

# SMALL BUT MIGHTY COMMONS



Lana Hall

A design proposal named as one of the **Ontario Association of Architect's (OAA) SHIFT2025** challenge winners reimagines a community food bank's new building as an ecosystem of food production, community support, and social enterprise.

The project, "Parkdale Commons: a Living Food Bank," is an adaptive reuse proposal that will transform a former low-rise restaurant and event space at 5 Brock Avenue into the new home of the **Parkdale Community Food Bank (PCFB)**. The adapted space, designed by **LloydLondan Architects** partners **Luc Johnston** and

**Nancy Chao**, would add furnishings, community space, office space for both the food bank and its partner organizations, kitchen facilities and a rooftop greenhouse. When completed in the spring of 2026, the facility will welcome an estimated 15,000 food bank users annually.

Earlier this year, the PCFB scraped together enough money to purchase the site at 5 Brock Avenue, marking an end to operational concerns and frequent displacement it had experienced in recent years due to rising commercial rents and expanding community needs. When LloydLondan's Johnston and Chao came on the scene, they were faced with the design challenge of balancing limited non-profit funding with the need to incorporate a variety of services required by the

Parkdale community into the building.

The SHIFT2025 "Reshaping Communities" challenge allowed Johnston and Chao to "take some liberty" with the proposal for 5 Brock Avenue, which also includes plans for publicly accessible washroom and shower facilities, a restaurant space that could serve as a rotating platform for emerging chefs, rooftop gardens, and a light-filled "conservatory" that could serve as gathering space, particularly during extreme weather. The design also proposes construction of a cross-laminated timber silo atop the building that would contain a vertical hydroponic garden. A freight elevator would transport produce from the garden to lower levels of the silo, where sinks and sorting tables would

enable cleaning and preparation of the produce.

"When we first started working with the food bank, I think it was a bit of an eye-opener for us in terms of how they operate," Johnston tells *NRU*. "I think we thought, well, people drop off food and they redistribute it. But a lot of what they receive is money. So in many cases, they are making weekly purchases at Loblaws or Sobeys ... and they're just as susceptible to things like the bread price fixing scandal. The idea of bringing food production on site was kind of a fun idea to be like, 'Wow if they didn't have to buy lettuce from California, nice!'"

The PCFB redevelopment is one of 13 non-profit infrastructure projects across the GTA recently selected for

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Rendering showing an exterior view of the adaptive reuse design proposed for 5 Brock Avenue, which will be the new home of the Parkdale Community Food Bank. Chosen as one of six winning entries for the Ontario Association of Architect's (OAA) SHIFT2025 Challenge: Reshaping Communities, the design includes community space, office space for both the food bank and its partner organizations, kitchen facilities, and a rooftop greenhouse. Designed by LloydLondan Architects, the adaptive reuse proposal also includes accessible public washroom and shower facilities, a culinary incubator hub, and a silo that would contain a vertical hydroponic garden, allowing the food bank to grow food for its users on-site.

SOURCE: LLOYDLONDON ARCHITECTS



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funding by the **United Way of Greater Toronto** through its Expanding Community Space Grant program. The grant program has allocated \$2.125 million to a variety of projects ranging from new builds to retrofits of existing facilities.

The grant program's intention, says United Way Greater Toronto vice-president of community infrastructure **Ruth Crammond**, is to help non-profit organizations push back against higher rent prices and secure their own space. Research in the 2024 Essential Spaces Report, produced by the United Way in collaboration with **University of Toronto's** School of Cities and Infrastructure Institute,

revealed that 70 per cent of social service agencies in the GTA do not own real estate. With minimal rent control on commercial spaces, this leaves non-profit organizations at risk of displacement, much like the PCFB has experienced.

"We were getting so many calls from our agencies saying, 'You know, we're being displaced, this is being redeveloped,' [or] 'The landlord's increasing the rent and we can't stay,'" says Crammond. "As you can imagine, that's very vulnerable for those services and for the communities that they're serving."

She calls the PCFB adaptive reuse project "small but mighty,"

and says the United Way grant will help get the space "in good working order" for the community, which will benefit from a permanent food and resource hub.

"...We do know in the next number of years there are going to be a lot of new developments in Parkdale," says Crammond. "It's traditionally been home to very low-income people. And we worry about those people being displaced, but we also worry about their services being displaced."

SHIFT2025 challenge jurors praised Johnston and Chao's design for its practical foundations, as well as its reimagining of what a community food bank could do.

"In many ways, this could be one of the most real, most doable of SHIFT submissions on a scale that may be replicable elsewhere," reads one anonymous juror comment.

"Its strength lies in shifting

from a passive service model to a more interactive and engaging experience—one that seamlessly integrates urban agriculture and culinary arts, embracing the full cycle of food from production to the table. This approach is deeply inclusive and demonstrates a strong sense of empathy, particularly toward the most vulnerable members of the community," reads another.

For Johnston, it remains to be seen just how much of their proposed design will come to fruition within the food bank's redevelopment. Much of it depends on funding. But at the end of the day, he feels confident that at least some of the elements will come to life, and perhaps serve as an inspiration for similar community organizations.

"I think the hope is that as we work more with [the PCFB] and certain funding comes in, we can start to make [the proposal] a reality," he says. "I hope that down the road 10 years, we can keep the spirit of what we proposed, if not at a smaller scale." 🌱



Rendering showing an interior view of LloydLondon Architects' adaptive reuse design for 5 Brock Avenue, which will be the new home of the Parkdale Community Food Bank. The entry was chosen as one of six winning designs for the Ontario Association of Architects' (OAA) SHIFT2025 Challenge: Reshaping Communities. Earlier this week, the United Way of Greater Toronto announced it would be providing some funding for the community infrastructure project.

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SOURCE: OAA