

In Subdivided: City Building in an age of hyper-diversity

A Tale of Two – or Three – Cities:
Gentrification and Community Consultations

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In the hyper-diverse urban communities of the twenty-first century, we need new mechanisms to recognize the engagement and leadership of those whose input has been traditionally ignored, and we must then imbed their views directly into the way we build our cities.

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Just east of Toronto's downtown, two busy streetcar lines meet at the corner of Broadview and Queen East. At that well-travelled intersection, the New Broadview Hotel's imposing neo-Romanesque bulk is the dominant landmark on a late Victorian main street almost untouched by the postwar building boom. Although the arrival of film studios on nearby Eastern Avenue in the late 1990s gave rise to Queen's trendy cafés and shops, few rich people wanted to actually live in the area – until a few years ago, when Streetcar Development quietly began to build tasteful high-end condos. These mid-rise buildings were raised on warehouse-type sites that did not require the developer to tear down Victorian houses, which meant that few locals noticed – until, in the summer of 2014, Streetcar took over the New Broadview and revealed plans for a tasteful, 'heritage' boutique hotel.

My neighbours had generally disliked the hotel because it housed a notorious strip club called Jilly's. Thousands of people going by on streetcars and on foot had long been a captive audience for the outsized, stereotypical pictures of semi-dressed women that marked the building's exterior, so many locals saw the change in ownership and use as a positive development. As a feminist, I had never been thrilled to see photos of young women in provocative poses dominating a key street corner. But, as I often used to say to my complaining neighbours, 'Hey, Jilly's is the one thing that stands between us and total gentrification!'

The Jilly's/New Broadview makeover was widely publicized in the *Toronto Star* and other media. But the larger social and economic context of extreme and highly localized gentrification in the Queen-Broadview area had only recently become apparent to the city-planning apparatus. Yet many of us in the neighbourhood had taken note. Well before the Jilly's sale, some concerned local citizens decided to take active measures to influence city policy so as to minimize the exclusionary effects of the upscaling of Queen East.

Public meetings on gentrification organized by the Ralph Thornton Community Centre in 2012 and 2013 initially stirred people to action. And after the Real Jerk, a venerable Jamaican restaurant across the street from Jilly's, was forced to close in 2013 (to later reopen at the un-gentrified corner of Gerrard and Carlaw), area residents formed Planning South Riverdale (PSR), with the aim of ensuring that the neighbourhood remained inclusive and affordable. Also in 2013, city planners decided to hold several community consultations in the area. The members of PSR, including myself, saw these as opportunities to raise awareness and ensure that city policies and planning rules supported social inclusion.

Like many other cities, Toronto has developed sophisticated protocols for community consultations about planning issues. But just who is actually consulted? And how exactly are those people consulted? Many people (including some authors in this collection) have wondered whether planners and the consultants hired to help them ought to revise their consultation methods so they do not unwittingly ignore the very people who are most at risk of being displaced in rapidly changing neighbourhoods like Leslieville, where Jilly's was situated.

But few models of genuinely inclusive urban planning consultation exist. The PSR group, concerned about the growing spatial and economic inequality of the neighbourhood, designed and carried out a series of alternative consultations in Leslieville in 2013 and 2014. Our unofficial consultations ran in tandem with two official city consultations: one concerning the establishment of a Heritage Conservation District in the small area just east of the Don River that is known as Riverside, and another geared to producing the architectural and height guidelines for Leslieville's commercial heart (Queen Street from Degrassi to Jones).

The Official Story

In Toronto, main streets, officially known as 'avenues', are governed by a policy promoting limited intensification. Along many wide avenues in the inner suburbs, the problem is low density and too

many parking lots. On older downtown commercial strips, such as Queen East in the Leslieville and Riverside neighbourhoods, the problem is instead that skyrocketing real estate prices and rents are threatening to turn the lively high streets of the Jane Jacobs type into canyons of high-end condos and boutique restaurants.

The Heritage Conservation District designation study aimed to preserve at least the architecture of the neighbourhood – though heritage designations can hinder local efforts to ensure that the area remains inclusive and affordable, as the replacement of Jilly's by a proposed boutique hotel underlines. Initially, the city's Leslieville 'avenue' study seemed to hold more promise, since 'affordability' and 'inclusivity' were part of the mandate.

The planning department had hired an outside consultant to run the community consultations, which took place over several months and demanded a great deal of energy from participants: four public events, solicitation of feedback through emails and phone calls, plus four further meetings of a select 'stakeholder' group.

The city held an initial 'open house' in a school gym, offering information about the avenue study, as well as three other planning reviews going on at the same time. For most residents, it was too much technical information. Few aside from professional planners and architects could keep the different studies straight. What's more, the open-house format has problematic political implications – city staff (and architects or planners hired by the city) come up with plans for a neighbourhood, and public participation is limited to reacting after the fact.

Between October 2013 and April 2014, the city held three more public sessions, each featuring short and tightly managed presentations of official plans followed by round-table discussions with participants (known in planning-speak as 'charrettes'). One evening, the people attending this session were all asked to think about the neighbourhood and its resources, identifying 'assets' and going on to suggest 'improvements.' The city's consultants dutifully gathered the input and summarized it at the next meeting. At another session, participants had to think of words that described the area: predictably, watchwords like *creative, energetic, diversity, inclusive* and *cosmopolitan* predominated.

Besides those four public meetings, the city convened four sessions with a select 'stakeholder advisory group.' A member of PSR asked to participate and was included, but it wasn't clear how others were chosen. The group included two established community agencies, but their representatives did not attend regularly; the rest of the participants were either homeowners or local business people. The low-income tenants living in the hundreds of units of subsidized housing nearby and the apartments above the Queen Street stores were not represented. The terms of reference for the stakeholder group noted that 'a few spots were reserved for local professionals with skills/experience in urban planning, urban design or architecture.' Low-income tenants, by contrast, were not specifically sought out.

At stakeholder advisory committee meetings, some participants attempted to raise broader social issues, asking how the urban design guidelines for the Leslieville stretch of Queen Street would help low-income residents. They repeatedly raised the question of affordable housing and the disappearance of shops and restaurants that had served lower-income residents for years. City staff fielded these queries politely, even agreeing with the sentiments – but by their very politeness, staff furthered the mistaken impression that social inclusion issues would be represented in the avenue study report. It was only after repeated probing by critical residents that city planners reluctantly admitted, late in the process, that neither affordable housing nor affordable retail were within their purview. The purpose of the exercise turned out to be limited: to set height limits and design guidelines for future development by builders like Streetcar.

While the city's staff and consultants expressed vague support at those meetings for socio-economic diversity, the official record included only the following comment: 'We [the city] do not intend to eliminate any affordable or social housing.' The planners knew all along that the purpose of the exercise, in legal terms, was to produce architectural guidelines. Their polite and 'inclusive' attitude had the effect of misleading participants about the nature of the exercise.

While attendance at the stakeholder group meetings fell (there were initially twenty participants, but that figure dropped to eight),

the continued participation of progressive activists meant that official city reports did note the exclusionary effects of the gentrification of Queen Street East, but only in the context of heritage preservation:

In recent years there has been an increase in specialty shops in the study area. The increase in specialty shops may push out the businesses that residents may currently depend on. This can be an opportunity as new types of businesses transform the area into a destination, but can also become a threat as businesses that meet the needs of local residents get pushed out.'

This bland statement was as far as the official record went in acknowledging the exclusionary effects of commercial as well as residential gentrification. But fortunately, while waiting for the city's reports, PSR's members did not put much faith in the official process, and instead undertook their own data-gathering and consultation exercises.

Focus Groups with Marginalized Residents

Though theoretically open to anyone, official public consultations on planning questions tend to draw homeowners, business owners, better-educated residents and those undaunted by such discussions. Urban neighbourhoods, of course, include many other people – shift workers who can't get to meetings, newcomers who don't yet have the language skills to follow the conversation, single parents who can't find or afford child care and, of course, people who exist on society's fringes – those who are homeless or just barely hanging on, and for whom the prospect of spending time in meetings discussing new land-use planning rules is eclipsed by the daily challenges of survival.

PSR's members recognized that those residents who had the most to lose from gentrification were unlikely to respond to the usual city mechanisms for soliciting public input. We decided that the group should go to where the most marginalized members of the community spent their time, instead of expecting them to attend public meetings. PSR organized four focus groups, in a supportive housing complex, a shelter, a health centre and a facility for older street-involved men. Overall, forty-one people turned out, including several new-immigrant seniors.

Besides changing the consultation venues, the group also broadened the conversation. PSR took two questions from the official process – ‘What do you like best about the neighbourhood?’ and ‘What would you like to see improved in the neighbourhood?’ – but also added questions about the area’s existing services and stores.

Changing the frame of reference elicited important insights into the ways in which gentrification increases the pressure in the lives of those who live in such areas. Many people told us they no longer bank and do grocery shopping in the Riverside/Leslieville area, but go across the Don River to the Regent Park area, where there are retailers geared to lower-income consumers. Others said affordable clothing and shoes were no longer available in the area. Many poorer residents said during the sessions that they felt more at home on Parliament Street, despite the long walk, than among the cappuccino bars of a neighbourhood many had lived in for years.

The most revealing finding was that the loss of one particular store or service might have a snowball effect. If a shop that is essential to poor people’s lives (a pharmacy, a bank, a hardware store) closes down, either due to the different shopping habits of new gentrifiers or because upscale restaurants and bars can afford much higher rents, its long-standing customers may well move many of their other activities to a more distant area as well. In one group, for example, several people mentioned going as far as Queen and Parliament to access shops and services. Another group appeared to have the same experiences.

The most consistent finding, emerging spontaneously in three of the four focus groups, was the desire for a coffee shop that would be open in the evening and welcoming (whether due to prices or to atmosphere was unclear) to low-income neighbours. ‘It’s all high-end now,’ observed one older man living in transitional housing. ‘There is nobody around after 9 p.m.’ Given that within five minutes’ walk of where the focus group was being conducted there are several higher-end bars and pubs that are busy late into the evening, it seemed this man meant that there was nobody around *like him*, or nobody with whom he felt an affinity. Participants in the other focus groups complained that the last remaining low-end doughnut shop (a Coffee

Time at Dundas and Broadview) had been transformed into a high-end bridal-wear store. Leslieville’s many espresso bars sell caffeine, obviously, but these long-time residents don’t even see such establishments as coffee shops.

These are highly practical concerns: what happens when there are no more affordable supermarkets at which to buy groceries, or a declining number of local health professionals serving clients on provincial disability or welfare? But prices are not the only issue. There are also cultural processes of exclusion – at one session, an older, dishevelled man complained bitterly about how most of the parkette behind the New Broadview Hotel had been turned into an off-leash dog park. Others echoed his point. The reason? That park had previously been heavily used by the low-income tenants living above the Jilly’s bar and in a nearby supportive-housing building as a good place to go for a smoke. Now it had been colonized by condo-owners with dogs.

Overall, the low-income residents who participated in PSR’s focus groups felt they’d been marginalized in their own neighbourhood by the proliferation of high-end restaurants and specialty stores – cupcake shops were mentioned with particular scorn. Despite that, city-planning officials had never sought to document how these doubly marginalized low-income residents actually used their own neighbourhood.

The Store Survey

The PSR also decided to document the impact of commercial gentrification by conducting an in-person store survey, something else the city’s planning staff did not do. Going from store to store during the winter of 2013–2014, the PSR team ambitiously surveyed all the properties on Queen Street from the Don River to Jones Avenue – about two hundred establishments. The volunteers then systematically rated each establishment on a scale of one to six – with one being most economically and socially accessible, and six being least accessible.

We found that an astonishing 37 percent of storefronts fell into the ‘six’ category – not just high-end restaurants and bakeries, but also a range of other shops, from organic butchers to a specialty bicycle

store to high-end home-décor shops. The second-largest category was stores that rated a 'five,' with 26 percent of the total. Thus, almost two-thirds of all the businesses on that stretch of Queen Street East appeared to cater not only to gentrifiers generally (a category that can include lower-income artists) but specifically to well-off gentrifiers. When the survey was updated eight months later, the proportion of high-end shops had increased to over 70 percent.

Just as interesting, however, was the finding that businesses of a distinctly low-end character still existed in considerable numbers: 11 percent of the stores were rated as either 'one' or 'two,' including a pair of very cheap Chinese restaurants, two pharmacies catering to those on provincial benefits, an auto-body shop, rundown variety stores and two low-end restaurants in which patrons seemed to mainly drink bottled beer.

So while Queen East has a surprisingly resilient low-end retail sector and a flourishing super-high-end retail scene, it is lacking in mid-range shops and services, such as a Tim Hortons. The store survey exposes a microcosm of Toronto's 'three cities' - University of Toronto sociologist David Hulchanski's mapping analysis that reveals increasing income polarization between neighbourhoods from 1970 to the present. Queen East is a place where Toronto's three cities coexist within a single neighbourhood, where the rich (who here predominate, unlike in the city as a whole) and the remaining poor (who are getting poorer) are squeezing out the middle class.

While writing this article, I took a break to buy food at Rowe Farms (a good example of a category 'six' business), which is next to one of the few remaining working-class diners - Jim's, at Logan and Queen. When I first moved to the area, in late 1991, I used to bitterly complain to my east-end partner that we had to walk all the way to the Danforth for an espresso. The only local restaurant I patronized was Jim's - and only to get rotisserie chicken to take home. Today Jim's continues to be popular with tow-truck drivers and cops, as well as some locals. But one of the city's 'Development Proposal' signs has ominously gone up. Three adjacent lots (Jim's, the mechanic next door and a postwar church) have been bought and assembled by a higher-end condo

developer. The builder has offered to rehouse the occupants of the Red Door Shelter, which rents space in the church, by way of a 'community benefit' given in order to gain extra density. But Red Door's success, which makes the liberally minded locals feel good about ourselves and our neighbourhood, contrasts sharply with the area's seeming indifference to the fate of Jim's working-class patrons.

Planning students are today encouraged to care about social inequality. But a progressive conscience is one thing, and planners' legal tools are another. In South Riverdale, residents who attended evening meetings at some trouble and expense were not clearly informed that maintaining the area's affordability was not on the planning agenda. When the narrow architectural focus of these official consultations became clear, many of us felt betrayed by city staff.

But the silver lining was that a tiny community group like Planning South Riverdale could obtain information from marginalized people who do not attend public meetings. The group's volunteers managed to organize and successfully run focus groups that generated valuable perspectives that had eluded city planners and paid consultants, who weren't, it must be said, looking for those kinds of insights. We concluded that if they wanted, planners could devise ways to 'outsource' some consultations to individuals who are already trusted community members, instead of always using professional consulting firms. Clearly, when we went to the places where marginal people live and gather and feel empowered to speak, we were far more successful at soliciting meaningful input than when city staff issue notices and hope people will interrupt their routines to attend a scheduled meeting in an official location.

Neighbourhoods in Toronto and elsewhere have become increasingly polarized spatially and socially. Tasked with planning socially, economically and culturally complex urban communities, city staff and ultimately politicians, who have the authority to change the rules, are going to have to find new approaches to ensure that those at risk of being displaced or ignored have some say in the changes washing over their city and their neighbourhoods.