

Inside Regent Park: Toronto's test case for public-private gentrification

Once notorious for bedbugs and crime, the Regent Park social housing development has been transformed with a \$1bn revitalisation – and more than a few luxury apartments. But has it managed to avoid social cleansing?

by David Hayes, The Guardian, 8 December 2016



Children playing in Regent Park in 2012.

Paintbox Bistro is a typical modern restaurant: high ceilings, framed art and hand-built wooden tables, serving everything from snacks to wraps to flank steak by a chef who did time in trendy Toronto eateries. It's a description that could apply to many of the restaurants that regularly pop up (and back down) throughout Canada's foodie capital. Except Paintbox Bistro has a twist: it is located in what used to be the city's roughest neighbourhood, Regent Park.

A 69-acre housing project known for bedbugs and crime, Regent Park became especially notorious in 2005, when a member of the Point Blank Soulijahs gang – an offshoot of the Regent Park Crew – shot dead a 15-year-old bystander near the Eaton Centre, the biggest mall in the downtown core. The killing shocked Toronto; several years later, in 2012, fighting between the gang's descendants, the Sic Thugz, led to another weekend shootout.

Visit now, however, and the area is unrecognisable: a \$1bn revitalisation project has transformed it into a mix of subsidised housing, condominium apartments, retail shops and community amenities. Paintbox itself, a certified social enterprise, trains and employs local people who face barriers to employment, many of whom live at or below the poverty line.

“It took us five years to refine the model,” says Chris Klugman from Paintbox Bistro. “Now we have about half our staff who fit our mission, working alongside experienced professionals attracted to Paintbox because they share our social conscience.”

Indeed, as Regent Park attempts to shrug off its violent reputation by integrating upmarket living with public housing, it has attracted global attention as a kind of socio-economic experiment in public-private gentrification. For better or worse, this one-time crime haven in Toronto has become a test: can you regenerate social housing without resorting to social cleansing?

The experiment



A policeman in Regent Park looks for a suspect in a shooting on June 12, 1975.

Nobody doubts that this was a badly needed intervention in a troubled neighbourhood.

Although well-intentioned, the designers of Regent Park clearly didn't realise that crime – gang-related robberies, drug deals and shootings – would flourish in the many dark, quiet corners, where it was difficult for police and city services to access.

Nor were gangs the area's only problem. The old housing stock was crumbling, and Toronto Community Housing Corp (TCHC), the city-owned non-profit social housing provider, couldn't afford to repair or replace it.

In other cities around the world, the pattern in such situations has become predictable: private developers are allowed to buy the public housing sites, evict low-income tenants, blow up the old buildings and build mostly new luxury apartments that the original tenants can't possibly afford. In London, the most famous recent example is the Heygate Estate, in Elephant and Castle, where the council housing was demolished and low-income tenants were "decanted" to sites on the outskirts of the capital.

Similarly, in the US, legislation under the Clinton administration in the 1990s led to the destruction of public housing complexes that displaced tens of thousands. Regent Park aimed to be different. TCHC partnered with the Daniels Corporation, a developer of condos and rental buildings known to have a social conscience. The old buildings are being torn down and replaced by towers and townhouses – a total of 7,500 units by 2020. As in other developments, there is a mix of subsidised and affordable housing, as well as condo apartments. Sales of the latter underwrite the former.

"Neighbourhoods in downtown Toronto would typically be mixed-income and made up of single-family homes, condos, rental apartment buildings and social housing," says Mitchell Cohen, president of Daniels Corp, whose roots are in co-op housing. When asked about the split, he says, "A community of nothing but social housing is not normal."

So far, perhaps, so typical. But TCHC also insisted on a unique "right of return" policy. Every former tenant was given a contract which guarantees that, once the new TCHC buildings are completed, they can return to the same size of unit they'd vacated, with rent calculated the same way.

Furthermore, when consultants suggested renaming Regent Park to avoid the stigma, and locating the marketing suite for the new apartments off-site so that well-heeled condo buyers wouldn't have to venture into a neighbourhood with so dangerous a reputation, Cohen, who felt the only way to succeed was to embrace the history of Regent Park, dismissed both ideas.

Instead, the presentation centre was located in the heart of Regent Park – and designed for double duty as a de facto community centre. There is a sprawling six-acre park, plus three acres of athletic grounds (hockey rink, basketball court, soccer/cricket pitch and running track) as well as the Regent Park Aquatic Centre, a

modernist gem with screens so that, at designated times, Muslim women can swim privately from men.

There is also a multi-use arts and culture centre, and the Centre for Community Learning and Development, an educational partnership among Daniels, TCHC, the provincial government and three postsecondary institutions.

Another new tactic was to start the revitalisation along a major street, with the aim of attracting commercial tenants. Today there is a supermarket, bank, pharmacy, coffee shop and telecom provider, with more to come. All are amenities that are essential to a functioning community, yet are frequently overlooked in top-down developments.

The whole project was a gamble on two fronts. Would people who could afford luxury apartments want to live next door to social housing? And would lower-income residents continue to feel included and welcome in what had been their home for decades?

The reaction

Muhammad Muzharul Haque, Mary Henkelman and Marie-Lauren Gregoire are sitting at a table in Paintbox bistro. Each is a resident of Regent Park, but each also got here through a different route.

Gregoire, a communications professional, had been a renter before qualifying for a Daniels programme to increase her down payment through an interest-free, payment-free loan. She used it to buy a condo in Regent Park.

"There's a Neighbourhood Association that's forming," she says excitedly.

"That's me," says Henkelman, a retired university administrator who lives in a condo above Paintbox.

"Ohhh, it's *you*," exclaims Gregoire, happy to have made the connection.

Haque, meanwhile, is an artist and father of two from Bangladesh who has lived in subsidised housing in Regent Park for 15 years. He tells Henkelman that his work is on display around the community, including outside the elevators in her condo. "Ohhh," she replies. "I knew the art was by local artists but I didn't know who did the ones in my building. I'm so pleased to meet you."

When Gregoire leaves for work, we visit Henkelman's 16th-floor condo, then cross the street to Haque's apartment. It's social housing, but from the outside looks virtually indistinguishable from the nearby condos, and inside he enjoys a brand-new three-bedroom unit with loft-like ceilings.

All three mention a few problems, but nothing, they say, you might not encounter renting or buying elsewhere in any big city.

Still, the project hasn't been without its challenges. Some long-time social housing residents were upset that a random draw for new units, which was pitched as the fairest system for everyone, didn't give precedence to their history in the community.

And, although every resident of TCHC housing was guaranteed a right of return, in the early years most had to be relocated off-site until their new units were built. This often stretched on for years, especially when construction slowed after the 2008 global financial collapse. All moving expenses were covered by TCHC, but many residents were forced to move to unfamiliar, far-flung parts of the city. Not surprisingly, some chose not to suffer yet another move, and have stayed in their new neighbourhoods.

Nor are all of the replacement units on the Regent Park site proper. At the beginning of the regeneration, Daniels built three off-site buildings with a mix of TCHC and affordable renting units, located a roughly 20-minute walk away from Regent Park. (Some of the tenants who were relocated to the three off-site buildings have chosen to stay there.)



Regent Park with the revitalization well underway.

Martine August, an urban planner and post-doctoral fellow at Rutgers University, conducted interviews with Regent Park residents from 2008 to 2012, including those in the process of relocation and those who had moved into their new units. Although no one liked the crime or disrepair of the old Regent Park, she found, they valued their community.

"The narrative that Regent Park was physically isolated as a lower-income community and needed the social influence of middle-class neighbours was overblown," says August. "A major theme in my research was people saying the strength of their community was huge."

She points out that this seemed to be because of, not in spite of, nearly 60% of the original Regent Park population having been born outside Canada.

Contrary to the premise that "socially mixed" redevelopment benefits low-income tenants – for example, by erasing the stigmatisation of living in a rough area like

Regent Park – August says a review of nearly 200 international studies shows that's not always the case.

"The stigmatisation moves from the broader scale of the neighbourhood to the more fine-grained scale of individual buildings and people," she says. "Continuing to be poor, a person of colour, a public housing tenant, still creates stigma in Regent Park. Outsiders may not be able to tell which building is which, but people said to me that when they walked out of their buildings, those living in condos knew who they were."

Adding richer residents to the mix has another effect, she argues: "The TCHC tenants also had a history of political organising that is often destabilised when people who have more political clout and more social power get involved in neighbourhood associations."

The future

At this point, it's too early to tell if that bleak picture will hold. There's a healthy anti-poverty movement in Toronto, and Regent Park's politically savvy activists, who have agitated for their rights at City Hall, are not likely to be intimidated by middle-class condo owners. Besides, in the absence of government funding for social housing, public-private partnerships seem like the only solution to regenerating areas like Regent Park that badly need it.

Jennifer Keesmaat, Toronto's chief planner, says she is a supporter of the Regent Park regeneration but warns against glorifying it.

"Positioning public-private partnerships as a kind of golden goose is misleading," she says. "This is a model that only works when there is a really hot market and you have properties that are in desirable areas. You also can't think that no public money will be required. The city provided funding for Regent Park, and by creatively identifying specific programmes, the developer was able to tap into some provincial and federal funding."

"You will create a vibrant neighbourhood and build better housing for existing tenants, and those are important and worthy goals, but as a broader financial model it won't always work."

For now, as the redevelopment continues, things appear to be just about holding together. The first building quickly sold out, as have the others since.

"We thought it was a worthy experiment," says Kate Sellar. A human rights lawyer who works for Legal Aid along with her husband, Sellar bought a condo in the first building that opened in Regent Park in 2010.

With their family growing, the Sellars sold their condo in 2013 and bought a three-bedroom townhouse, also in Regent Park, with a small backyard and a detached garage. Their young daughter goes to the local City of Toronto day care and their son is in one of the two elementary schools in the neighbourhood. In both cases,

Sellar's kids mix with children from a variety of cultural, social and economic backgrounds. For her, at least, it is an example of the best of Toronto: a mixed community in one of the most diverse cities in the world.

"We knew that if it was going to work you'd need people to buy the first condos, to take a leap of faith," she says. "I haven't regretted that decision for a second."