Regent Park

a story of collective impact

How a handful of individuals with a strong vision drove a process of massive transformation that changed an entire Toronto neighbourhood





Introduction

Long before shovels touched the ground, a core group of Regent Park residents began to discuss the need for change in their neighbourhood. With a clear understanding of why their community mattered, they initiated a major outreach effort, engaging urban thinkers, planners, and local government representatives. Extensive consultation resulted in guiding principles and a shared vision for how to build upon and strengthen the social, cultural, and economic fabric of the neighbourhood. Supported by community service agencies and faith groups, and financed by a unique public-private partnership, Regent Park is now one of the largest urban renewal projects in the world.

The story of Regent Park is an example of how the commitment of key players from different sectors, to a common agenda, can result in a collective impact of positive "city building."



photo courtesy of Daniels Corporation



1972

photo courtesy Toronto Archives: series 1465, item 5



2012

photo courtesy of Daniels Corporation

The wilting of the garden city and the need for renewal

At one time, Regent Park was called Cabbagetown — a name that has since been claimed by the neighbourhood to its direct north. Author Hugh Garner famously called it the "largest Anglo-Saxon slum in North America." His 1950 novel, *Cabbagetown*, was set here amidst the decaying Victorian buildings and shacks, many with dirt floors, poor insulation, and even worse plumbing.

In 1948, squalid conditions spurred city officials into action and the 69-acre Regent Park plan was conceived. It was based on "Garden City" planning principles pioneered in the United Kingdom and considered, at the time, to be one of the best strategies for urban renewal.

The area was bulldozed and with a nod to two of its original streets — Regent Street and Park Street — was renamed Regent Park. Financed by the federal government, new apartments and townhomes were built with indoor plumbing connected to a new sewer system. The transformation was captured in the 1953 National Film Board of Canada's short docudrama, *Farewell Oak Street*, which contrasts scenes of urban blight with clean, bright, postwar modernism.

Initial reports indicated that the health and morale of the neighbourhood were better, but by the late 1960s, Toronto's first big experiment in public housing started to show signs of stress. The squat brick buildings with small windows and enclosed balconies were set back from the streets. The lack of roads and the disconnect to surrounding



neighbourhoods discouraged casual wandering and neighbourhood visits. The entire area became a place where many passed by but few ventured through.

It became apparent that a community consisting entirely of low-income tenants encouraged economic marginalization. Residents came to understand this, as did a new generation of planning experts influenced by the work of writer and activist Jane Jacobs. By the early 1970s, there were many discussions about how

to improve Regent Park, while media reports — some fair, many sensational — were pointing to problems in the neighbourhood and furthering its reputation as an isolated no-go zone.

Though the buildings were aging and the urban design left much to be desired, a strong sense of community always existed in Regent Park. Innovative ideas about revitalization, often generated by the residents, continued to surface. Repeatedly, plans were drawn up and subsequently shelved. Then in 1995, a perfect storm began to brew that set the stage for the revitalization we see today.

Our story begins with a group of Regent Park residents who share a deep commitment and desire to improve their neighbourhood

"I liked the neighbourhood," says Sheila Reid, who lived in Regent Park from 1971 until 2011. "There were lots of people and many different nationalities." Like many residents, Reid speaks fondly of the sense of community but not its physical design.

Another early and vocal advocate for change, Diane MacLean, moved into Regent Park in 1986. As her family expanded she moved into larger units, but always stayed in the neighbourhood. Of being pregnant and living in a three-storey walkup, she remarks, "It was hell when you're pregnant with a toddler and stroller and groceries. We went to each landing and rested." It's a small detail but one that points to the problems of the old buildings that made day-to-day life difficult.

In 1995, Reid and MacLean were among a group of residents who took the lead to organize meetings which were chaired by former mayor John Sewell. The meetings brought residents together with representatives of the Metro Toronto Housing Authority and provincial Ministry of Housing to talk, once again, about the future of Regent Park. Getting both levels of government in the same room with residents was a major achievement.

MacLean points out how organizers went to great lengths to be open and inclusive. "Everyone was invited. Meetings were done in first languages and we had child care and food to make it easier for people to come out."

Not all involved were residents. Some simply had a keen desire to see their city improve. Ken Hare, a master's student in planning at York University, became involved in a variety of ways from setting up chairs at meetings to talking with residents.

"Over time we developed a pretty extensive communication strategy," says Hare. "We printed newsletters in half a dozen languages, sometimes knocking on doors to bring people out." These open meetings evolved into sessions with architects and planners and included simultaneous "whispering translations."

Liz Greaves, who in the 1990s ran Dixon Hall — a multi-service agency that services Regent Park and that was the first community agency to sit at the redevelopment committee table — says it was the perseverance of a few people over the years that ultimately made this billion-dollar project possible. "With so much of Regent Park redeveloped today and cranes in the air, individual efforts can seem insignificant. But it was the local residents who were dreaming, planning, talking, and pushing."

The people, partnerships, and principles behind collective impact in Regent Park:

- → A dedicated group of residents, with a desire for change, catalyze a movement to revitalize their neighbourhood
- → Inclusive, continuous communication and consultation between residents and key stakeholders, results in a shared vision and guiding principles
- → Unwavering support from a variety of individuals and organizations, including residents, urban thinkers, local government representatives, and Toronto Community Housing
- → Creation of the Social Development Plan: a blueprint to support social inclusion and cohesion through local employment, community economic development, and resident participation
- → Cooperation among service agencies working in the area coupled with their ability to mitigate fear and embrace change for the greater good of the community
- → A unique public-private partnership, between the city and the developer, fosters ongoing cross-sector commitment that extends to community service agencies and businesses
- → Reconnecting the neighbourhood to the fabric of the city by seamlessly mixing uses, architectural styles, and income levels within the redeveloped community



Extensive consultation between residents and stakeholders results in a shared vision and guiding principles

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, political changes threatened to derail revitalization efforts in Regent Park. These included the amalgamation of decentralized municipal governments into a new, larger City of Toronto, and the downloading of responsibility for social housing from the province to the city.

Through these delays, however, residents remained steadfast in their desire for change. Another crucial factor at play was the unwavering support for revitalization at the local political level. City Councillor Pam McConnell, and Member of Provincial Parliament George Smitherman, remained strong advocates for redevelopment.

In 2002, the newly amalgamated City of Toronto created the arm'slength Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCH) to oversee a public housing stock of 58,000 units, including the 2083 units in Regent Park. Even as this new organization was still finding its legs, it jumped into the Regent Park planning process with gusto. CEO Derek Ballantyne walked the community to get to know residents on a firstname basis.

Ballantyne also invited a number of community animators to help establish a more formal agenda. Sean Meagher, co-founder of social change firm Public Interest, facilitated a renewed public participation process to ensure that residents' voices continued to be heard.

"We broke it down structurally," says Meagher. "Somalis tended to



gather in big meetings while Spanish residents liked to gather around kitchen tables. We had to make some groups gender specific. For example, we had a Bengali Womens strategy."

Meagher and his colleagues posed four questions to residents. What do you like about Regent Park? What don't you like? What do you hope for? What do you fear?

This extensive community consultation resulted in a shared vision. The vision was articulated into a set of 12 guiding principles that would become as much a part of the community's new foundation as the concrete that was eventually poured.



One key principle was the right of return and relocation costs covered for any resident displaced by the redevelopment. Another was agreement to reintegrate Regent Park into the rest of Toronto. This meant bringing back the street grid so roadways run through and into the surrounding neighbourhoods. Residents understood that a community consisting entirely of social housing is not the best approach, and stipulated that the new community must have a mix of incomes similar to other downtown Toronto neighbourhoods.

Many residents and other stakeholders point to the leadership and openness of Ballantyne and TCH staff as key to gaining the trust needed to move discussions and planning forward. As MacLean points out, misinformation circulates quickly so "rumour control" was needed. This meant confirming and reaffirming the core principals, especially the right of return.

Breakthrough: The creation of the Social Development Plan — a blueprint for change that fortifies neighbourhood integrity

Continuous communication and consultation among residents, TCH staff and city staff, resulted in the creation of a Social Development Plan. The plan expanded and enshrined the residents' vision into 75 recommendations — all based on the guiding principles. Its purpose was to give the human side of Regent Park as much attention as the bricks and mortar blueprints, and it was designed to give residents tools and opportunities — through a network of community services and facilities, and an employment services plan — to foster social cohesion and inclusion. The hope was that the work of stakeholders would not stop once the buildings went up but would continue to support the community — sustaining the power of collective impact.

Unlike the Regent Park that was, the new Regent Park would provide people with opportunities to shop and work in their own community. Businesses that moved into the neighbourhood, including demolition and construction crews, would be encouraged to hire from within the community.

Ballantyne explains, "We wanted to make it feel like a neighbourhood, with employment opportunities, sustainable buildings, and mixed ownership. Regent Park had the capacity to do this because it had strong, vocal, articulate tenant leadership."

Urban designer Ken Greenberg, brought in to work on the master plan, was astonished at how residents intuitively grasped the principals of city building. "To tell the truth, the biggest issue was guaranteeing



the right to be able to come back. It was very helpful that Ballantyne came to the meetings and personally stated this guarantee."

Mitchell Kosny, Ryerson University planning professor and chair of the TCH from 2004 – 2007, says the TCH worked hard to overcome the mistrust that had grown over past decades. "It was about giving away power and control. For example, we did participatory budgeting. It sounds corny but giving residents control meant good decisions were made."

A zoning by-law governing redevelopment of the 69 acres was approved by City Council in early 2005. Incredibly, for a project consisting of over 5000 housing units, not one objection was filed to the Ontario Municipal Board — a true testament to the success of the community consultation process.

A public-private partnership, supported by community social agencies, provides the final impetus

The final essential piece of the revitalization puzzle was determining who would build it and how it would be financed. As tricky as every other phase was, money, or lack of, had put an end to all previous plans.

To find a developer, TCH conducted a Request for Qualifications and a subsequent Request for Proposals. The idea was to create a public-private partnership between TCH and a developer that would allow TCH to use its share of profits, from the sale of market condominiums, to offset the cost of replacing the rental units. This was the most effective way to create the desired mixed-use, mixed-income community.

Liz Root, project director at TCH at the time, worked hard at city hall to garner support, as there was resistance to the partnership idea. "It took some time to get the right people in place with the right perspective to realize they had the legitimacy to make the ball roll," she says. Slowly, the perfect storm was gathering.

"Taking the Regent Park plan to final approval was a really big moment," explains Kosny. "We worried: what if nobody wants to play with us? Can we do this?"

The Daniels Corporation's submission contended that a true publicprivate partnership model was required for such a challenging and textured project. TCH, and eventually the City of Toronto, embraced the partnership model and awarded Daniels the contract for Phase One, with a Right of First Opportunity for Phase Two. Daniels President Mitchell Cohen believed it was essential for both parties to be on the same team working "shoulder to shoulder to realize the shared vision." And he also saw an opportunity to do something very special. "The RFP had a lot of emphasis on bricks and mortar, energy efficient LEED standards and such. Our interest included the opportunity to build capacity in the community by creating jobs and career opportunities for residents. These community development aspects really turned us on."

"The first thing we did was meet with as many of the community service agencies as possible," Cohen explains. "After all, they are the ones who have been on the ground in this neighbourhood as it has continually absorbed waves of newcomers."

One of those agencies was the Christian Resource Centre which has been operating in Regent Park for nearly 50 years. In 2003, as revitalization plans were coming together, Michael Blair became the Centre's Executive Director.

"It hit me the first day," says Blair. "We needed to figure out what our role was going to be in the change that was happening." Blair set out to get to know and meet with leaders of other agencies in the area, including Dixon Hall, Central Neighbourhood House, Yonge Street Mission, Regent Park Focus, and the local library.

"We were all worried," says Blair. "As leaders, we realized, if we didn't find a proactive way to deal with what was coming we'd let the community down." Blair points out that the city involved them in the planning process and an Executive Directors' Table was created where they could participate in, among other things, the creation of the Social Development Plan.



The Board of Directors of the Christian Resource Centre decided to use the revitalization of Regent Park as an opportunity to literally rebuild. Fundraising efforts resulted in their new building, 40 Oaks, which functions as a community hub with a drop-in centre and housing units that are now home to over 90 people. 40 Oaks also provides a daily community meal program and a vast number of other programs geared towards bringing all members of Regent Park together.

Debra Dineen took over as Executive Director of the Christian Resource Centre in 2007, and led the build of 40 Oaks. Having lived in Regent Park since 1989, and having been at the early meetings in 1995 with Diane MacLean — her "sister in this journey," she knows fully what the revitalization has meant to her neighbours. She points to conversations among agencies, regarding how to better serve the community, as key to calming anxiety within the neighbourhood.

A business case for social cohesion and proof that cross-sector coordination makes large-scale social change possible

There is a strong business case to be made for thinking broadly in terms of how all parts of a community can relate to, and respect, each other's needs and priorities. That's why social cohesion became part of everyone's mandate in Regent Park.

There was a big push to rename the community because it was thought that no one would ever buy a condo in Regent Park. But as Dineen notes, "Regent Park has a long and proud history that residents wanted to maintain so that the rest of the city and the world could see the vibrancy of the community we love and call home. Keeping the name was integral to this, and our partners embraced the idea."

Daniels and TCH created a presentation centre where community events and meetings are held. They also supported the creation of a Centre for Learning where residents can access educational programs, and developed two programs to help people on limited incomes purchase homes.

Various groups and organizations, both inside and outside of Regent Park, have come together in support of a variety of cross-sector community initiatives such as the creation of a greenhouse and a community bake oven, as well as the preservation and expansion of community gardens. Container gardening on balconies and rooftop garden plots have been introduced to all buildings.



The Christian Resource Centre is expanding its role to initiatives such as food programs. Bringing people together around food is a surefire way to start the process of developing social cohesion across cultural and economic divides.

A social enterprise café and catering operation has been created in partnership with George Brown College's School of Hospitality and Culinary Arts. The café, called Paintbox Bistro, is hiring locally through the Employment Service office and Dixon Hall's employment program.

photo by Dan Bergeron

A place for culture

The arts have always been alive in Regent Park, so a place for culture in the new community was inevitable. Artscape — a non-profit, which since 1986 has been developing multi-tenant art spaces in Toronto to house both individual artists and arts organizations — became a natural partner.

When approached by the Daniels Corporation in 2008 after two years of community consultation, it was clear to Artscape's President and CEO, Tim Jones, that Regent Park would be a different kind of project. "We didn't know what it would look like, but we knew we couldn't just plop down an existing model. We needed to respond to the dreams and aspirations of the local community."

A steering committee was created that included residents, Regent Park community organizations, and other arts groups. "The vision that emerged was of a place rooted in Regent Park but open to the world," says Jones. "This really came out of the community — that it should not be seen as a place to drive through, but one to come to."

The result is the \$38 million, 60,000 square foot Daniels Spectrum located at the centre of Regent Park in the first three floors of the Paintbox Condominiums podium on Dundas Street. The first floor includes five performance areas and an open lobby and café space with free wifi where Regent Park residents can mix and meet informally. The second floor is home to local-based arts organizations. On the third floor a chapter of the Centre for Social Innovation has opened.





From a few individual residents to one of the world's largest redevelopments that's the strength of collective impact

The corner of Parliament and Dundas, a dozen or so blocks from the city's commercial heart, is where the billion-dollar revitalization and rebuilding of Regent Park began.

Today, there's a small informal square on the northwest corner in front of the FreshCo by Sobeys supermarket — a rarity in a city that historically hasn't thought a great deal about creating small people-places. Shoppers come in and out of the large store built into the main floor of One Cole — a new condominium building complete with a

green roof. Some folks linger in the square, chatting, others go on their way. Much of Toronto's multicultural mix is here.

Up the block is a Tim Hortons restaurant, busy around the clock as people meet up with each other. The sound of kids playing from a daycare mixes with the sound of kids from the Lord Dufferin Junior and Senior Public School across the way.

Redeveloped streets are a mix of handsome towers, midrise blocks and townhouses. People are walk-



ing along or sitting on their stoops (real honest-to-goodness big city stoops). With glass being used as a primary building material, interior and exterior public life are visible from the sidewalk.

Back on the corner, the Dundas streetcar rumbles by, clicking and clanking over the rails it crosses at Parliament Street. It's a sound all Torontonians associate instinctively with "home."

This is how we want our cities to be. Busy, mixed, economically active, and visually interesting. And most importantly, filled with people from different walks of life.

This corner is a remarkable testament to the handful of individuals, many of them women, who were able to kick-start a process of change. Their hard work, patience, and tenacity were the critical ingredients needed to drive the process of transformation. Their vision is what steered the collaborative efforts of individuals, government, community and service agencies, and business, that have resulted in a collective impact of positive "city building."

"Here's the irony," says Greenberg. "In my view, Regent Park is the best example of a new neighbourhood in all of Toronto. It outperforms private sector development. Socially it's a very diverse and mixed community with a variety of housing and architectural styles built to environmentally progressive standards. The crowning feature is its mix of activities. And when the dust settles, nobody will be sure where the boundaries of Regent Park begin or end."

photo by Sean Marshall

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Written by Shawn Micallef Design by Matthew Blackett All photos by Garrison|MacArthur Photographers, courtesy of Artscape except where noted With support from the Metcalf Foundation