



December 2020

# Evoking Wonder:

## Finding Inspiration Through the Library



# Table of Contents

|  |                  |
|--|------------------|
| <b><i>Introduction .....</i></b>   | <b><i>3</i></b>  |
| <b><i>What We Learned.....</i></b>   | <b><i>4</i></b>  |
| <b><i>Theme 1: Libraries are Catalysts for Student Development .....</i></b>                   | <b><i>4</i></b>  |
| <b><i>Theme 2: The Home of Conversations: Finding Inspiration Through Connection .....</i></b> | <b><i>7</i></b>  |
| <b><i>Theme 3: The Library as a Place of Opportunity.....</i></b>                              | <b><i>9</i></b>  |
| <b><i>Design Principles .....</i></b>  | <b><i>11</i></b> |
| <b><i>Design Checklist.....</i></b>  | <b><i>12</i></b> |
| <b><i>Personas .....</i></b>   | <b><i>14</i></b> |
| Eman .....   | 14               |
| Taylor.....  | 14               |
| Aaron.....   | 15               |
| Derrick .....  | 15               |
| <b><i>Limitations .....</i></b>  | <b><i>16</i></b> |
| <b><i>Conclusion .....</i></b>   | <b><i>16</i></b> |
| <b><i>Student Contributors .....</i></b>   | <b><i>17</i></b> |



# Introduction

As a central library in the UofT library system, Robarts Library is a key space that students frequently visit during their time at the university. In order to understand what students need and desire in library spaces, Robarts has partnered with the Innovation Hub to collect student stories on their experiences at this UofT Library. We asked:

*How do students use and experience Robarts Library, what do they need in a redesigned space, and how can the library better support them?*

In order to answer this question, we designed and delivered three group data-collection sessions. We received interest from over 380 students and selected 32 undergraduate and graduate students from diverse programs to participate in empathy-based focus groups. Our data was representative of a variety of identities, including domestic and international students, as well as the commuter population. The large quantity of responses was the first indicator of just how important libraries are to the UofT student population. In order to obtain the most genuine feedback, facilitators encouraged story-based discussion within these feedback sessions, addressing how students experience space and what they feel they need in a library space. In addition to these feedback sessions, we drew upon the Innovation Hub's bank of data from previous projects to supplement our findings.

# What We Learned

Through our analysis, we found that *libraries evoke a sense of wonder that inspires students to explore new possibilities*. This key finding can be broken down into three main themes. First, **Libraries are Catalysts for Student Development**; they allow students to find growth and inspiration in both the negative and positive moments of their student experience. Second, **Libraries are the Home of Conversations**; they facilitate the discourse between students and themselves, their work, as well as the many others around them, encouraging the development of a sense of wonder through these connections. Third, **Libraries are a Place of Opportunity**; libraries serve as the great equalizer for students and provide the fundamental toolkit that each student needs in order to thrive.

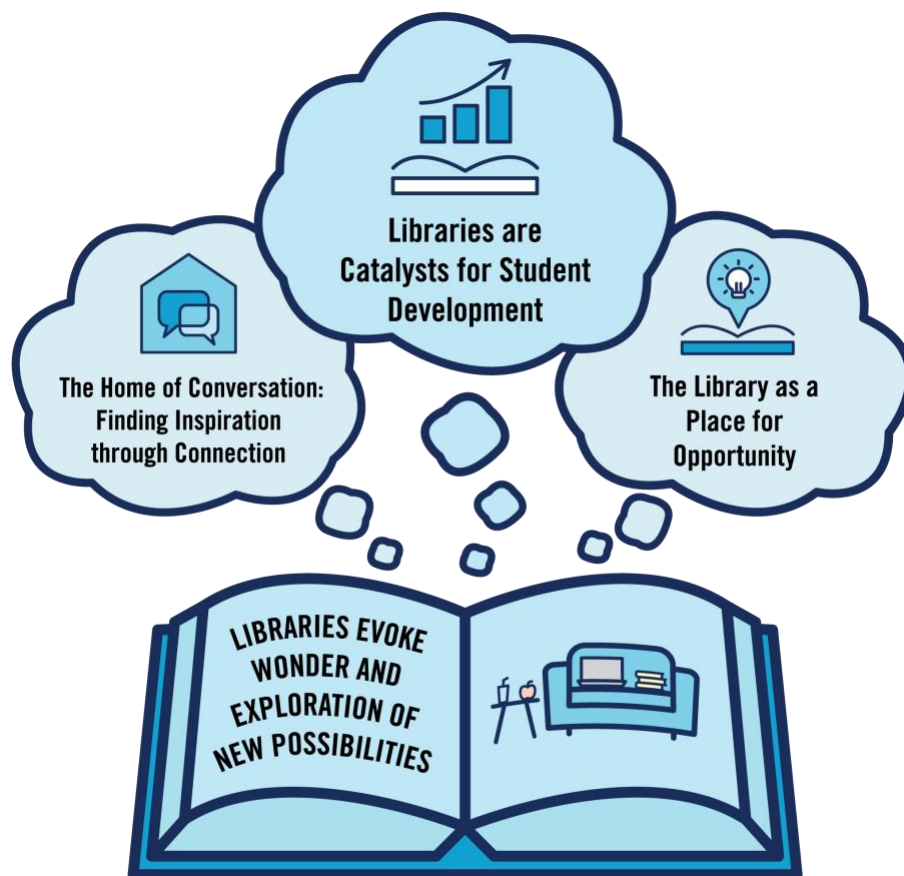


Figure 1. Visualization of themes

## Theme 1: Libraries are Catalysts for Student Development



In navigating the highs and lows of the university experience, students grow through the endless possibilities that the library awakens for them. The student experience is a culmination of moments; moments that can be intimate or communal, joyous or challenging, fleeting or perpetual. The library catalyzes the growth and wonder that students find in these moments. A student may find wonder in a sunny nook, engaged in sheet music, or in a high-energy group environment, working towards a summative project.

### Cultivating Joy

Students frequently recall the instants of joy throughout their experiences with the library. This may be a quiet morning in a sunny nook, or an encouraging sticky note found on the side of a desk. They reminisce on how the library instills magic in these instances and provides a space that nurtures and facilitates creativity and inspiration. The library becomes a space that evokes enjoyment, levity, and sentimentality that other environments, such as one's home or workspace, often don't provide.

*"I remember one time going into one of those study carrels. And someone had, I don't know when but, they left a post-it note... it's like 'you got this'"*

*"I went to the Trinity library. And I think it was snowy... And I came in, and it was very warm...I remember...being like, this is the way to start your morning. It's a nice, sunny room with wood, and [I was] feeling very ready to work."*

*"At Gerstein, I think maybe it was towards final season, but I really appreciated that they put out puzzles for us. I know it's like kind of cheesy, but [...] I would go and like stare at the puzzle for a little bit [...] It's just like everybody collectively worked on that puzzle. [...] it was a nice touch."*

Students need a space where even the small moments of joy can be adequately savored and the door to personal growth is comfortably open.

## Overcoming Setbacks

Challenging moments in students' academic journeys can strongly affect mental and emotional wellbeing. In recent years, challenges such as anxiety, imposter syndrome, and depression have become increasingly prevalent obstacles in the lives of students, and libraries are often the setting of the most challenging moments. However, libraries are also a vessel for growth in the moments when students feel most challenged by the student experience. Students find inspiration in a space that embraces multiple ideals of productivity and acknowledges the need for rest and respite. UofT is known for excellence, but this expectation of excellence can create immense pressure, overwhelm and a fear of failure. The library encourages student development by being a dependable space to focus, take breaks, and experience setbacks.

*"I'm also [a] commuter student, or I was, and so the library was just a dependable place that I could go to where I would have the things that I need. And I knew that I could go there and do the things that I need to do with purpose."*

*"I would go to the library between classes to study but like, also just to relax between classes, to fill up my water bottle or charge my phone."*

A library gives students the space where students, rather than feeling alone in their struggles, can find growth in them.



## Theme 2: The Home of Conversations: Finding Inspiration Through Connection



Students learn through dialogue with people and ideas during their time at UofT. Conversations in the library may take place with other students or staff, they may take place with knowledge or ideas, or they may be reflective in nature. Whether these conversations take place in solitude or in collaboration with others, the library provides an environment in which students can safely partake in discourse and feel part of something bigger, reinforcing their student identity and sense of belonging.

### Inward Conversations: Moments of Reflection

In many ways, the key function of the library is to push a student to independently explore a wide expanse of knowledge, and through that exploration, develop a sense of wonder and curiosity. A student in this library environment may discover new knowledge while browsing library shelves or become engrossed in what already sparks their creativity or inspires them. Library spaces encourage this exploration of possibilities by facilitating reflection on material, allowing moments of beauty, and encouraging students to drive their own academic journey.

*"I ended up digging around all of the shelves for different pieces for my instrument because there was so many options. I think I [spent] like an hour just looking at different pieces being like, 'I want to play this, I want to play this'. And that was really nice."*

*"On the [...] bottom level of the music library there's a row of cubicles and this skylight, I guess, and it was during the day, so it was very sunny and nice and warm. I ended up just staying there after grabbing a couple scores and going through them and also getting some work done as well. Ambience was really nice."*

## Learning Together in Solitude

In addition to being a place for academic discussion, the library encourages a student to engage with their work independently, but to also take inspiration from the passionate buzz that surrounds them, the knowledge that others are on the same journey. Though each student works on their own, they feel connected by their common path; they indicated in their feedback that this sense of solidarity and positive peer pressure was a primary motivation for them to visit the library. There is a sense of unity in the collective student pursuit of knowledge and education which pushes students to keep learning.

*“It was like 10 o'clock in the morning and everyone just sitting with their coffees at Robarts, and everyone was just silently staring at their computer. And there's this like, 'okay, we're all [struggling] together. It's okay' [...] There was some solidarity and like I'm not alone and crazy.”*

*“I like libraries that have a variety of noise levels, like they'll have dead silence spaces and then pretty quiet spaces and then louder spaces and let you work with your group. Because for me, the dead sound spaces sort of intimidate me and I feel so awkward”*

The experience of working alone while surrounded by members of one's own community is unique to the student experience, and is an environment which students find uniquely motivating.

## Conversations with Others: Finding Inspiration in Community

Since its beginning, the library has been not only a resource for knowledge, but a community hub in which like-minded individuals can connect and collaborate. Students use the library to casually relax and chat with friends, to book scheduled productive time for group projects, and to gain motivation from their peers. For students, the library is multifunctional. It accommodates group learning, both in formal spaces, like bookable study rooms, and informal, like groupings of armchairs and smaller tables.

*“I just think of [a group of classmates] staring at a whiteboard, like in a study room, or in the basement of the library [...] it's nice when we do group work there. Because when everybody just has their eyes on the whiteboard, you can feel the thinking in the air.”*

In addition to there being a place for academic discussion, it can also be a space where students may socialize with one another and take breaks from their academic work. A space which opens doors for students to exchange ideas and information will plant and nourish their natural wonder and inspire future possibilities.

*“They also have couches, more comfortable seating areas, where you can just sit there and relax and study which would make it more comfortable and allow people with different seating preferences to sit wherever they want. Or if someone wants to change positions so that they don't feel bored, they can renew or feel that they're rejuvenated.”*



## Theme 3: The Library as a Place of Opportunity



Before students can embrace the wealth of knowledge and possibility that libraries offer, they must have access to a fundamental toolkit which addresses their simplest human necessities. The library provides each student with this toolkit, supporting their fundamental needs and ensuring that each student feels that they are accounted for. Creating a sense of inclusion and belonging through accessibility within the library is crucial.

### A Hierarchy of Needs

Many students struggle to find meaning in their academic experience if they do not feel that their basic needs are being supported. The library is a space which fills this gap for all students: it provides access to food, water, electricity, washrooms, technology, and a space which is created with their success in mind. Each student has access to the same resources and feels included in the greater university community. Once they are supported holistically, students are more prepared to explore their sense of wonder.

*“There was a period last year for me where actually right before the pandemic began, my computer broke, and I have never been more dependent on a library in my life. [...] Every time I had free time, I’d go to the library just to have access to a computer. So yeah, that was really valuable.”*

*“I was usually [living in] shared accommodations, like with many roommates, so it’s kind of hard sometimes to study in a quiet space. So [...] I just go to the library and study and then go home.”*

*“I’m a commuter student so for me, being able to just grab a coffee at the library and then get my work done is just something that’s really important to me personally as well. Small thing, but it makes a difference.”*

*“There’s also just a real utility in giving access, like computers and stable internet connection, and that sort of thing. Because that’s clearly not the case for a lot of people I’m starting to realize. I think [in the library] there’s almost like an equal level of resources that people have access to, including textbooks and everything.”*

## Inclusivity Matters

The library, above all, should be a place of equity and accessibility. Students hold the desire to fit in and feel nurtured in study spaces, to have their unique identities acknowledged and respected. They need a space in which they feel safe, both physically and emotionally. A student that is working long hours wants to know that their belongings are safe if they briefly leave, and a student from a smaller program would like the same access to space as students from larger programs. Moreover, the University of Toronto population is incredibly diverse and home to many students of different experiences, ethnicities, religions, or disabilities. Ongoing consultation with the applicable student groups is a necessary step in the student space design process. It is through the provision of this care that students can find wonder and inspiration in their diverse experiences.

*"There were sort of a lot of informal ideas of this library as the social library...And I think just having those expectations, like the social norms is one thing. But I think it's also really helpful to have those more clearly laid out of rules of you know, this is the area where you actually have to be quiet, this area where a certain level of noise, maybe some food is allowed. So, having some sort of rules around that...is good."*

*"Bahen out of all the buildings on the engineering campus, it was best for group work, because they actually had nooks like round seating, where people just like could sit around a table and work. But there weren't many of them [...] A lot of it was also blocked off specifically for Eng Sci and Computer Science students so that was a little bit of a bummer."*

*"I also thought of something related to like different spatial accommodations. Robarts, I remember seeing them like with the big light boxes [SAD lamps], like for winter, and I think that's really helpful for a lot of people. And I don't think they have them in too many places. But especially for winter, it's really helpful to have."*

# Design Principles

Design principles describe the fundamental design values that emerge most prominently from the data. They provide a broader picture, rather than the specific details, of the elements that should be included in a space.



1. **Communication is Key:** Spaces should either implicitly or explicitly communicate their intended purpose to students. Communicating environmental norms, such as expected noise level and purpose, lets students feel comfortable in a space because they know what is expected of them.



2. **Communal Inspiration:** Spaces should be able to accommodate group work and separate it from other forms of work. Group spaces of a range of sizes encourage students to be inspired by one another and should be separated from silent study spaces, to ensure that a diverse variety of learning styles are supported.



3. **Choice is Important:** Studying is a process that often occurs over extremely long durations. As such, students prefer spaces that have several types of furniture, lighting, and study norms that can break up feelings of tedium and allow them to stay motivated and inspired.



4. **Honouring History:** UofT students are a part of the deep and ongoing history of the institution. Spaces honouring the experiences of those that came before them and those that have not been traditionally included can be uniquely inspiring to current students. Draw connection to the ongoing history of the university by motivating students through encouragement, belonging, and the normalization of failure, to ensure students don't feel overwhelmed or inadequate.



5. **Meeting Basic Needs:** Libraries are a microcosm of our worlds and provide us with the elementary needs that sustain us. Access to affordable food, water, and washrooms ensures that students have the resources to maintain healthy habits and overall wellbeing.



6. **Democratizing the Student Experience:** Students come from a diverse range of backgrounds with variable access to resources for success, namely technology. Library spaces can limit financial and technological barriers by providing access to affordable printing, plenty of outlets, a reliable internet connection, and access to public computers.



7. **Holistically Support the Student:** Libraries are places of tremendous functionality, but also of tremendous stress. Designate space for programming and resources that are designed for relief, lightheartedness, and mental support.



8. **Inclusivity Matters:** The library should be an inclusive and welcoming space that supports all students. The library is an important forum for issues of equity on campus. As such, we recommend further consideration of various student group needs, and honouring these voices in an ongoing manner.



9. **Home Away from Home:** While the primary function of a library may be for academic growth, UofT libraries also act as a respite from busy student life, a place to commune, and a place to wonder. Libraries can provide for students by maintaining comfortable temperatures, group spaces, and individual nooks to curl up with a book.

# Design Checklist

A design checklist suggests the practical framework with which a designer may implement design principles in their project. Rather than provide broad themes, the checklist outlines the specific details that fall under those themes and are practical rather than theoretical.



## 1. Communication is Key:

- ☐ Use signs to clearly communicate space norms (noise level, food toleration, formal study vs informal collaboration)
- ☐ Clearly delineate quiet zones and group spaces
- ☐ Provide an easy-to-use booking system that clearly shows room availability
- ☐ Sound-proof rooms meant for group work



## 2. Communal Inspiration:

- ☐ Provide co-working spaces with large tables and white boards for group work
- ☐ Provide informal group areas for students to be visible and connect
- ☐ Open study spaces should promote student visibility in order to harness the motivational effects of positive peer pressure



## 3. Choice is Important:

- ☐ Provide students with spaces for independent learning and reflection, such as study nooks, for relaxation, and for intense focus
- ☐ Provide multiple spatial accommodations and seating arrangements to suit different styles of learning
- ☐ Include furniture for students using the library for non-studying purposes



## 4. Honouring History:

- ☐ Include media around the library which honours different identities and historical figures
- ☐ Name segments of the space after historical figures or important places



## 5. Meeting Basic Needs:

- ☐ Provide access to affordable food and drink, or make sure that these options are nearby
- ☐ Provide a dedicated space for students to eat and heat up food
- ☐ Use accessible and space-efficient sources (e.g., coffee vending machines)
- ☐ Provide filtered water fountains on every floor



## 6. Democratize the Student Experience:

- ☐ Provide access to computers and printers
- ☐ Provide access to strong Wi-Fi
- ☐ Provide easy to access outlets, preferably at every workstation
- ☐ Provide access to technology that services students with disabilities, such as voice-to-text
- ☐ Provide access to affordable printing/scanning/photocopying services



### 7. Holistically Support the Student:

- ☐ Designate space for stress relief programming
- ☐ Provide the opportunity for students to support one another with message boards (physical or digital) for encouraging notes and experience sharing
- ☐ Provide space for embedded counselors



### 8. Inclusivity Matters:

- ☐ Ongoing consultation with student groups (First Nations House, Students for Barrier Free Access, Black Students' Association, Family Care Office, etc) about how their identities and needs can be included
- ☐ Consider indigenous identities, racial and religious identities, students with disabilities or care-giving responsibilities
- ☐ In consultations, ask about items such as space names or artwork that can represent certain identities
- ☐ Include accessible, gender-neutral, and family-friendly washrooms



### 9. Home Away from Home:

- ☐ Maintain comfortable temperatures (warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer).
- ☐ Consider adding wood furniture for a natural, cozy ambiance
- ☐ Use durable materials that can be easily cleaned
- ☐ Offer comfortable seating for groups
- ☐ Offer comfortable individual seating that can be used for long periods of time
- ☐ Consider including plant life, sun lamps, and utilizing natural lighting whenever possible

# Personas

Personas are fictional representations of the University of Toronto students that we encountered in our feedback sessions. They are useful in understanding and contextualizing the needs and desires of the diverse student body.



## Eman

3<sup>rd</sup> Year Undergraduate Student  
Life Science

I'm a 3<sup>rd</sup> year Life sci student. I live at home in Richmond Hill with my family. I work part-time for a student-run design practice on campus. I'm pretty shy and don't socialize very much, so studying and working are what I do with most of my time.

I would like to be able to work and study at home, but I have a big family and I don't get much privacy. There's always noise in the background during my work meetings or study sessions and this creates a lot of stress. I leave early in the morning to get to campus and prefer to spend the day there, since my commute is too long to keep going home. I sometimes struggle to find places to rest or eat, or places that are quiet enough for me to be in meetings but not so quiet that I can't speak out loud. When I'm studying, I like to be around others as it helps me stay on track and feel motivated. Sometimes as a break, I just want to kick back and open up Netflix, but it feels inappropriate in most library spaces. There are spots in the library that would be perfect for me, but they're blocked off to students from other programs.



## Taylor

2<sup>nd</sup> Year MA Candidate  
Visual Arts

I'm a 2<sup>nd</sup> year MA candidate for Visual Arts. I live in an apartment downtown Toronto by myself. I love my apartment so much; aesthetics are very important to me, especially since right now I'm deep into writing my thesis and use my environment to motivate me. I wake up early in the morning, make a strong, black coffee, and study in the warm light of my study lamp until the sun comes up. Once it's out, I head over to the library to spend the rest of my day there, since I don't like to spend all day cooped up in my apartment alone.

The library has been helpful for me while I write my thesis; I use it mostly as an office space because my graduate program doesn't provide me with my own. I love spending hours upon hours in the library, especially during the winter when I can look out the big windows and watch the snow fall during my study breaks. I always do my best work when I'm in a space that creatively inspires me. Sometimes it bothers me when people are being rowdy or leaving their food out, or when the temperature in the library gets too chilly and I have to find a warmer place to sit. Once I get settled in, I really hate having to move spots.





## Aaron

2<sup>nd</sup> Year PhD Candidate  
Engineering

I'm a 2<sup>nd</sup> year PhD candidate in Engineering. I live in a large house on the edge of campus that I share with 3 other students and couldn't love it more. I'm an extremely social person and participate in a ton of extracurricular activities on campus, and I'm always looking to join more. I really like to feel immersed in the University of Toronto community since I'm so far from my own hometown and miss the sense of community there.

I do a lot of collaborative work in my program and find it difficult to find spaces that accommodate my learning and communication style. I can get loud in group settings, so I try to find group study rooms that are separate from the other study spaces, but I find the bookings fill up weeks in advance. Even when we do manage to book one, I still get complaints from other students about how noisy we are being. I just don't think I could accomplish the same quality of work if I have to monitor my volume, so I need a space where I don't have to do that. It's also important that I am close to a washroom due to a chronic health condition, so that really limits the spaces that work for me.



## Derrick

4<sup>th</sup> Year Undergraduate  
Music

I'm a 4<sup>th</sup> year undergraduate student in the Music department. I live at home with my family in a small apartment and share a bedroom with my brother. I don't have much money and haven't been able to afford a lot of the things that I need for school, like textbooks or a new laptop. I spend a lot of time caring for my younger siblings, so I do not work. I like to use the library as a space to escape and focus on my schoolwork, which I am very passionate about and consider to be my entire life. I need a quiet space where I can be alone with my thoughts and my work.

The library gives me access to a computer and internet connection, so it's where I do most of my work. I would love a place in the library to meditate, since I easily get anxious and often need time to reflect and breathe in a place where I won't feel judged. I can't work very well when I'm hungry, so a place to eat that is clean and has a place where I can warm up my food is important to me.



## Limitations

While the conclusions provided within this report will support the design of library spaces moving forward, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the research. Although our methods allowed for in-depth discussion with UofT students, our sample size of 32 cannot be assumed to be representative of the individual needs of the entire student body. We worked to select students of many identities to participate in our feedback sessions, but we acknowledge that not all identities may have been represented. In this regard and given our finding concerning how important the library is for issues of equity on campus, we recommend further consideration of various student group needs, such as Accessibility Services, First Nations House, and the Black Students Association.

We included a wide range of students in our sample. However, graduate level students were slightly over-represented. It is likely that students at the graduate level have different needs from library spaces when compared to undergraduate students. It is possible that the graduate student experience has had an undue influence on our conclusions. We aimed to counteract this effect by including a third feedback session comprised entirely of undergraduate students. During the design process, consult with student governing organizations, such as the Commuter Students Association, Graduate Students Association, and Undergraduate Students Association to ensure representation of all academic needs.



## Conclusion

This project provided great insight into what students value in library spaces. Overarchingly, we found that students need a space that inspires them to explore the breadth of possibilities available to them. This need is best represented by three themes: *Libraries as Catalysts for Student Development*, *The Home of Conversations*, and *The Library as a Place of Opportunity*. These themes highlight the need for a sense of wonder in the student experience, awakened by libraries, to help students realize and achieve their potential. Future adaptations of space redesign may benefit from focusing on ensuring students feel a sense of connection, comfort, flexibility, and nourishment in their learning environments.

# Student Contributors

**Philippa Gosine, Senior Research Assistant, Ph.D., Biomedical Engineering**  
**Mac Morgan, Design Research Team Lead, Bachelor of Science, Psychology**  
**Anshika Seth, Data Analysis Researcher, Bachelor of Science**  
**Manaal Mirza, Data Analysis Researcher, Bachelor of Information**

## Designed by:

**Gianina Ramos, Project Assistant & Communications Specialist, Master of Information, UX Design**  
**Cody Foo, Digital Storyteller, Master of Information, UX Design**

For more information, or to work with the Innovation Hub,  
please contact Julia Smeed at [julia.smeed@utoronto.ca](mailto:julia.smeed@utoronto.ca) or  
416-978-8619, or visit our blog at [uoft.me/innovationhub](http://uoft.me/innovationhub)

Imagery provided by the UofT Digital Media Bank  
and the Innovation Hub.

