

APRIL 22, 2026

# Trails as Social Infrastructure: Practical Strategies to Build Connection in a Disconnected World



Jones Falls Trail, MD | Courtesy Side A Photography

# Before we begin:

- Drop your questions in the Q&A box.
- Live transcription is enabled for this webinar.
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- In the event you run into technical difficulties during the webinar, here's how to troubleshoot:
  - Log out and back into the webinar
  - Webinar ID: 858 1072 7800
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Trails as Social Infrastructure: Practical Strategies to Build  
Connections in a Disconnected World

Event #9325836

*AICP members **who view this event live** are eligible for 1.0 CM credit*



# Apply Now for a Trail Grant

The 2026 Trail Grants application window is now open. All applications are due by 11:59 p.m. ET on May 10.

- Eligible activities include: planning & engineering activities; trail construction, improvements and maintenance; and matching funds for state or federal grants
- Grant amounts will range between \$10,000 and \$25,000.

Apply at: [railstotrails.org/grants](https://railstotrails.org/grants)



# 2026 Webinar Topics

Celebrate Trails Day! (*Saturday, April 25, events held nationwide*)

E-Bikes, E-Motos, and Safety: What Belongs on Trails and Why (*May 13, 1:00 p.m. EDT*)

Model Trail Networks for Safer Transportation Systems

Beyond ADA: Accessibility, Dignity and Choice on Multiuse Trails

*And more!*



# AMERICA ISN'T THRIVING

Social disconnection now defines the American experience, impacting our health, democracy, and quality of life.

**27%**

Lack Reliable  
Social Support

**50%**

Not  
Thriving /  
Flourishing

**45%**

Don't Trust  
Others

**40%**

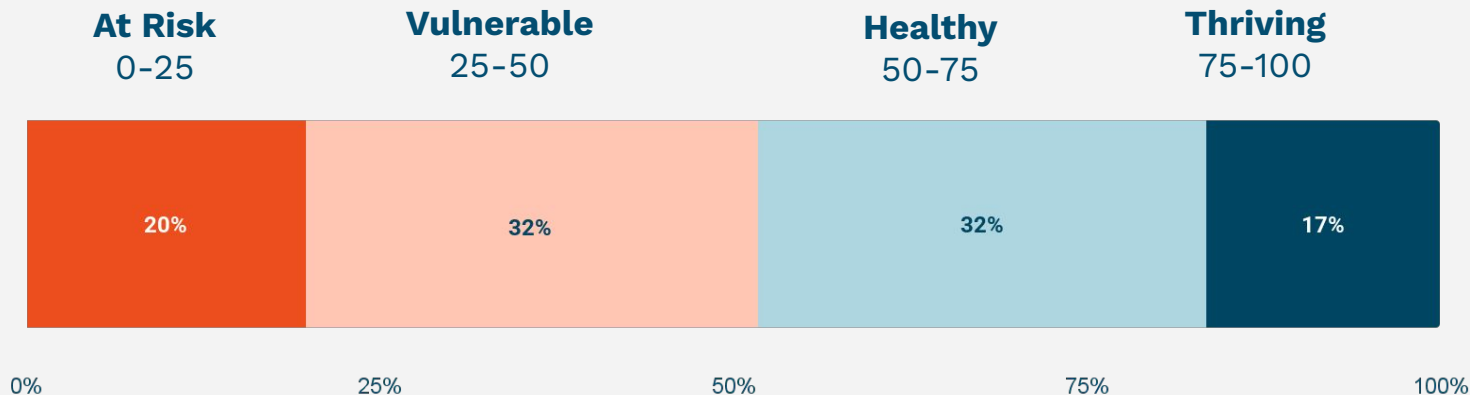
Uninterested  
in Connecting  
Across  
Difference

**55%**

Feel Politically  
Disempowered

# An Uneven State of Connection

52% of U.S. adults fall in the at-risk or vulnerable range, bands associated with lower access to relationships, support, and shared places.

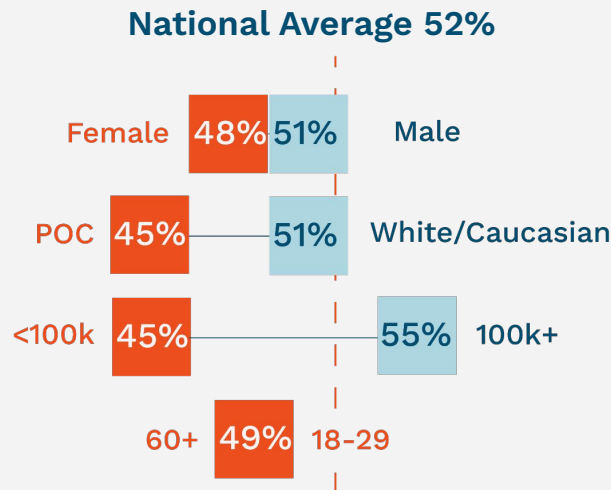


Distribution of Social Connection Index Scores (n = 1,997 adults)

# Connection Varies by Income, Race & Gender

Differences reflect conditions and access, not individual capacity.

Income differences are substantially larger than differences by race or gender.



Disaggregated subgroup scores; not population-weighted or mutually exclusive. No statistical difference by age.

# What do healthy and thriving people consistently experience?

The 48% of people who are thriving are accessing Six Points of Connection — ordinary, place-based behaviors of connection.

These behaviors reflect how connection actually shows up in daily life, not just how connected people feel.

01

Neighborhood  
Contact

02

Community  
of Identity

03

One-on-One  
Relationships

04

Third  
Place

05

Community  
of Play

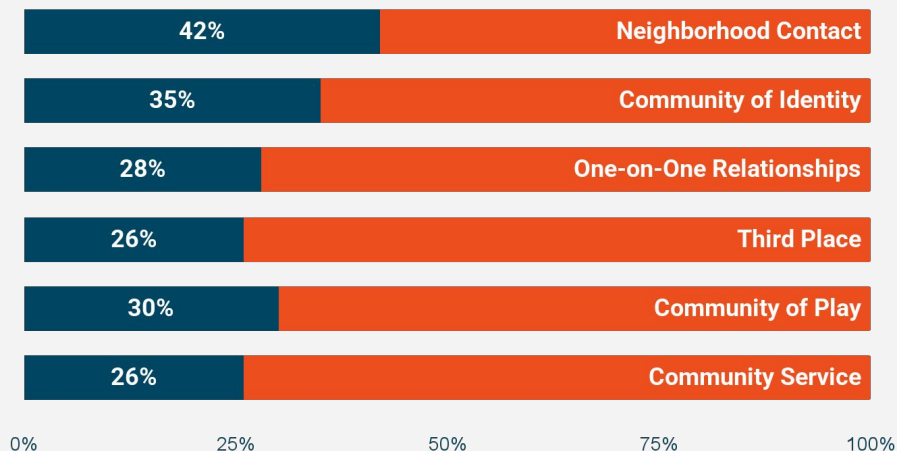
06

Community  
Service

# No Point is Widely Practiced in America

Most of the Six Points are adopted by less than one-in-three people.

Percentage of people reporting healthy or thriving levels of adoption of each of the Six Points of Connection.



Across the report, Community of Play is associated with higher adoption of other Six Points.

# The Power of Playing - Together

We played together as kids but it is just as important as adults.

**+28 pts**

Have strong  
**social  
support**  
(93% vs 65%)

**+33 pts**

Report high  
**life  
satisfaction**  
(74% vs 40%)

**+28 pts**

**Trust** others  
(74% vs 46%)

**+30 pts**

**Connect  
across  
difference**  
(82% vs 52%)

**+29 pts**

Feel  
**politically  
empowered**  
(65% vs 36%)

# Too Few People Play Together

Only 30% of people regularly play together.

*"I am part of a community of people who do activities together."*

**Have Regular  
Community of  
Play**



**Don't**

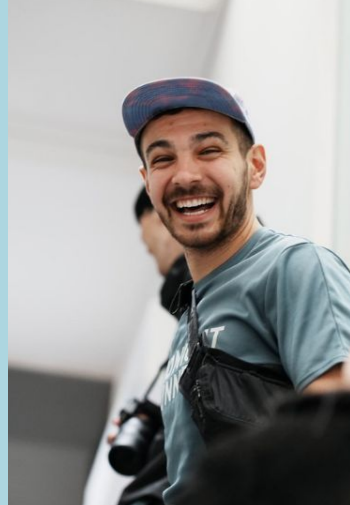


# Skilled, Committed, and Purpose-Driven

The most common professional backgrounds of community builders are event planning (36%), coaching/facilitation (33%), and teaching (29%).

Community builders are deeply committed, with 58% leading their communities for 3+ years and 27% for 6+ years.

They are more motivated by building connection and belonging (63%) than by sharing an activity or topic they love (37%).



*“They wrote a letter just pouring their heart out, saying how much this community meant to them. They said they felt lost and sad and lonely in the city until they found this group.”*

— Gabriel Ghiglione

# Consistent, Real-World Connection at Scale

They create connection consistently, with most hosting events multiple times per month (59% host 30+ annually).

They reach hundreds of people each year, with over half serving 100+ participants annually.



*“We have monthly dinners, monthly happy hours... there’s a lot of set programming people can rely on.”*

— Margie Jiang

# What Community Builders Need to Thrive

Growth is the top need, with 42% seeking help with marketing and outreach to expand their communities.

Financial support is critical, with 35% seeking funding to sustain and grow their work.

Access to space is a major barrier, with 24% needing affordable and consistent places to gather.

Builders are seeking connection themselves, with demand for local and national peer networks (37% combined).

There is strong demand for practical tools, with 21% seeking playbooks, training, and guidance.



*"The dream is to actually go national and create in every major city this community hub that's very wellness focused."*

— Hannah Goldstein

# Connected Cities Summit

Designing Connection as Civic Infrastructure

An invitation-only design studio for city leaders and place-based institutions

October 15-16, 2026

# Seattle

Hosted at the  
**National Nordic  
Museum**



- ■ ■ United States
- ■ ■ Chamber of
- ■ ■ Connection

# Programming Overview

January 2026

the bentway

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Toronto ON M5V  
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For more than 60 years, the area under Toronto's Gardiner Expressway was regarded as an obstacle to Toronto's flourishing waterfront (if it was regarded at all).

The Bentway was founded in 2018 by a group of urbanists who believed that the Expressway could be and do more for our city.

**Our mission:** To ignite the urban imagination.



**our story**



**The City of Toronto is blooming upwards, hugging tightly around the Expressway.**

**Today, more than 200,000 people reside next door to the Gardiner, in dense high-rise developments deficient in public space or cultural life.**

**Anchored under the Gardiner and guiding its complex future, we are transforming the highway from an obstacle to a hybrid opportunity.**

**opportunity**

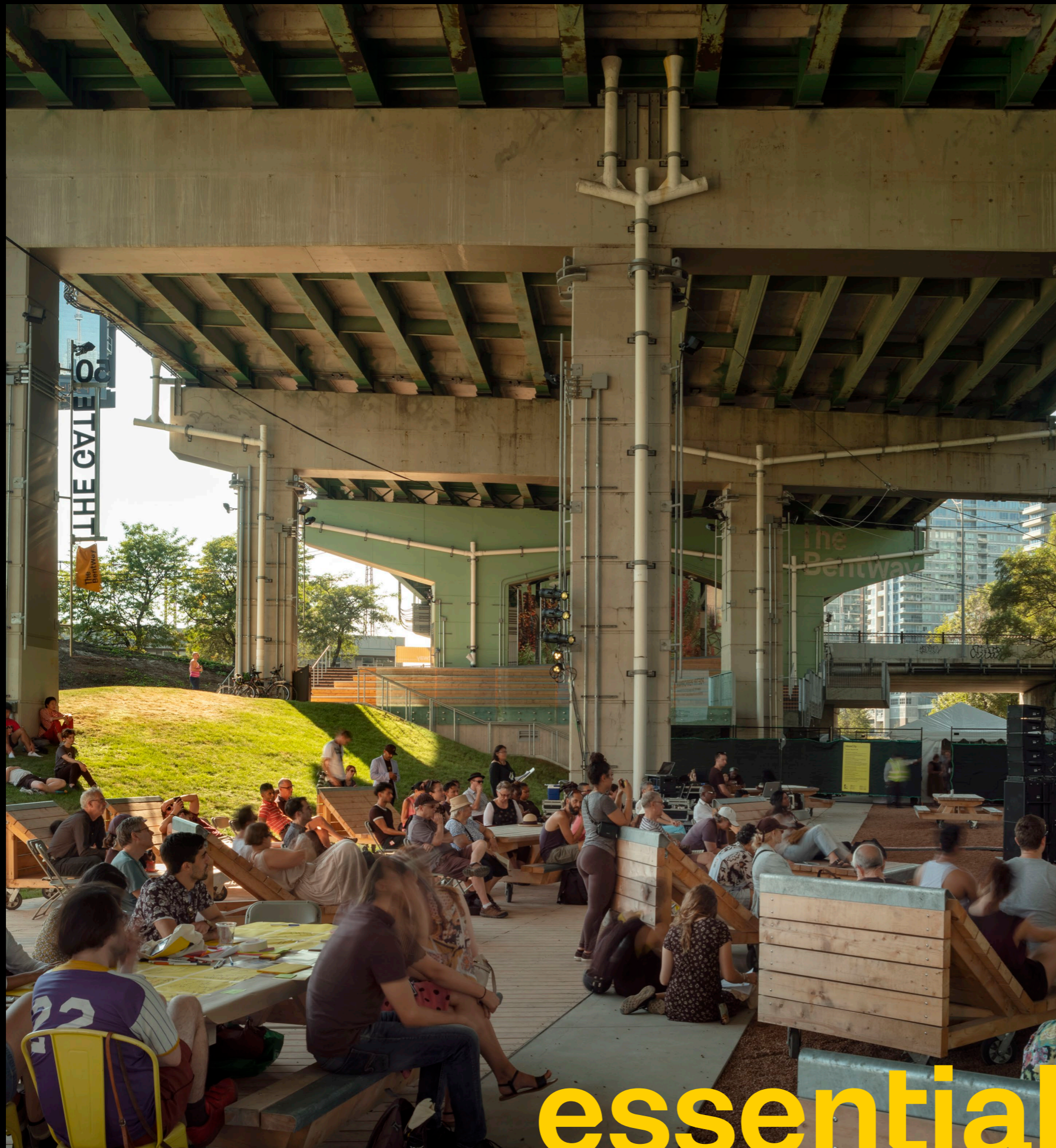


**The Bentway develops public urban spaces through the lens of hybridity and connectivity; it collaborates with artists, creatives, and communities to produce imaginative, catalytic works and programming; and it facilitates—and leads—a vibrant, inclusive conversation.**

**It is a new kind of civic and arts institution, one uniquely suited to address the challenges and opportunities of cities in the 21st century.**

**The Bentway seeks to transform physical and cultural landscapes, but above all, it seeks to transform the landscape of the imagination, expanding our collective understanding of who we are and what we can achieve together.**

**where we are today**



As Canada's first urban conservancy, The Bentway is charting new territory that many look to replicate. We are the caretaker to a growing network of urban parkland situated under and adjacent to The Gardiner.

Our spaces draw 250,000 attendees a year

We are working with local and provincial stakeholders to design and plan for further expansion of The Bentway.

**essential public space**

# programming pillars



## public art

We strive to be the city's foremost public art producer, nurturing artist voices that provoke and inspire, while revealing the city anew.



## recreation

We offer year-round recreation opportunities including our iconic Skate Trail which hosts ice-skating in winter and roller-skating in the warmer months.



## education

From workshops to after-school programs to Toronto District School Board visits, we create opportunities for learning about urban design, city building, and placemaking



**Active participants:** Programming that engages neighbours, communities, and the general public as active, primary participants in city-building (*not* as subjects)

**With creative voices:** Artists and creatives in dialogue with, and about, the city

**Co-Creation:** Co-creation with broader communities, championing diverse voices, perspectives and expertise

**As a Catalyst:** Work that lives a larger life beyond a single site, season, or city

**City as site, subject, and canvas**

**programming approach**

# Rx for Social Connection

Public space as a strategy to combat loneliness

the bentway

Gehl

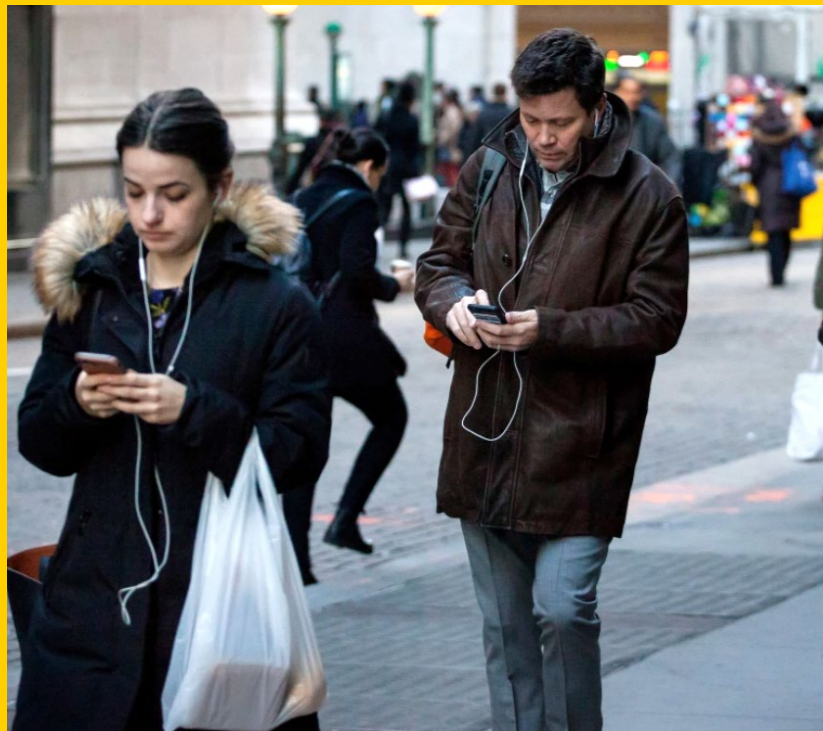
Dalla Lana  
School of Public Health

In 2024, **Toronto** was named the **loneliest city in Canada**, with 43% of Torontonians reporting that they never see their neighbours and 37% feeling lonely at least 3 times a week.

Source: Toronto Foundation's Vital Signs Report, 2023



# Loneliness is a global challenge. Why is it on the rise?



**Technological  
Advancement**



**Urban Design**



**Socio  
Demographic Shifts**



**Cultural and  
Civic Engagement**

“ **Social isolation and loneliness hurt our cardiovascular systems, our brains and our mental health; we’re at higher risk for dementia and heart attacks and strokes. This is because we’re biologically designed to be in relationships with other people. When we don’t have relationships, we don’t have life.**

”

- Kate Mulligan, Assistant Professor,  
University of Toronto  
Dalla Lana School of Public Health

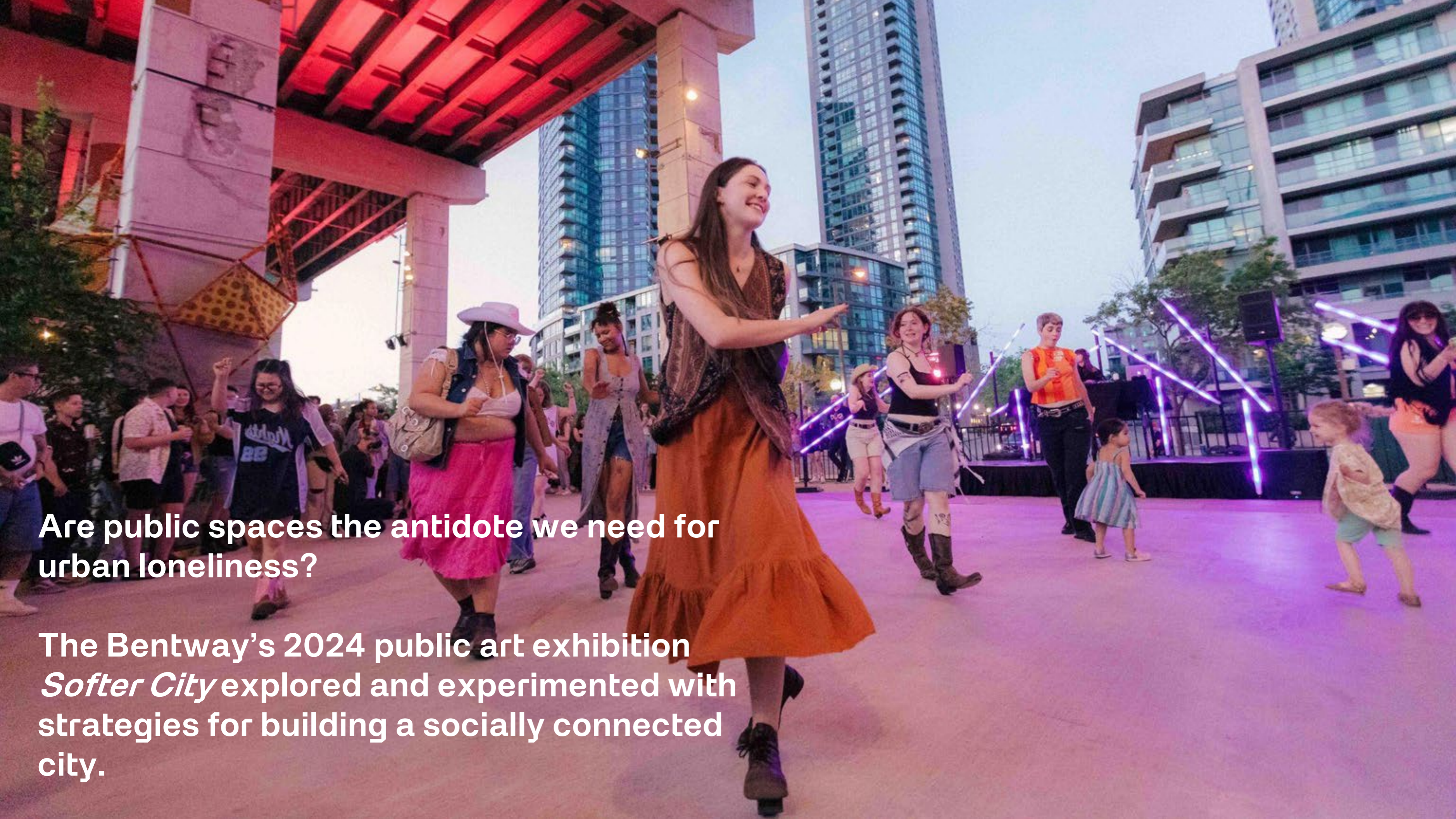












**Are public spaces the antidote we need for urban loneliness?**

**The Bentway's 2024 public art exhibition *Softer City* explored and experimented with strategies for building a socially connected city.**

# research methodologies



**Public Health Survey**  
led by Dr. Nadha Hassen & Dr. Kate Mulligan, Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto



**Public Life Observation Study**  
led by Gehl Studio

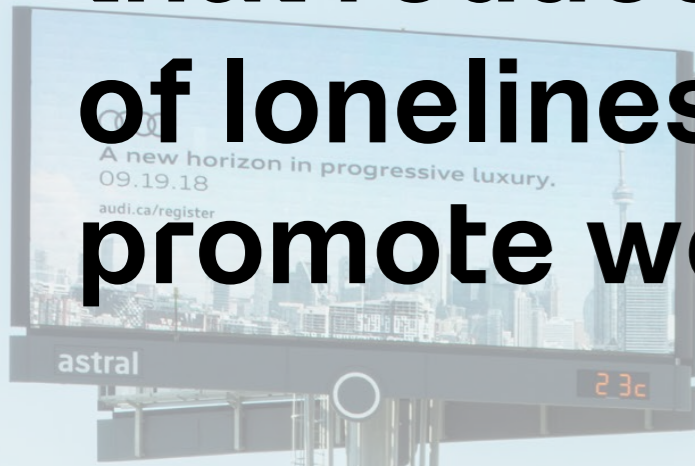


**Artistic Research**  
led by participating artists and designers



**Expert Interviews**  
led by the Bentway

**Public spaces are critical health tools that reduce feelings of loneliness and promote well-being.**



**A majority of respondents felt that The Bentway helped them feel healthier:**

**71%** reported that Bentway visits improved their physical health

**62%** reported that Bentway visits improved their mental health

**59%** reported that time at The Bentway enhanced their sense of belonging

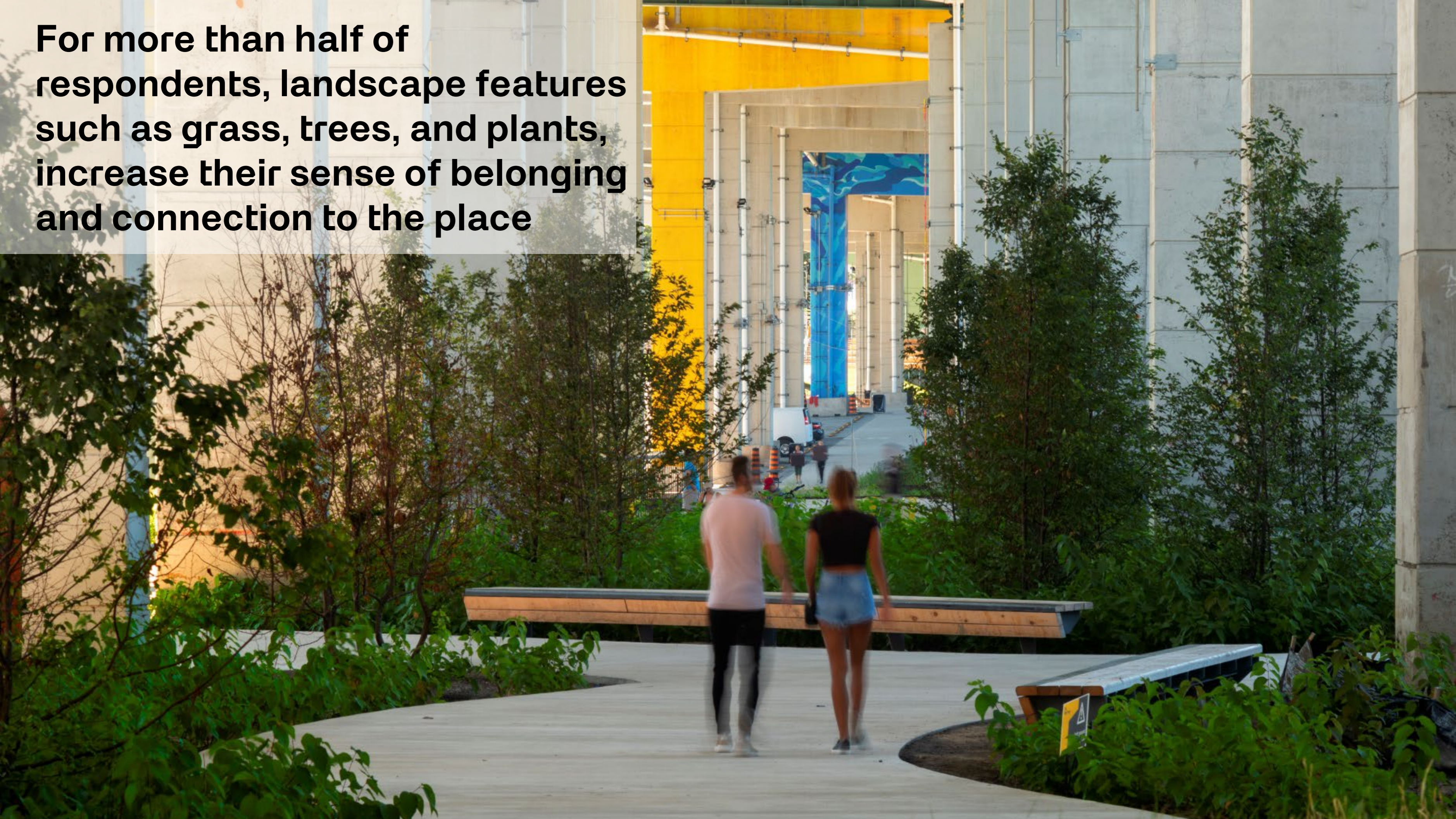
**64%** reported that time at The Bentway improved their sense of social connection



Where did  
ants  
79 go?  
a  
ntway  
story.

**Areas featuring interactive public art installations saw an average of 20% more social interactions compared to areas without**

**For more than half of respondents, landscape features such as grass, trees, and plants, increase their sense of belonging and connection to the place**



**71% of respondents said that public seating enhanced their meaningful interactions**





**Public spaces need to employ explicit and implicit invitations to signal “you matter” and promote social gathering**



**Participatory programming is a powerful tool for fostering social connections in public spaces**





**More than half of respondents shared that “other people” enhance their sense of community and belonging**





# Audience Q&A

# TrailNation Collaborative

The TrailNation™ Collaborative is a peer learning community from Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) where advocates, public leaders and professionals can come together to **share their experiences, their challenges and their strategies** for accelerating the pace of **equitable and connected trail** and active transportation infrastructure.

**Member Benefits:** Monthly webinars and virtual dialogues, dedicated Facebook group, regular newsletter, grant announcements, early warning system alerts,

[railstotrails.org/trailnation/#collaborative](https://railstotrails.org/trailnation/#collaborative) or  
[trailnation.org/#collaborative](https://trailnation.org/#collaborative)



**Join the Collaborative!**

