



PATH of Least Resistance



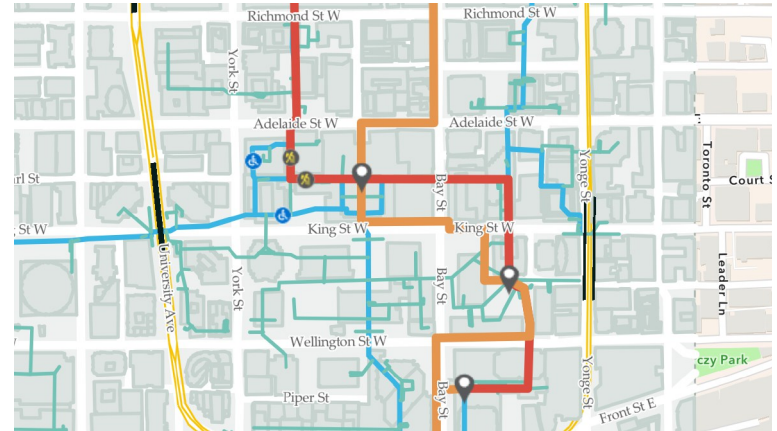
PATH of Least Resistance

Private Public Realms and the Spirit of Discovery

Andrew Robertson
April 9, 2022

Maps

[Official PATH Map](#) [Jane's Walk \(printable\)](#)



This route is about 3.5 km or 2¼ miles long and takes about 45 min. It is mostly flat and completely paved. Small detours can be made to avoid stairs.

Inclusion of a Different Sort?

Wayfinding is one of the more overlooked aspects of any good public transportation system. Including not just signage, wayfinding is also the architecture that guides you where you want to go, interior design that makes you feel comfortable you are on the right path, and landmarks so you can see your destination. Poor wayfinding can obscure a system and make it feel exclusionary, like it's "for experts". Does the PATH do this?

The PATH

Toronto's downtown is home to two separate "street" networks: the public grid and the private PATH. Since 1987, the City has helped co-ordinate PATH development ([Toronto, 2017](#)), but implementation of the PATH is still up to private building owners.

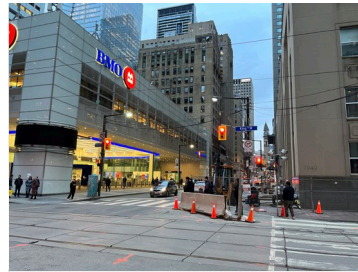
However, is this a bad thing? Streets get clogged with snow, and bad curb cuts, streetcar tracks, and the like offer all sorts of

obstacles to wheelchair or stroller users. The PATH has no weather, no gutters, and is wheelchair accessible.* However, being privately-owned, the PATH curates a certain type of clientele. It is famously labyrinthine. And unlike public streets, it has closing times.

So, is the PATH an accessible street network replacement encouraging office-dwellers to walk to work, or is it a private domain of shops masquerading as a pedestrian network?

*Some routes have an alternate accessible path.

Points of Interest



Construction can make already rough curb cuts near-impossible to traverse, not even considering the streetcar tracks.



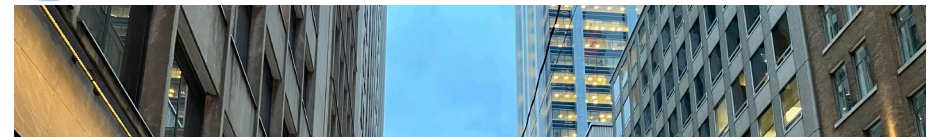
1 Union Station



...is Toronto's transit hub and a landmark, at Front St.

What is the importance of landmarks?

2 Old City Hall





...is another landmark, on Bay St.

Landmarks are important because they increase one's propensity to explore (Rioseco & Berczuk, 2017). This makes sense, after all: wouldn't you feel more likely to wander around a place if you knew could get back home at any time?

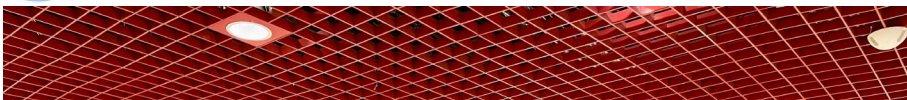
A friendly place should:

- Answer *where* you are and where you're *facing*
- Show you how to get to where you want to go
- Let you gain experience so navigation becomes *easier over time*, even in new places

(Foltz, 1998; Delamont, 2016)

Does the city do this? Is it friendly to discovery? Let's find out.

3 Sheraton Centre



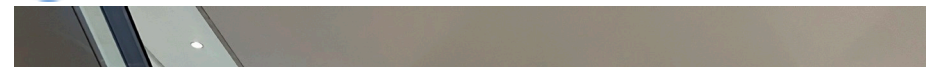
Original PATH Signage

Did you notice it? How useful does it look? Can you get to the next stop, First Canadian Place?

The original PATH wayfinding system was designed to be subtle because building owners were reluctant to tell people how to *leave*. (After all, if they left, how would they shop?) The problem is, this means the old signs have no useful marks of a friendly wayfinding system. Even orientation, provided by a compass rose, is not useful underground where there is no grid system (Delamont, 2016).

What are the implications of letting private owners design public walkways?

4 First Canadian Place





Eyes Underground

While private pathways have advantages like wheelchair accessibility and cleanliness, they are also subject to the whim of the owner of the building they are in.

Look around. Can you see any landmarks? What about Old City Hall? In controlled environments like these, navigation is at the whim of the developer, who can define landmarks as they see fit. If your conception of the city doesn't match theirs, that's too bad.

Also, the PATH empties fast, yet during the day, it sucks the life off of the street, creating a sort of two-tiered navigation system. This also creates a sort of protection racket, where buildings that are not on the PATH are not economically viable (Cui et al., 2013). The PATH was originally built to do this: as a series of ad-hoc basement connections, it was built for profit, not connection (Barker, 1986), and serves

mainly wealthy office workers (Cui et al., 2013). Closing times also fragment the network, causing it to change size depending on the time of day (Bélanger, 2007). This all serves to make the PATH feel like it's for insiders.

Did you see the new signage?

Only in some buildings, see if you can spot it!

5 Commerce Court



A private public square

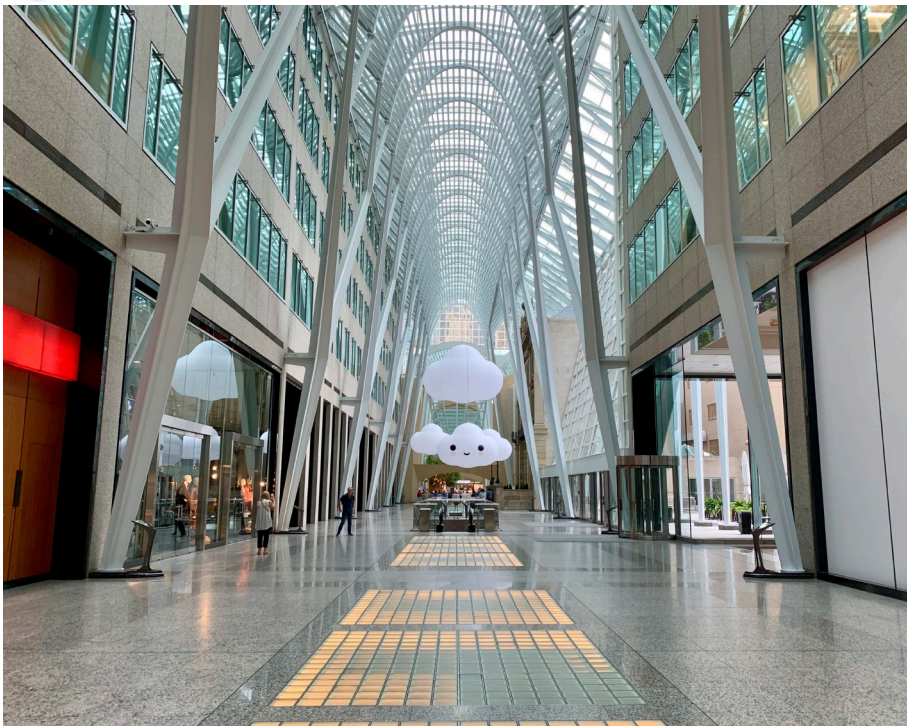
What is the importance of the PATH to the city?

The PATH matters to Toronto, though. Underground pedestrian networks like the

PATH were created to stop retail from fleeing to cheaper land in the fringes, which would leave the downtown dead (Cui et al., 2013).

Such a system can also promote walking (since it *feels* safe and is easy to access) (Mateo-Babiano, 2016), thus reducing car traffic and freeing up space on the subway. This can make the city more flexible and resilient (Cui & Lin, 2016). For children, who are not good at telling how safe a street is to cross (Meir et al., 2015), removing the street altogether solves the problem. The PATH allows families to walk safely together in an urban environment.

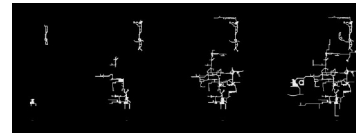
6 Brookfield Place



The PATH is popular with parents of young children for its easy access and

controlled atmosphere. **By being exclusive, is the PATH inclusive?**

Food(courts) for Thought



The PATH in 1917, 1971, 1993, & 2006 (Bélanger, 2007)

The PATH is important to the economic survival of downtown Toronto and may have prevented the city centre from losing foot traffic to suburban malls such as Yorkdale or Fairview. Its quiet, mostly-flat, climate-controlled interior allows for easy wheelchair, stroller, and suitcase

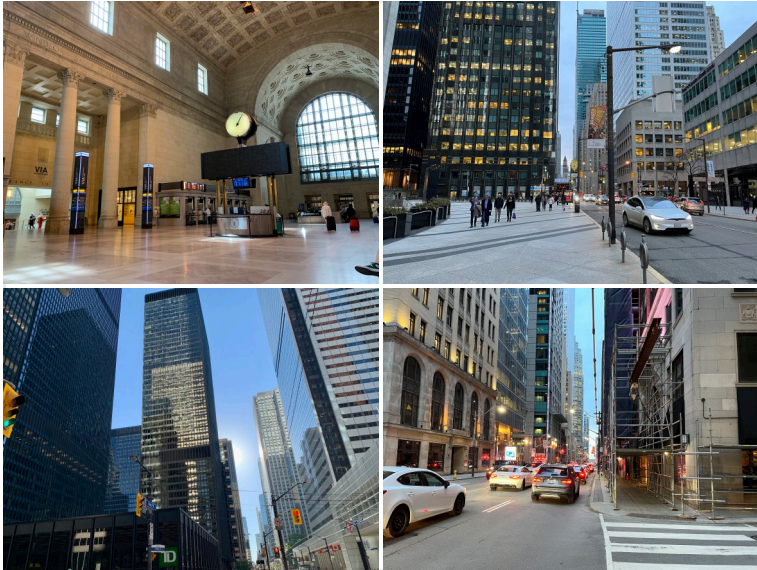
use, and encourages walking to and from the office. The lack of cars means parents can feel safe walking with their young children.



The PATH changes size outside of business hours (Bélanger, 2007)

Yet the use of the PATH requires giving the pedestrian public's right-of-way to private developers where access, navigation, landmarks, and even opening hours are at the whim of the building operator. The PATH also removes retail life from the street and disadvantages buildings that are not on the network, and its labyrinthine layout creates a feeling of needing to rely on "insider" knowledge to navigate, creating a feeling of **you don't belong here** for "outsiders".

So maybe the PATH's good-enough network is just enough PATH for Toronto.



Streets and spaces around the Financial District, the PATH's main home.

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PL8101 Diversity and Inclusion in City-Building

Jane's Walk

May 6, 7, & 8th, 2022 – Cities for people

Thanks also

to Nour Khalil for her interest and insight in this topic.