but we understand that is kind of chopping into [developers’] development. I guess it depends on what the city is looking for” (personal communication, April 7, 2025). He went on to state that “the goal is to find a way to support development while creating sustainable communities” (personal communication, April 7, 2025). The balancing act between developers and parkland is a contentious subject as profit, city intensification, and public well-being reside on the spectrum of city planning.

Moreover, a key land-use element that developers are reliant on is location, location, location. Irene and Lazarus elaborated on green space integration into neighbourhoods, conveying that green spaces in the past were an afterthought in comparison to city buildings. Lazarus's perspective about green spaces and location was forthcoming; he observed that,

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“[Green] spaces can be limited in larger cities.... It could be difficult to find sections of the city where you are able to just put out a big green field” (personal communication, April 7, 2025).

Urbanization driven by spatial planning in major cities can create a disconnect between “planned greenspace requirements and actual greenspace provision” (Boulton et al. 2018, p. 83), leading to a supply-and-demand imbalance in meeting public needs.

Irene presented a narrative that addressed planning from a historical purview by saying, “So, I think that, yes, like the existing built form, has its limitations because of historical planning practices that didn't factor in what the overall public good of a development would be” (personal communication, February 18, 2025). Irene further articulated that,

So maybe, if you're thinking about rental housing, high rise rental housing, maybe they would say, back then, the decision to justify not making sure green space was built into the proposal or at a location where there was direct access to green space was because the priority was to just get high-rise, low-income housing, versus looking at the full picture (personal communication, February 18, 2025).

Moreover, Irene stated, “I think that [was] maybe the solution, to keep those [green spaces] use out of prime real estate but just make sure [the community] had essentials such as transit” (personal communication, February 18, 2025). Wang (2024) examined the relationship between green space and urban built form, noting that “in urban settings, however, the availability of land for greenspace is constrained by the necessity for buildings, infrastructure, and road networks to support daily life” (p. 574). From that perspective, Irene reflected on how earlier planning ideologies prioritized infrastructure development as the foundation for modern cities -

So, I think that there was a prioritization of transit and low land acquisition, and then put, you know, housing that's meant to service low-income earners based on those priorities, versus creating utopia environments in prime real estate areas where low-income earners can still exist amongst community and society (personal communication, February 18, 2025).

The allocation of green space, infrastructure investment, and maintenance in low-income neighbourhoods has long been shaped by principles rooted in environmental injustice and systemic racism. These practices have spatially disadvantaged marginalized communities for generations, prioritizing profit and elitism over social equity, public health, and community

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welfare (Nobles & Moore, 2024). Disinvestment in marginalized communities reinforces systemic inequality, perpetuating social disparities and contributing to poor wellness outcomes (Adams, 2022). Adams' (2022) analysis, along with Irene's insights, was echoed in Valerie's comments, where she addressed the issue of funding concerning the Black community, stating: "This is something that happens across [the] Toronto Community Housing portfolio. It's a lack of investment leading to deteriorating infrastructure" (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

The development of green spaces is a double-edged sword. Cities benefit from an alternative revenue stream (CIL), receive land to develop parkland, and enhance their cities' sustainability goals. Alternatively, the perception of new green spaces and the redevelopment of existing green spaces within neighbourhoods can present the imagery of luxury (Kronenberg et al., 2023; Łaszkiewicz, 2024; Łaszkiewicz et al., 2019), which can attract "higher-end buyers", that affect marginalized communities being 'eco-gentrification' or 'green gentrification' (Kronenberg et al., 2023, p. 1). The spatial gentrification of neighbourhoods is tied to observation about "the classification and segregation of spaces", where the distinct separation of race - Black, white, and other, constitutes society's continued subjugation of racial meaning – "both about people and the spaces they inhabit" (Brahinsky, 2011, p. 147). Moreover, race remains a fundamental factor in determining access to employment, neighbourhood opportunities, and cultural experiences within urban environments.

From the planner's perspective, designing green spaces is a complex and multifaceted process that depends heavily on developers to create communities that are inclusive and equitable for all residents. However, the reality of the real estate market is driven primarily by financial models focused on profit, which often conflict with these inclusive goals.

4.1.2 Capital Investment in Green Spaces: Confronting the Economic Realities

Capital investment is a paramount revenue source that can govern how green spaces are implemented, maintained, and disbursed within the city's boundaries. Capital investment from Irene's perspective availed the importance of managing current green spaces by saying "Usually parks are paid for, or their upgrades or retrofits are paid for through a capital works program [in] a municipality" (personal communication, February 18, 2025) and "I think it comes down to funding. So, you know when these green spaces already exist, who's going to step forward to

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retrofit them so that they do meet some of these great design principles” (personal communication, February 18, 2025). In conjunction with Irene’s critique, Lazarus continued the discussion about retrofitting and approached the issue: “I think that there is not enough retrofitting of existing green spaces” (personal communication, April 7, 2025). Retrofitting green spaces requires investment and design principles that accommodate different stages of life. For seniors, green space modifications such as wider walking paths, accessible outdoor equipment, and seating areas encourage park visitation (Paudel, 2024).

Irene continued the conversation by stating,

And then I think that those same adaptations or retrofits could be applied to principles of creating new [green spaces]. So just working through [the] physical plan of subdivision, making sure that there's draft plan conditions that advocate for higher quality green spaces (personal communication, February 18, 2025).

The missed opportunity to enhance existing green space infrastructure within communities is a detriment and a barrier that can undue one’s connectivity to nature, especially in marginalized communities.

Moreover, Irene expressed that engagement from city officials and councillors is a critical consideration. She expressed concern about securing adequate support, stating, “How can we get our local councillors to understand the need for more strategic funding of parks?” and “How can we increase funding from municipal tax dollars and upcoming developments?” However, she also highlighted a broader benefit, adding, “I believe that if we create spaces that meet the needs of Black women, those improvements have a universal value that benefits the entire community” (personal communication, February 18, 2025). Irene’s commentary heightens the debate in how taxpayer funds are spent and what type of infrastructure is being built within the public realm to support the public's best interest.

However, Irene also understood and articulated that “There's always going to be budget restraints” (personal communication, February 18, 2025) and “There is money being collected from new developments that can't offer parkland. So where is that money going in terms of making the existing infrastructure, more safe, more accessible, more welcoming” (personal communication, February 18, 2025). Similar to Irene’s comments, Lazarus spoke to green space maintenance through capital investment -

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There could be budget constraints for the maintenance [of green spaces] as well, and that could be more of an issue that the city would maybe have to deal with, or even if it's on a developer's private property. It may not be the first thing when they're looking at trying to upkeep the area (personal communication, April 7, 2025).

The development of green spaces through capital investment initiatives cannot operate within a vacuum. Irene's thoughts became streamlined, which afforded a course of action that could support new approaches to enhance green space allotment. Irene said, "Maybe increasing minimum requirements for how these green spaces are meant to be built and developed through like policies and or draft plan conditions when it comes down to the technical stage" (personal communication, February 18, 2025).

The discourse on capital investment and green space aligns with the fundamental issue surrounding cities' economic stability and growth, with equitable resource allocation. Where and how is the citizens' money being spent? Who are the beneficiaries? What community is enduring the burdens? The ramifications on public health can spiral towards negative health outcomes if investment into communities is either inadequate or minuscule in comparison to more affluent neighbourhoods and districts.

4.2 Planning Policy Meets People: Community Collaboration and Green Spaces

When the community's participants voice their opinions in planning UGS, green spaces grow into venues that are more inclusive, meaningful and relevant to the community's neighbourhood. Collaborating and working for the greater good, residents and policymakers can design and create parks and natural areas that promote and support well-being, strengthen social connections, and reflect the unique character of each neighbourhood.

4.2.1 Community Consultation and Planning

Community planning, according to Gordon and Michalos (2014), "is a form of urban and regional planning that incorporates social, economic, and environmental considerations to guide future development at the scale of neighborhoods, towns, cities, and regions" (para.1). The community's vitality stems from the active participation of citizens at the micro level, where the

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best practices are analyzed to support the public's interests, well-being, growth, and neighbourhood connections. Civic participation was a recurring theme among all planners in their discussion of building resilient communities through the integration of green spaces and planning policies.

Valerie started the conversation about participatory engagement by discussing the importance of “Focus groups, focus groups ... [those types of] things” (personal communication, March 5, 2025), which help support community initiatives in creating UGI. Irene resonated with Valerie’s statement and added her twist by saying, “I think it comes down to public engagement. So, like visioning sessions, doing walking tours, have them walk you around or, you know, have the designers walk them around their spaces, and to just do [those] initial needs assessment” (personal communication, February 18, 2025). Knowing the needs of the community from Irene’s perspective, she believes that “It is good to have an understanding [of] who is coming to the community, right? (personal communication, February 18, 2025). Community consultation is a flexible praxis of space that is conducive to opinions that are outside of the standard norm. Engaging in conversations that are judgment-free was an outlook that Valerie presented.

But I think sometimes we also have to expand people's engagement opportunities, to expand people's understanding of what can happen and what can take place, and not just be like what do you think, but also here's our perspective and expertise, and here's how we can kind of meet in the middle (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

Planning cities, as mentioned previously, is a monumental undertaking. Community engagement is one rung on the proverbial ladder for building healthy communities.

As the planners continue to share their insight, Lazarus added a conceptual layer of space, belonging, and inclusivity into his conversation -

Community activities where there's community engagement, I think, are key. Especially in green space ... seen as almost informal. Maybe there will be a little bit more or even, if it is the formal spaces, because at least everybody knows [and is] aware that [there] is like a designated area (personal communication, April 7, 2025).

Lazarus’s statement aligns with Pietrzyk-Kaszyńska’s (2017) definition of green spaces, which emphasizes the community’s role in redefining how such spaces are used to promote health and inclusiveness. This perspective also reflects Zhang et al.'s (2024a) view of urban green spaces, as

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they note that “welcoming and vibrant green spaces that promote exercise and facilitate social encounters significantly impact urban parks’ importance” (p. 3). The conversation with planners about community participation transitioned to include rhetoric outlining the dynamic of power-wielding decision-making and green spaces. According to Irene, “There’s always going to be budgeting restraints, etc. But kind of having our local and political leaders understand the community priorities and what will deliver good planning, so that, you know, green space is not like an afterthought” (personal communication, February 18, 2025). From Irene’s perspective, working from a bottom-up pedagogy can add fuel to social advocacy organizations that support green space community endeavours as a step towards developing, enhancing, and reducing spatial inequalities.

In narrowing the scope to a micro level, focusing on policy, the Black community, and SBW, Valerie noted “[SBW] don’t often understand the opportunity for engagement with these policies as something that can have a direct impact on [their] living conditions and the spaces we are able to access and how we access them” (personal communication, March 5, 2025). However, Valerie also understood that “We kind of get bulldozed by these policies as well” (personal communication, March 5, 2025). From Valerie’s perspective, when the Black community is not present at the planning table to engage with policymakers and discuss ongoing policy changes, it loses the opportunity to help shape more nuanced approaches and to challenge existing assumptions about certain types of spaces, thereby driving innovation (personal communication, March 5, 2025). Valerie’s reflections parallel Lipsitz’s (2007) assertion that space is not neutral but shaped by social hierarchies. These spatial arrangements systematically structure unequal access to resources and opportunities, reinforcing racialized and class-based inequalities.

Planning policies are an in-depth legal framework of statutes and acts that the Black community and SBW may not be too familiar with and can often feel the pressure of technical language that is outside of their purview. Procedural requirements, political decision-making, and bureaucratic constraints of urban planning can create exclusionary zones and asymmetrical power dynamics that widen the gap between vulnerable and marginalized communities and influential policymakers. This disconnect can impact a person’s community engagement, as the regulatory environment can perpetuate systemic barriers.

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Notably, Valerie emphasized the importance of planning policies and their connection to the Black community. She remarked, “Policy, policy, policy. I feel like, for so long, in our [Black] community, we don't understand the interaction that we need to have with policies around land development” (personal communication, March 5, 2025). She further explained that everything “needs to be written somewhere and unfortunately, that's the type of dynamic we have with our governance and bureaucracy” (personal communication, March 5, 2025). Black communities and SBW already face structural and systemic barriers. When planning processes are added to this racially discriminatory landscape, they can further reinforce hierarchical power imbalances. However, Valerie challenged this dynamic by stating:

But again, if we're not at the table, and if you don't have the language, and if people aren't willing to walk in and step with us and help educate while building a plan, a [better] policy framework, which a lot of communities do get the benefit of. They just assumed that we don't have certain priorities in our community (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

Despite Valerie’s sentiments, growing awareness of racial disparities in the planning field is falling short as SBW and Black communities experience spatial inequalities in green spaces. Incorporating anti-oppressive principles (AOP) strategies into planning policies can rectify historical planning frameworks that create power dynamics between the affluent and marginalized communities. AOP is a pathway to reduce inequalities in the planning field, while emphasizing cultural perspectives, the redistribution of power via community consulting, and advocating for inclusion.

Moreover, as Valerie continued her narration, she emphasized,

As a planner [we] will go and say, hey, this is a permitted use case. This is not a permitted use. What are you doing here? This isn't permitted, right? And then, as a part of our communities, we kind of enjoy creating our own worlds and our own interpretation of things, responding to our cultural needs, responding to our political needs, responding to our economic needs (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

The accumulation of thought from all three planners understood that community engagement is imperative within the planning field when discussing green space. However, engagement within Black communities continues to be inadequate as the needs of the

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communities continue to be ignored. At the same time, Black communities must also recognize their voice and power in advocating for change by utilizing the same planning principles and policies to their advantage.

4.2.2 Planning Strategies for Health and Inclusive Communities

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially goal 11⁹ emphasizes the importance of developing healthy communities that are resilient, sustainable, and safe. Zhang and Li's (2024) article reinforces the SDG through an in-depth discussion about parkland, by conveying, “parklands are also important sources of social cohesion in cities. By providing shared spaces for people of different backgrounds and cultures, parklands promote communication and understanding within and between communities, thus enhancing social inclusion and diversity” (p. 19). Together, the SDGs and Zhang and Li's perspective on healthy communities provide a framework for recognizing the importance of integrating parkland development into urban planning.

Planners Valerie and Lazarus expressed the importance of implementing planning regimes as tools of endearment for the betterment of communities' health. Valerie conveyed her sentiment, stating, “Based on my interaction with the planning framework, I would say that [green spaces] are emphasized throughout policies, and it is a driving force behind how some of the decisions [that] are made in terms of strategies towards sustainability” (personal communication, March 5, 2025). Healthy communities are defined by elements identified through research by the United Nations and the Canadian Institute of Planning (CIP). According to the CIP (2023), a healthy community is “a place where healthy built, social, economic, and natural environments allow citizens to live to their full potential, regardless of their socially, culturally, or economically defined circumstances” (p. 2). By embedding these themes into policy frameworks, planners can bridge the gap between physical and social infrastructure, which are both essential components of the community.

⁹ Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.).

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Lazarus's viewpoint was shaped by Sir Patrick Geddes's city planning philosophy, which emphasized that nature should be integrated into the fabric of the city rather than treated as an afterthought. He stated:

They are being incorporated; these [green] spaces [and] are being observed as ones that almost create a sense of belonging and promote sustainability, and we're now aware of all the environmental health benefits that also come along with having these green spaces around (personal communication, April 7, 2025).

The World Health Organization (WHO) (n.d.b.) characterizes healthy cities as environments that need people, participation, prosperity, planet, place, and peace. Adams's (2022) article incorporated WHO ideology for our environment, as "our moral concern and care for the environment" is strengthened (para. 12) when we invest in environmentally friendly planning policies and practices. Lazarus continued his thought process about healthy communities by incorporating the idea of walkable communities:

We're taking more time to recognize the need for green spaces within the neighbourhoods, ... they help build healthy and complete communities, as the green spaces can be utilized ... to make the neighbourhoods a little bit more walkable (personal communication, April 7, 2025).

Walkability can be seen as an underrated focal point within public domains. However, walkability is an important conversation in the planning field concerning seniors, as their physical mobility can diminish over time. The proximity of living close to a green space for seniors is a positive attribute in comparison to taking transit.

The continuation of Lazarus' commentary exemplified his concern for healthy communities. He stated, "We try to implement strategies to manage, protect and enhance the environment," while "at the same time, we still want to conserve resources and mitigate any impacts on the natural environment" (personal communication, April 7, 2025). Earth's resources are limited, and how cities mitigate their environmental impact was the concern of Lazarus. Lazarus envisioned a utopian ideal in saying, "Maybe we had envisioned that use for the space as for the community and like for communal gathering, so it's still required to help build complete and healthy communities" (personal communication, April 7, 2025).

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Valerie evolved Lazarus' messaging by acknowledging that “Well, we have to create policies and designs [that] support development through the policy framework that enables the existence of these [green] spaces” (personal communication, March 5, 2025). The framework to create healthy communities through green space integration is a compelling initiative. However, the reality of implementation tells a different story. According to Vabi (2022), marginalized and low-income communities not only have less access to green spaces but also tend to live farther from them and experience reduced tree cover. Expanding on her previous reference, Valerie included more planning rhetoric in the conversation.

Through revised policy frameworks for cities and particular neighbourhoods, which are undergoing more localized strategies, like a secondary plan. I can say that throughout the planning framework, there are opportunities to emphasize the role of green spaces.

Usually, around implementation, we are just creating these conceptual frameworks to help guide the growth and development of [the] green environment (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

Building communities relies on holistic approaches that benefit all, as human existence is tied to the natural environment. According to Adams (2022), “the more time we spend in nature, the more we feel connected to it and vice versa” (para. 12). Adams (2022) also ties in the notion of how humans can begin to devalue and disregard the natural environment if green spaces continue to diminish. He also emphasizes that “with fewer of us feeling a strong moral environmentalist concern, we become bystanders as the climate and biodiversity crisis deepens, and options for human-nature relationships decline further” (para. 14). Valerie echoed Adams’ (2022) outlook, noting that

We can create a policy, for example, that says we don't need any more green space, or 95% of this land to be covered by buildings. But we don't do that because we understand the impact and consequences of that and how it takes away opportunities for people to use green spaces (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

The construction of new developments, whether green spaces or cities, relies on city planning matrices that include innovation, sustainability, and a vision for future generations to benefit from their predecessors. Irene concluded with “I think that just with the creation of new parks, you know, we really only have one chance to get it right” (personal communication,

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February 18, 2025). Each planner added invaluable planning insights that highlight the importance of green space development and SDGs.

4.2.3 Growing Minds, Growing Wellness: Environmental Education Through the Planner's Lens

The benefits of green space integration and environmental education were discussed with each of the planners. Lazarus began his discussion on green space education by highlighting its health benefits, stating: “[Green spaces] can be used to promote physical activity in a way that can kind of reduce stress or improve cardiovascular health, and it can help prevent any age-related decline” (personal communication, April 7, 2025). For SBW, however, limited access to such spaces remains a significant concern. Lazarus went on to elaborate on the relationship between seniors and green space, explaining:

There's an enhancement of cognitive function through activities such as walking and gardening.... There are opportunities to engage through social interaction, and activities can be made for seniors to socialize and build connections, combating loneliness and isolation as people get older (personal communication, April 7, 2025).

The recognition that Lazarus distilled about green spaces as multifaceted venues that enhance seniors' well-being was validated by SBW, other research studies, and planners' narratives.

Lazarus acknowledged the intersectional lens between environmental benefits and education – “There might be a lack of education or a lack of understanding regarding some of the benefits, [of green space] such as, how all these green spaces could help improve air quality or reduce surface temperature” (personal communication, April 7, 2025). Or how green spaces support the ecology network - “like we hear about the rising heat table and the promotion of biodiversity [in] support [of] those green spaces, just being able to educate people and realize the importance of it” (personal communication, April 7, 2025).

Valerie echoed Lazarus's perspective: “I think overall, green space planning and how we use those green spaces can promote education and also the benefits of being outdoors” (personal communication, March 5, 2025). As Valerie shared various planning perspectives, she recounted a story about how her mother revitalized a local park. She described how the park's original infrastructure—“swings, monkey bars, and slides”—was removed (personal communication,

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March 5, 2025), transforming the area into an informal green space. Valerie's mother wanted to bring farming back to the community. Valerie eloquently stated, "One of the things that the older Black women in my community did was farm"(personal communication, March 5, 2025).

Valerie pointed out that the community revitalized the deconstructed site – "They put fences around it, they started to create the plots" and "my mom, anyone, whoever's hose could get to the middle of the community, was using [the hose to] water the grass and help grow things, getting our lettuce and whatever we wanted to grow each summer" (personal communication, March 5, 2025). The notion of Black resilience and creativity from Valerie's story resonates with SBW rhetoric about creating a space of your own.

Valerie continued her viewpoint by saying, "So as I said, like, [the Black community] really does try to reinvent things to suit our needs, culturally, socially, and economically. Additionally, the community garden, according to Valerie, was a "Food justice initiative as well, to get fresh food in our community" (personal communication, March 5, 2025). A quote from Maya Angelou in a conversation with Bill Moyers (1973) speaks to the resilience of Black Women, "there is a kind of strength that is almost frightening in Black women. It's as if a steel rod runs right through the head down to the feet. And I believe that we have to thank Black women" (para. 30). Valerie's story about SBW transforming an informal green space into a community farm, along with Maya Angelou's statement, brings the paradigm of culture and resilience to the forefront.

Irene focused on the cultural aspect of green spaces and eloquently stated, "I think it's in the spirit of diversity. I guess you could have one park that has many different cultural aspects and elements to it. I think that would be the most effective approach" (personal communication, February 18, 2025). She added, "Yes, there's power and recognition to know that your culture is being recognized, being heard, being addressed" (personal communication, February 18, 2025).

Lazarus concluded his perspective on SBW and green space education by emphasizing that:

There could be opportunities to learn about nature and green spaces that can be educational, especially as we're speaking of maybe Senior Black Women. Maybe this is something that they're a little bit more familiar with based on their learnings from back home or from when they were younger (personal communication, April 7, 2025).

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Most importantly, the value of environmental education and green spaces can influence how developers envision land, and the planning rationales to implement them. Environmental education interacts with all facets of society, as cities are part of a global network of dynamic components of knowledge, energy, and innovation.

4.3 Exploring the Intersections of Park Design, Accessibility, and Public Safety in Green Spaces

Accessing UGS for recreation, exercise, and socializing is a valuable privilege. The planning and development of the parkland are guided by the city's Official Plans and other regulatory policies. However, Adlakha and John (2022) argue that planning within today's society has inherent social inequalities built in and is "spatially fragmented, socially divisive, and detrimental to health" (p. 790). Urban green space infrastructure plays a pivotal role in how SBW experiences UGS as a mechanism to improve their health.

4.3.1 Park Design

Park design grounded in Universal Design Principle 7—Size and Space for Approach and Use—emphasizes the importance of spatial accommodation that fosters inclusion, ensuring comfort and usability so that all individuals can navigate and enjoy public spaces (Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, n.d.). The Parkland Strategy (2019) identifies two primary park types: "planned," referring to public spaces that are "acquired, designed, and conceived for public use," and "natural," which includes preserved, undeveloped areas (p. 15). Park classifications are also differentiated by size, as detailed in Figure 16 (see separate document titled *Supplementary Figures*). The implementation of parks involves a combination of legally dedicated parkland, community input, and strategic planning.

Toronto's High Park, as classified by the Parkland Strategy (2019), falls under the classification of City and Legacy park. High Park demonstrates how planning principles and philosophies surrounding park design, layout, and scale can integrate public recreation with ecological preservation, harmoniously fostering community connection and environmental responsibility, as illustrated in Figure 17 (see separate document titled *Supplementary Figures*). Its design offers planners, designers, and other professionals valuable insight for those

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developing urban parks that respond to the challenges of urban growth, social demands, and climate change mitigation strategies. Enssle (2020) describes the design of UGS and UGI as:

The inclusive design of urban green spaces such as parks relates to a number of particular infrastructure elements and facilities, including pleasant vegetation, trees for shade, age-convenient benches, toilets, shelters from extreme weather situations (e.g., heat), and paved trails for older people (p. 39).

Irene expanded the conversation on park design and scale by incorporating Enssle's (2020) insights into her reflections on age-friendly green spaces. She highlighted the distinction between parks and parkettes, stating:

When you think about it, you know, seniors [who] go outside, maybe they can't reach, like I'm saying, accessibility. Maybe they can't walk 15 minutes to a park, but they could walk five minutes to a parkette where there's still, you know, shaded areas and a place to relax outside, and it's just a bit of a shorter distance. So maybe having more smaller parks that, you know, suit a senior's lifestyle than the mega parks (personal communication, February 18, 2025).

From Irene's perspective, understanding the purpose behind the park scale and layout plays a pivotal role in revealing the connection to seniors, community, and functionality. According to Irene, "Another thing that I don't think we talked about is the size and the scale of parks. So, is it better to have mega parks or is it better to have smaller community parks?" (personal communication, February 18, 2025). Park design is a conduit between city officials' (planners, urban designers, environmental planners) perception and public reality, as "parks are a versatile setting for outdoor recreation, physical activity, and social connection, all of which are important aspects for healthy ageing" (Veitch et al., 2022, p. 2). Urban green spaces serve as a link bridging wellness elements with planning approaches that support age-friendly design.

A concurrent theme to Irene's statement was considered by Valerie and dealt with the physical design of parks. She articulated that:

So sometimes people get carried away, [they] think that [green spaces] need to look a certain way. But sometimes, you know, whatever the community wants is what is probably going to help enable a lot of usage and the functionality of the site. Like, we have to work with folks to determine that (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

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Incorporating SBW voices in the creation of green space designs enhances community initiatives, supports seniors' engagement and perception with the outdoors. Positive perception of green spaces through enticing vegetation, accessible seating infrastructure, clean washrooms, and close proximity to one's residence can wield incremental changes to seniors' routine.

Irene enriched the conversation by asserting the purpose of parks by stating, “Exactly. So, I think access is [a] pretty big issue or concern. And then once you're in that space again, is it like a destination? Is it just a thoroughfare? What is it about the park that gives me a reason to want to stay?” (personal communication, February 18, 2025). Furthermore, Irene narrowed in on greenway¹⁰ access and park design, and stated, “Creating nodes, destination points within the park” to make it easier to “get from point A to point B, [and] are these spaces meant to be a connector, like a pass through?” (personal communication, February 18, 2025).

According to Chang et al. (2024), “approximately 80% of older adults’ physical activity occurs within a three-block radius from their homes” (p. 1). Travelling to a planned destination for seniors is a significant concern for seniors, because their ability to access transportation can be challenging, and their physical mobility may be hampered. The implementation of neighbourhoods and parks (*see Figure 16*) is dependent on planning principles, developers, and capital investment. The merit of the planner's rhetoric was insightful and fluid. In cities, master plans for green space design and utilization can influence how seniors connect with and integrate with these venues for their vitality and ability to age well.

4.3.2 From Canopy to Comfort: The Power of Shade

Canada's tree landscape is vast. Trees support biodiversity, carbon sequestration, regulate cities' temperature (cooling), mitigate urban heat islands (UHI), and other climate change features. In his work, Whittingham (2022) underscored the ecological and social importance of trees:

A better approach is the 3-30-300 rule, which states that everyone should be able to see at least three trees from their home, that all neighbourhoods should have at least a 30% tree

¹⁰ Greenways: Linear open spaces that link parks and neighborhoods within the community, such as paths or trails. Greenways provide public access to green spaces and opportunities for residents of all ages and abilities to be physically active (Institute for Local Government, 2010, p. 27).

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canopy, and that all residents should have a greenspace of at least one hectare within 300 metres of where they live (p. 1).

Trees and thermal comfort continue to be a prevailing concern in major cities. The concrete jungle decreases the number of green landscapes that once existed. Lee et al. (2018) discuss thermal comfort within the public realm¹¹, which refers to the increase or decrease in temperature that an individual feels. Trees are important landscaping design features in the conversation about seniors' health and equitable spaces.

Irene's comments about tree cover were interesting as she articulated the following: "Lighting is important, shade is important. Because when you speak about comfort and seating, I think [it] would be important [those types of] design elements, I would say" (personal communication, February 18, 2025). Valerie continued the discussion about trees and comfort, saying "Shading, [it is] hot lately [much] warmer apparently. So, shading [is meaningful]" (personal communication, March 5, 2025). Shade from tree canopies helps cities to cool and create comfortable environments where the reliance on "air conditioning units is reduced" and they also intercept rain, "allow[ing] up to 30% to evaporate without even touching the ground" (Whittingham et al., 2022, p. 14).

Lazarus shared his perspective on the topic, incorporating the concept of tree management, stating:

Tree management also has to be taken into consideration. Whether it could come from ... hav[ing] to pay attention when reviewing drawings, and being able to review landscape drawing and say, hey, I could see where the position of this Greenfield or the position of these trees are, this could create a little bit of an issue.... So yeah, tree management would also be important, just to avoid blind spots at the forefront [of UGI designs] (personal communication, April 7, 2025).

The management of urban tree networks is a critical design principle, typically overseen by city planners through the review of development applications submitted by developers. Adding to this, Irene conveyed caution about inadequate infrastructures -

¹¹ City of Toronto (2023) considers the public realm as "[areas] comprised of all public and private spaces to which the public has access. It is a network that includes, but is not limited to, streets and lanes, parks and open spaces, and the parts of private and public buildings that the public is invited into" (p. 3-2).

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When you think of a lack of shade, more permanent structures [will have to be built] versus, like tree cover, because tree cover doesn't provide shade year-round. You could suggest planting [more trees] to increase greenery and to offset poor air quality (personal communication, February 18, 2025).

The rhetoric from all planners about trees, shade, and thermal comfort can be analyzed through the Tree Equity Score Analyzer (TESA) web application. The TESA's aim is:

Our goal is that urban communities have the resources to get healthy trees to those who need them the most [and] planting trees in underserved neighborhoods addresses basic human rights to health, safety, and welfare. The benefits of mitigating extreme heat, air pollution, public health, and environmental hazards are well documented (n.d.).

The illustrations, as shown in Figure 18¹² [A, B, C, and D] (see separate document titled, *Supplementary Figures*) are a diagnostic examination of the City of Toronto's tree equity score. Figure 18A is an aerial view of the City of Toronto's overall tree canopy landscape that incorporates climate, demographic, and socioeconomic data. Figure 18B (see separate document titled, *Supplementary figures*), is the location of Toronto's tree canopy within the urban core and periphery in green. Figure 18C (see separate document titled, *Supplementary figures*), illuminates the neighbourhoods in orange that point to the inadequacies of tree canopy [lowest percentile out of 100%] and need remedial attention. Figure 18D (see separate document titled, *Supplementary figures*), is the location of Toronto residents who identify as non-white and Indigenous.

¹² Tree Equity Score Analyzer (n.d.)

- A. Tree equity score is a metric that helps cities assess how well they are delivering equitable tree canopy cover to all residents. It is derived from tree canopy, climate, demographic and socioeconomic data. Scores range from 0-100. The lower the score, the greater priority for tree planting. A score of 100 means the census tract has met tree planting goals;
- B. The existing percent tree canopy cover, that is, the footprint of trees when viewed from above-the bird's eye view of tree crowns (leaves, branches and stems) (Data Source: 2018 Forest and Land Cover, City of Toronto Parks, Forestry & Recreation);
- C. The percentage area of a census tract that must be planted to reach the census tract tree canopy goal. Calculated as the difference between the percentage of tree canopy cover and tree canopy goal; and
- D. The percentage of persons in a census tract who identify as non-white or indigenous. (Data Source: Canada of Population, 2021)

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The maps in Figure 18 highlight the prevalence of certain Toronto neighbourhoods and communities experiencing unequal distribution of trees, which results in urban heat islands (UHIs), as shown in Figure 19¹³(see separate document titled *Supplementary Figures*). Surface temperature differentials are illustrated in red (+5 Celsius), hotter and blue-whitish zones (-5 Celsius), cooler, highlighting the thermal and spatial disparities primarily associated with uneven distribution of tree cover, within the parameters of UGI (Tree Equity Score Analyzer, n.d.). Inadequate trees cover in hotter zones undermines nature's ability to sustain a healthy environment. Furthermore, the differential zones reinforce disparities within cities' neighbourhoods that undermine the development of resilient and healthy communities. This mirrors existing racial and socio-economic inequalities that shape our urban environment (Vabi, 2022).

Tree disparity according to Whittingham et al. (2022) and Nature Canada, (2022) affects marginalized and racialized communities as “have highly inequitable access to urban trees and forests compared to those in affluent neighborhoods” (p. 5) [and] “racialized and marginalized residents continue to have inequitable access to urban forests and are denied the attendant benefits” (p. 38). Figures 20 and 21 highlight the spatial relationship between Toronto's tree canopy (dark and light green), visible Black minority population (purple), and senior women 60+ and older (orange) circles (see separate document titled *Supplementary Figures*). The clustering suggests that the areas with concentrated visible-Black minority populations and the lighter segments within the inner core, the west, and the east end indicate a reduction in tree canopy that is conducive to hotter temperatures because of the reduction in natural shading properties. The effects on marginalized communities' health relate to experiencing heat stress disproportionately. The underlying visual representation can inform planning departments about inequalities, while prioritizing investment in marginalized neighbourhoods and age-friendly communities.

¹³ Compares average census tract surface temperature with the citywide average to measure variance in heat across census tracts. Surface temperature is a good estimate of where excess heat is generated in urban areas. Data Source: Contains information made available under the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA)'s *Open Data Licence v 1.0* (Tree Equity Score Analyzer, n.d.).

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According to Parkland Strategy (2019), UHIs' effects can be mitigated “by increasing the amount of greenspace [which] reduce[s] the intensity of heat waves” (p. 10). In alliance with Parkland Strategy 2019, Valerie concluded that “I think green space is so important [to] climate resilience [as it] is becoming more significant to create new responses, and we have to engage everyone in our communities to be able to create change as well” (personal communication, March 5, 2025). Exposure to prolonged heat can be detrimental to health outcomes for marginalized seniors through an increase in heat-related illnesses (Guo et al., 2019; Weidmüller, 2024). Shortwave radiation from sunlight is the leading component of thermal discomfort. By adding shaded areas, environmental countermeasures can reduce UHIs. Lazarus recognizes the importance of UHI and shared his perspective on rising temperatures: “Like we hear about the rising heat table and the promotion of biodiversity ... [we need to] further support those green spaces, just being able to educate people and realize the importance of it” (personal communication, April 7, 2025). Given that the "heat table" symbolizes the rising global temperatures, increasing support for green space education, awareness, and advocacy is paramount for future generations' livelihood.

The urban built form is an amalgamation of design elements, modern planning regimes, people, and biodiversity. The concepts of NbS and Geddes' nature-based ideology are fundamental methodologies in addressing climate change challenges created by the urban built form of the concrete world. With the continual intensification of cities, the integration of NbS, tree canopy, and other environmental mitigation approaches amplifies the conversation about sustainable, age-friendly communities that support ecological endeavours.

4.3.3 Accessibility Challenges in Green Spaces

Gong et al. (2016) identified a critical relationship between UGS, accessibility, and the needs of older adults, highlighting the importance of equitable access by asserting that:

Urban green spaces must be accessible to the public, as accessibility is the key to effective social and ecological functioning of cities. The role of accessibility of urban green space is especially important for elderly people in high density city since they are the age group who will be the most beneficial from their living environment (p. 91).

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Echoing this, Lazarus explained his perspective on accessibility, encompassing not only accessible design elements but also a space that is conducive for the entire community to thrive and feel safe: “[I] think accessibility is a big, big, big thing, a big principle that has to be taken into consideration” (personal communication, April 7, 2025). Adding to this, he states, “I think that the question focuses on accessibility, safety, and [being] welcoming. I think that there's a lot of work to be done just because location matters” (personal communication, April 7, 2025). From a planner's perspective, planning accessible cities involves a myriad of policies and foresight, ensuring that public spaces and transportation corridors can be used by all individuals, irrespective of their capabilities. According to Zhang et al. (2023), “improving the accessibility of urban parks and green space can alleviate some of the social pressures associated with aging” (p. 3). Incorporating the lens of seniors into the conversation is paramount, as their mobility, self-empowerment, and health interact with the natural environment. Accessibility was consistently validated as an important focal point.

Lazarus continued to elaborate and included transportation, primarily a car, as an avenue for seniors to travel to their destination. Lazarus’s perspective aligns with findings from Barker et al. (2012), who note that older adults “prefer to stay busy, and their ability to do so is heavily dependent on having access to a car” (p. 8). Many seniors continue to drive into older age, which contributes to their well-being by preserving a sense of autonomy and independence. Lazarus offered an alternative perspective by highlighting mall walking as a viable form of physical activity and social engagement for older adults. Lazarus made the argument that:

So, I think it's access, like, how close is the nearest park to me, right? That's a big factor. And then when you think about seniors, there's an extra level of mobility. Do I have to drive to my park? And is that going to be of benefit [to me] over, say, going to a mall to get, you know, leisure or walking (personal communication, April 7, 2025).

The Canadian environment is not conducive for seniors to enjoy UGS all year round. Mall walking integrates the planning philosophy of age-friendly communities, supports mobility planning, and utilizes underused spaces that support seniors' physical fitness, social integration, mental stimulus, and other health benefits.

Lazarus merged the perspective of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and Accessible Canada Act (ACA) principles into the conversation. He stated, “We

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want to make sure that, whether it's building in ramps or just seeing about the kind of floor that's put in place, you just want to make sure that everybody's got access to this space.” He further added, “Not to mention if it's somebody dealing with a disability like that. All has to be accounted for when designing these spaces” (personal communication, April 7, 2025). The work of Zhang et al. (2023) addresses Lazarus’s paradigm and adds the component of travel distance for people with disabilities.

The disabled, limited by their mobility, do not travel frequently, mostly only walking, with a small activity range, generally with 500 m as the high-frequency activity area, and 1 km as the maximum distance for most disabled people to travel to green spaces (p. 27).

Accessibility for senior citizens is linked to wellness. The ability to continue to navigate one's surroundings supports independence and preserves the principle of maintaining a routine as one ages. Planning rationales and policies are instrumental in the creation of walkable, inclusive, and equitable UGS.

4.3.4 Feeling Safe in the Outdoors: Addressing Safety Concerns of Senior Black Women in Green Spaces

Gibson (2018) addresses personal safety as a constraint that senior citizens navigate, differing from other demographics. Safety is more than one’s environment; safety can be tied to health. For seniors, reductions in vision and hearing, frailty, and physical instability are associated with falling (Lach et al., 2017; Gibson, 2025). Planning strategies for UGS should incorporate initiatives that align with AODA and UD principles, emphasizing safety under the principle of Equitable Use¹⁴. In that context, Irene articulated,

I have done a few park planning exercises, and it's like design matters as well. But also, what are the components that make up that park? The overall design, from a safety perspective, surface treatments matter. So, you know, the width of the pathways, are they going to be finished in gravel? Are they finished in asphalt? Is there the introduction of, like, rubber, just for safety, I guess, you know, wood chips in playgrounds, reducing

¹⁴ Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (n.d.) definition for Equitable Use is “design [that] is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities” (para.1). Four additional guiding principles support this UD principle, includes, provide the same means of use for all users: identical whenever possible; equivalent when not; avoid segregating or stigmatizing any users; provisions for privacy, security, and safety should be equally available to all users; and make the design appealing to all users.

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concrete, some of those elements? And I also think an element of safety is making these spaces [Age Friendly] (personal communication, February 18, 2025).

Irene's discussion and perspective incorporate underlying principles of safety for all demographics, and she understands the importance of implementing design features that are age-friendly. Guo et al. (2024) address this by saying that within green spaces, additional attention "should be paid to the elderly or the kids who have special demands to green spaces in Landscape Planning" (p. 3). Echoing Guo et al. (2024), Irene continued to elaborate on safety measures with the added benefit of green spaces: "Adds more eyes in the park, and that intrinsically also increases the level of safety" (personal communication, February 18, 2025). Adding that it is important to "evaluate the infrastructure that's being proposed ... the overall design, the surface treatments from a safety perspective also matter" (personal communication, February 18, 2025). Lazarus offered an additional perspective on park safety, emphasizing the need for accessible and well-maintained spaces. He stated,

I don't want to have somebody walking through any land that's maybe unsafe or unkept in order to have access to any activities. It should be multifunctional and inclusive ... maybe [for] seniors and women ... how they are going to utilize the space (personal communication, April 7, 2025).

From Larson and Ogletree's (2019) perspective, safety in UGS is enhanced when parks are thoughtfully designed with safety in mind, regularly programmed with activities, and well-maintained. Such parks tend to attract residents whose presence helps deter crime. Larson and Ogletree's (2019) statement aligns closely with Lazarus's comments on safety and visibility in parks. Lazarus emphasized that:

We just want to ensure that the space is accessible [to] everybody. I think there has to be an emphasis on the design and layout; spaces have to be visible. So, you may want in, especially a space that's going to be used by everybody. You may want to avoid winding paths, just so go back to the security point, just so that people can be seen (personal communication, April 7, 2025).

He (2025) aligns with Larson and Ogletree (2019) and Lazarus's viewpoint, stating that "neighborhoods with more green space tend to foster a stronger sense of safety" (p. 7). This idea echoes Jane Jacobs's (1961) concept of "eyes on the street" (p. 54), where the active presence of

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community members in public spaces promotes belonging, community wellness, and social connections among older adults (Enssle, 2020). Lazarus's statement closely mirrors that of Larson and Ogletree (2019), highlighting potential safety concerns in green spaces. He explained:

Maybe there could be issues where the space is unkept, or like, are you making a difference between formal and informal spaces? If it's an informal space and all of a sudden, it's just like a gathering spot where people are just hanging out, there may be some safety concerns, or maybe just like some people may feel like that space is being dominated by a particular person or a particular group (personal communication, April 7, 2025).

He (2025) further elaborated, emphasizing that “beyond physical attributes such as accessibility, design, and size, individuals’ perceptions of the environment play a crucial role in their decision to utilize green spaces” (p. 3). The perspectives expressed by the planners and urban planning scholars align with the principles of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) and Oscar Newman’s concept of defensible space theory, which propose that “urban design influences crime rates by fostering territoriality and natural surveillance” (McKee, n.d., para. 1). Urban green spaces and defensible space theory - four tenets¹⁵ are interconnected with community beliefs about stewardship and ownership that contribute to a sense of community pride and belonging. Lazarus built on his disposition about safety by saying, “So [green spaces] are accessible, and not just accessible for mobility, but also for safety. So, how do our existing public spaces engage and support more vulnerable populations so they can exist and utilize that community asset regardless of the time of day?” (personal communication, April 7, 2025). The prevalence of UGS, defensible space theory, and communities' perceived notion about safety contribute to the community's overall wellness, which influences the health outcomes, especially of Senior Black Women.

¹⁵ McKee (n.d.) four tenets of defensible space theory include:

1. Territoriality refers to the idea that physical design should reinforce a sense of ownership among residents” (para. 4);
2. Natural surveillance “the concept that the physical arrangement of buildings and spaces should allow residents to observe activities around them (para. 5);
3. Image and milieu emphasizes that the visual appearance and overall condition of a neighborhood influence perceptions of safety and crime risk (para. 6).

4.4 Discussion

This study highlights the multifaceted nature that exists in planning urban green spaces. The spatial distribution of green spaces is shaped by a plethora of intricate factors, including developers' proposed land use applications, the allocation of capital investment, and the active engagement of SBW to advocate for their community.

4.4.1 The Implications of Planning Policies and Development of Green Spaces

The first key finding revealed the relationship between parkland policies described by Ontario (1990) as “park or other public recreational purposes” (p. 95) and developers. The implementation of the Planning Act, which is the highest governing planning document that subsidiary planning doctrine must adhere to, guides and supports municipalities' Official Plans. Within the Planning Act, land conveyance for parkland development is addressed in Section 42: Conveyance of land for park purposes; Section 51.1: Parkland; and Section 53: Consents. Understanding the procedural framing of how parkland is constituted by the conveyance of land is twofold. First, developers can convey a portion of their land, whether residential (5%) or commercial (2%), for parkland or pay cash in lieu (CIL) to their respective municipalities if they are unable to allocate the stated percentage (Ontario, 1990).

Planners understand that land is a commodity for developers, a resource that can be bought, sold, or traded to increase revenue (Nobles & Moore, 2024). However, since green space development does not typically generate profit, allocating land for parks is often viewed as a revenue loss. Shan et al. (2024) encapsulate that ideology and conveyed that, “capitalization of urban green space is a long-standing concern in urban planning, highlighting the complex nature of urban green space as ‘public goods’ while possessing economic value” (p. 1). This tension illuminates a systemic spatial planning bias in the creation and location of green spaces. This contrasts with Zhang and Li's (2024) emphasis on “spatial equity” and “social equity” (p. 3), where spatial equity equates to the “fair and just distribution of resources” (Urbanitarina, 2023, para. 1), while social equity adopts the outlook of “people-oriented” (Zhang & Li, 2024). The underlying message is that green spaces are distributed differentially across social backgrounds and neighbourhoods. Guo et al. (2024) commentary on parkland and the public iterates that

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parkland is a “vital resource in urban construction” [and they] “should be accessible to all residents” (p. 2).

Recalling that historically, city planning regimes heavily relied on housing and transit corridors as the prevailing land use development, and through that lens, green space development in low-income neighbourhoods was seen as a devalued built form ideology. This devaluation aligned with Guo et al. (2019), findings and incorporated the model of “environmental justice issue[s]” (p. 2). As a result, the complexity of green space planning is not a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to the distribution and location of parkland (Knight et al., 2018).

4.4.2 Paved with Good Intentions: What Happens When Cities Invest in Urban Green Space

The study revealed the role of capital investment in green spaces to be polarizing from planners' viewpoints. With the continual intensification of the periphery, the allocation and size of new green spaces are tied to capital investment. Shan et al.'s (2024) research acknowledges that urban green space allocation is uneven, “which commonly corresponds to demographic and socioeconomic stratification” (p. 2). Retrofitting existing green spaces within the Black community was discussed by planners, as fiscal constraints caused by inadequate funding continue to exist. As monetary funds flow from citizens' tax dollars and developers into cities' economic trusts, financial incentives and political influence shape how green space initiatives are implemented within cities. Lee et al. (2020) highlight that “many communities of color are still deprived of quality parks and recreation opportunities, and the racial and ethnic disparities in provisions of public parks and recreation continue to be a serious social justice issue” (p. 102). The allocation of capital investment for green spaces from the planner's perspective remains limited, which creates barriers and hindrances to the equitable distribution of these landscapes.

Furthermore, the discourse capitalized on the idea of engaging with cities' elected officials in the discussion of green space funding and its distribution. Elected officials are pivotal instruments that can be leveraged in revising or implementing new planning policies that support green space initiatives that align with the United Nations' SDGs. In addition, elected officials can be the bridge between cities' governance and communities' goals and objectives. The collaboration between public citizens, planners, and city officials can amplify the needs for

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conversations that focus on public health and environmental sustainability within green spaces that foster socio-spatial connectivity.

The effect of diminished access to quality green space on SBW wellness as they navigate different life stages is embedded and tied to negative health outcomes. Capital investment allocation for green spaces represents power and influence that impacts marginalized communities. This form of power perpetuates spatial injustices by unevenly distributing resources.

4.4.3 The Reality of Seniors' Mobility in Accessing Green Spaces: A Planner's Perspective

Access to green space is a critical component of healthy aging, particularly for seniors who benefit from opportunities for physical activity, social interaction, and psychological well-being. However, many older adults face accessibility constraints due to limited mobility and reliance on public transit or private vehicles. Seniors who no longer drive may find it difficult to access UGS as the location is car-dependent, or the bus service may pose a significant barrier. These transportation challenges often result in reduced use of green spaces, contributing to social isolation and diminished quality of life. Urban planning must consider both transit-oriented development and age-friendly design to ensure equitable green space access for the aging population.

Furthermore, safety was another key component for seniors, who may have heightened sensitivities to environmental conditions and mobility constraints. Elements such as adequate lighting, shaded areas, green space infrastructure, and clear and visible pathways can engage seniors to venture into green spaces for their well-being. While inadequate lighting sources can be a detriment to seniors, as a reduction in visibility could lead to feelings of anxiety and fear, or the potential risk of falling (Gibson, 2025). This can reduce seniors' opportunities to participate in recreational and social activities. Moreover, the lack of shaded areas that provide thermal comfort within the context of urban heat island (Gong et al. 2016) environments can exacerbate and intensify heat-related health concerns of seniors. Increasing the amount of tree canopy throughout the city is a solution to mitigate climate change impacts and support seniors' health.

4.4.4 Refining the Relationship between Senior Black Women and Decision-Makers

The planner's narrative recognized that engaging senior citizens in the political forum is pivotal for building inclusive age-friendly policies. Meng et al. (2024) stated that “the older population is frequently disregarded when urban parks are planned” (p. 1). This third conceptual finding underscores the importance of including Senior Black Women's lived experiences and voices in planning UGS.

Sustainability Directory (2023) explains Spatial Planning Equity as “fairness in how space is organized and used, especially concerning access to resources and opportunities” (para. 1). It further emphasizes that its significance “lies in its ability to address social and environmental injustices that are spatially manifested” (para. 11). Planning departments and municipalities could implement and prioritize culturally relevant community engagement programs that are transparent in scope ensuring equitable participation. Through the incorporation of SBW voices, community development that once relied heavily on a top-down framework is reversed to encompass a holistic model that values SBW opinions and perspectives. As oftentimes, SBW voices are unrecognized for their community insight and knowledge.

4.4.5 Implications

The implications of the emergent findings demonstrate that the planning field can continue to evolve and improve its planning mandates in building inclusive and better equitable green spaces for Senior Black Women. Equitable and non-discriminatory landscapes hold space for policy reform, social advocacy forums, and are a transformative tool for resilient and sustainable communities. The limitations of the study rely on the sample size, as only three planners were interviewed. Incorporating environmental planners, urban designers, or landscape architects could have provided a greater in-depth analysis of green space infrastructure, methodology, and their connectivity to the public realm. Furthermore, the study identified potential causation from the planners' viewpoint between capital investment and green space. However, clear and concise evidence was not obtained.

4.5 Recommendations

As our urban core continues to densify, reducing urban green spaces can pose negative wellness outcomes and ecological disparities on vulnerable communities (Weidmüller, 2024). The community's vitality stems from the active participation of citizens, planners, and policy-makers, continuously supporting initiatives that focus on wellness, sustainability, inclusion, and age-friendly systems and their benefits, not only from an anthropocentric perspective but also from a biodiversity and ecological lens.

4.5.1 Community Consultation to Planning Reform: The Role in Building Equitable and Inclusive Cities

Grounded in the findings of this research, the primary planning recommendation emphasizes the importance of actively incorporating the voices of Senior Black Women into the development of urban green spaces. This includes integrating age-friendly design principles and cultural considerations through meaningful community consultation, ensuring that these spaces are inclusive, accessible, and reflective of the diverse needs of SBW.

Community consultation for many years has devalued the importance of incorporating cultural components into planning, which is foundational for Black communities. The aim of community consultation and engagement for planners focuses on the actual priorities of the people they are serving by obtaining opinions and feedback about planning policies (Purohit et al., 2024; Rong, 2023). Furthermore, by centring SBW voices into the planning perspective, planners can challenge racial and discriminatory norms and spatial injustices through anti-oppressive and equity-based frameworks. This cornerstone approach can revolutionize how planners view age-friendly UGS, UD methodology, accessibility, and safe communities for SBW.

The concept of *tokenism* in community consultation is well-documented. It refers to the practice whereby political decision-makers engage with only a select few individuals from the community, often for the sake of appearance rather than genuine inclusion. As a result, the strategies and policies developed frequently fail to reflect the diverse perspectives, needs, and priorities of the broader community (Carr et al., 2006; Rong et al., 2023). Tokenism within marginalized communities has devalued communities' voices and uplifted the ideology

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surrounding the saviour complex. Tokenism can be negated when public servants actively listen and engage with marginalized and older constituents. This can have a positive effect on SBW wellness in the political arena through empowerment, and SBW may feel welcomed, at ease, and more inclined to venture into green spaces. The potential to ignite and implement new planning strategies that support SBW wellness, through the facilitation of age-friendly infrastructure and cultural components, relies on policymakers, developers, political stakeholders, city officials, and planners. This shift in one's outlook and policy reform into cities' green space planning doctrine can shape future planners' vision of Canada's aging SBW population.

Conclusion

The study focused on the relationship between green space planning and the wellness of Senior Black Women. Historical exclusionary policies such as green space planning, redlining, policing, and diminished capital investment into Black neighbourhood's stem from racial discrimination that created inequality between whites and Blacks. This historical legacy left impressionable perceptions and connotations, resulting in a legacy of "do not enter" regimes. The continuation of racial inequalities in green spaces is ever present in today's society, as the Black community faces repercussions for enjoying green spaces, as demonstrated by the 2020 incident in which Christian Cooper, a Black birdwatcher, was racially harassed in Central Park, New York City.

By focusing on the lived experiences of Senior Black Women, this study reveals that this demographic is underrepresented within the political domain as their needs, histories, knowledge, and perceptions have been systematically excluded from environmental conversations and planning discourse. Furthermore, this study challenges the prevailing misconceptions that Senior Black Women and the broader Black community are uninterested in the outdoors. In the face of adversity, this demographic continues to thrive and actively engage with these spaces by reshaping the landscape to suit their personal and community needs, for example, revitalizing informal green areas into community gardens. Their resilience and strength in these environments support their pursuit of healing, socialization, and joy. At the same time, they challenge public perception of what it means to be a senior, a woman, and Black which is empowering.

Furthermore, this study is not without limitations. First, the geographic and qualitative scope was constrained due to a limited number of participants and the potential for greater refinement in GIS analysis. Secondly, time played a crucial role in conducting the study via recruitment, participants' narratives, and follow-up, which narrowed the scope of experiences represented. Lastly, occupying dual roles as a researcher and member of the Black community allowed culturally sensitive conversations to be held in confidence. This dual role can lead to the introduction of biases in the study. Nevertheless, Senior Black Women's perspectives provided spectacular discernment, rich knowledge, and cultural relevance that can transform

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misconceptions about SBW health through improved public health mandates, planning policies, and DEI initiatives.

Moreover, community-led planning and programming within the Black community extend beyond monetary funds. Acknowledging their cultural wisdom and lived experience holds the potential to transform green spaces from tokenistic ideas into inclusive, restorative landscapes that support wellness. This includes ensuring a sense of belonging, improving physical and psychological health outcomes, and addressing issues related to social isolation, loneliness, and elder abuse. Future research should expand on established inclusive methodologies and participatory approaches that strengthen community bonds and build on these narratives, while also examining planning policies, such as land use development and parkland dedication.

The importance of this study affirms a call to action from governmental officials, developers, city planners, and community organizations to reimagine how green space rhetoric and perceptions cater to whiteness and exclude marginalized communities. Green spaces are not merely recreational areas but essential venues for justice, healing, and community resilience. The strength and resilience of Senior Black Women in the face of systemic adversity are powerfully reflected in the words of Ntozake Shange: “Where there is a woman there is magic” (The Chocolate Voice, n.d.).

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