

research snapshot

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Planners Need to Address the Needs of Diverse Communities in Toronto



What is this research about?

City planning in Canada tends to take a one-size-fits-all approach. For the most part, planners are white, middle class 'experts' who often decide how city dwellers should live based on the principles of the marketplace. The result? Urban spaces with a rigid, homogenized look that meet the needs of business – and little else. But as Canadian cities become more diverse, the nature of the public interest becomes more uncertain. As a result, planners need to view social, cultural, and ethnic differences from the perspective of the communities they are working in. They need to develop new skills – not to manage these communities, but to learn and work with them. In doing so, planners can create spaces that celebrate difference in 'the uncertain city'. The question is: how do planners begin this process?

What did the researchers do?

Professors at York University and the University of Manitoba researched the way city planning has tended to homogenize urban space. They then looked at several examples of planning in Toronto, such as Yonge-Dundas Square and Regent Park. They focused on Toronto because it is one of the most multicultural cities in the world and has the highest proportion of immigrants. Recently, there has been a renewed hope that the city's government will put the interests of residents before the economic interests of land developers. Toronto has a unique opportunity to plan with people rather than for profit.

What you need to know:

City planners need to learn to work with increasingly diverse communities. Planners need to accept the fact that they cannot know the answer to a planning problem in advance.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that planning projects in Toronto, such as Yonge-Dundas Square and Regent Park, have largely ignored the needs of local communities. In both cases, the 'market' appears to have taken precedence. Yonge-Dundas Square, next to the Eaton Centre, has been promoted as a place of quiet respite as well as a site for community celebrations. However, the Square, with its billboards and video screens, has more in common with New York's Times Square. Despite its designation as a 'public' space, permits are required for almost any use of Yonge-Dundas Square. It is heavily regulated to project a safe image of harmonious diversity to tourists and potential investors.

Not far from Yonge-Dundas Square lies Regent Park, Canada's oldest and largest public housing project. Its aging buildings have been a source of concern for residents and neighbours for more than a decade. There have even been several attempts to rejuvenate the area – and with good cause. The area is rich with diversity. It contains a broad range of cultural groups speaking more than 80 languages. However, the neighbourhood's proximity to the business district, as

well as mounting development pressures, has made the site desirable for private developers. As a result, the City is demolishing existing rent/geared-to-income (RGI) apartments and townhouses, and replacing them with a mix of new RGI dwellings (fewer than had previously existed on the site) and 2000 market units to be provided by the private sector. There are concerns that the needs of the local community are being ignored by developers focused on the profitability of their investments. At the very least, the concerns of the new homeowners are likely to be placed ahead of those who require social assistance.

As an alternative to these planning projects, the researchers point to other, more positive examples that ‘redistribute’ justice and open the door for more inclusive planning processes. The late Indigenous historian, Rodney Bobiwash, once offered a tour called “The Great Indian Bus Tour of Toronto.” The bus stopped at familiar sites, like Casa Loma and High Park, but the historical significance of the stories Bobiwash told about these sites is no longer visible. Dolores Hayden documented other attempts to recover histories in the “Power of Place” project. This project celebrated the histories of people who contributed to the development of Los Angeles but were excluded, based on gender or race, from the plaques and sites that mark the city’s fabric.

How can you use this research?

Planning education offers one way to begin to create more equitable and just planning processes. Popular education should be added to the curriculum of planning programs to help to create broader social change. In order to develop the sort of institutional structures that will allow local communities to have a say in planning, educators and students must resist looking at planning from a solely market-based perspective. Planners need to come to terms with the fact that they cannot know or predict the outcome of a planning process in advance because they cannot know what specific communities value. Rather, planners must work with communities to determine their needs.

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