



“It’s all about power and you have none:” The marginalization of tenant resistance to mixed-income social housing redevelopment in Toronto, Canada



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ABSTRACT

Mixed-income redevelopment has become a go-to approach for restructuring post-war public housing in advanced capitalist nations. In Regent Park, Canada’s first and largest project, revitalization is underway to create a mixed-use, mixed-income community – with rebuilt public housing, condos, and a redesigned landscape. While tenants face negative impacts related to relocation, displacement and gentrification, there has been a void of organized opposition to the project. This article tells the story of revitalization in Toronto and identifies five inter-connected factors that have worked as barriers to tenant organizing. These include: (1) a successful effort by the public housing authority to build support for revitalization by successfully branding it as tenant-driven, (2) a consultation process designed to limit collective interaction among tenants, (3) the co-optation of some critical voices, (4) fear of reprisal among tenants for speaking out, and (5) an internalized sense of powerless and un-deservingness among tenants. These factors have emerged in a context that does not foster resistance, as tenants are desperate for new housing, forced to come up against a popular revitalization approach, and suffering from attrition in numbers over a long development timeline. Despite these barriers to resistance, the limited opposition that has emerged in Toronto has been surprisingly successful, indicating the political potential tenants have to mount a fundamental challenge to mixed-income redevelopment, and to demand investment that is not tied to gentrification and displacement.

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1. Introduction

Toronto has emerged as Canada’s capital of public housing redevelopment. Since 2002, the city’s housing authority, Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC), has made plans to transform dozens of its projects into mixed-use, mixed-income neighborhoods. Leading the way is Regent Park, the nation’s oldest and largest project, where 70 acres of modernist public housing will be replaced over 15–20 years with a dense landscape of condos, rebuilt public housing, new roads, shops, facilities, and parks. While still new to Canada, this approach has gained worldwide popularity as a way to deal with aging post-war public housing, and as a way to capitalize on the development potential of the land beneath it. In many cities, tenants and their allies have organized to defend their public housing communities, and to fight against the displacement, gentrification, and community destruction that come along with revitalization (Goetz, this issue). In Regent Park, however, organized tenant opposition has been curiously absent – even though many tenants have expressed skepticism about revitalization and dissatisfaction with the process so far. Based on qualitative research, this paper examines what forces and dynamics have worked to prevent critical opposition in

Regent Park from emerging in the form of organized, well-publicized resistance.

Five inter-related dynamics are identified in this paper. These dynamics have played out in a context–common in public housing communities–in which tenants are desperate for better housing, in which mixed-income revitalization is widely accepted as ‘best practice’, and in which resident attrition limits the numbers of people who might engage in local organizing. In this context, resistance in Regent Park was limited by (1) a successful campaign by TCHC to ‘brand’ revitalization as tenant-oriented, (2) efforts to limit the public airing of concerns in consultation processes, (3) the co-optation of critical voices, (4) fear of reprisal among tenants, and (5) an internalized sense of powerlessness among many residents. Despite these barriers, the few tenant-based opposition efforts that have emerged in Toronto have been surprisingly effective. While these efforts have been small in scale–working to tweak existing revitalization plans rather than challenge them in more fundamental ways–they point to the political potential of organized tenants to demand improvements to public housing that are not tied to gentrification and displacement.

2. Resistance to public housing redevelopment

Over the past two decades, mixed-income redevelopment has become a popular strategy for addressing modernist public housing in

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the US, Western Europe, Australia, and Canada. This approach typically involves the demolition of public housing and its replacement with newly built (but usually fewer) social units, “mixed” in with new private market homes. Redevelopment is often accomplished via public–private partnership, and involves the redesign of modernist projects in line with contemporary planning trends. Supporters of redevelopment tend to draw on a common set of theories and ideas to justify it, including “New Urbanist” design principles (Duany & Plater-Zyberck, 1991), the planning concept of “social mix” (see August, 2008; Arthurson, 2010), and academic theories supporting the “deconcentration” of poverty (Wilson, 1996). The classic model for this approach is the US HOPE VI program (1992–2010), which provided federal funding to housing authorities for the demolition and redevelopment of “distressed” projects, and for the dispersal of residents with housing vouchers.

Public housing revitalization is perceived in the mainstream as a benevolent policy that helps the poor to improve their lives while ‘cleaning up’ run-down parts of the city. Advocates promise that tenants will benefit from proximity to the wealthy, who are expected to connect them with better jobs and opportunities, while acting as ‘role models’ for good behavior. Critical scholars (e.g. Crump, 2002; Goetz, 2013; James, 2010; Kelly, 2013; Smith, 1999) and activists (Right to the City Alliance, 2010), however, have begun to challenge the value of this policy approach, pointing to the condescending and problematic assumptions on which it is based, and to its role in displacing low-income and racially marginalized tenants in order to remake their communities for the wealthy. Critics see mixed-income revitalization as a neoliberal project associated with dismantling the welfare state, and promoting privatization, market-driven policy, and state-facilitated gentrification.

In addition to these broader critiques, the empirical record has revealed that redevelopment does not always live up to its promises. While redevelopment has led to improvements in neighborhood and housing quality, crime reduction, and economic development (August, 2014a), studies have found that expected improvements related to incomes, job outcomes, social capital, educational achievement, behavior, and health do not tend to materialize as a result of mixed-income redevelopment or public housing “deconcentration” (Ibid.; Goetz & Chapple, 2010). Even worse, many tenants experience negative impacts — including worsened economic circumstances (e.g. Buron, Popkin, Levy, Harris, & Khadduri, 2002; Popkin, Levy, & Buron, 2009), fractured networks of friendship and support (e.g. Curley, 2010; Gibson, 2007; Greenbaum, Hathaway, Rodriguez, Spalding, & Ward, 2008), and sadness over the loss of one’s community (Clampet-Lundquist, 2004, 2007; Joseph, 2008). Scholars have found that with HOPE VI, few original public housing residents ever return to redeveloped sites (Goetz, 2013), owing to strict move-back criteria and tenant screening. Those who do return often face draconian surveillance regimes and social regulation (e.g. Graves, 2010). Redevelopment also reproduces socio-spatial patterns of racial inequality. Examining HOPE VI data, Goetz (2013) found a “disparate racial impact,” in which black residents are more likely to be displaced, and projects with higher proportions of black residents were more likely to be targeted for demolition (see pp. 114–121). The scholarly and empirical record suggests that if policy makers want to improve the lives of tenants, mixed-income redevelopment is a flawed approach. One alternative would be to invest in the upkeep of existing public housing (and to build more), and to invest in the facilities, services, and supports that tenants need in the places where they live (see Silver, 2011 for a discussion of this approach in Winnipeg’s Lord Selkirk Park).

In line with these critiques, public housing residents in many American cities have organized to fight displacement, protect their homes, and resist redevelopment. Public housing communities are known for having long-standing histories of resident-led activism (Feldman & Stall, 2004), which can serve as a foundation for mobilization efforts. In Chicago, America’s testing ground for redevelopment, residents organized a coalition to prioritize tenant interests and fight displacement (Wright, 2006). The coalition also supported a lawsuit to

stop the demolition of Chicago’s Cabrini Green community (Wright, Wheelock, & Steele, 2006). Tenants have similarly sued housing authorities in New Orleans, Boston, Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Kansas City, to prevent HOPE VI-induced displacement (Goetz, 2013; Pardee & Gotham, 2005), and used numerous other tactics — including protests, rent strikes, and sit-ins to publicize their concerns.

Tenant resistance of this sort has not, however, emerged in all places where redevelopment has been pursued — including Toronto’s Regent Park. Understanding why is important in the Canadian context, given that there are plans to expand mixed-income revitalization across Toronto’s public housing portfolio, as a key part of the TCHC real estate investment strategy (TCHC, 2008). To date, redevelopment has been completed at a public housing community called Don Mount Court (between 2002 and 2012), and launched (in 2007) at communities called Lawrence Heights and Alexandra Park. Thirteen additional sites have been selected for redevelopment, and 50 more for further study (Toronto, 2013).¹ Elsewhere in Canada, Regent Park has served as a model, inspiring BC Housing (in the Province of British Columbia) to undertake mixed redevelopment in Vancouver’s Little Mountain community.

3. Methods

The findings in this paper draw on data from ethnographic participant observation, document and media analysis, and qualitative, in-depth interviews (n = 125) with tenants and key informants primarily from Regent Park, and also from Don Mount Court and Lawrence Heights. In Regent Park, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted in two stages (from 2010 to 2013), first with tenants in *old* units, prior to revitalization (n = 33), and second, with tenants living in *new*, post-redevelopment units (n = 53). During interviews, tenants were asked about their thoughts on the process of redevelopment, and asked to compare their community and apartment before and after redevelopment. If participants raised the issue of resistance, more details were sought out about their thoughts and experiences. Interviews were also conducted with key informants (n = 15) including planners, developers, politicians, and representatives from community agencies and the housing authority. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed with the aid of NVivo qualitative data analysis software. When analyzing interview data, several themes emerged that helped to make sense of the lack of organized tenant resistance to redevelopment in Regent Park and other communities.

Ethnographic participant observation was carried out at meetings and events from 2007 to 2014 (and most intensely between 2010 and 2014), including redevelopment update and consultation meetings (in Regent Park, Don Mount Court, and Lawrence Heights), tenant council meetings in Regent Park, and other relevant meetings, events, and celebrations. While at these meetings I took detailed notes on meeting content, interpersonal dynamics, and on informal conversations that took place with residents, TCHC staff, representatives from community agencies, and other key actors. My interview notes were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo software. While not gathered formally (via interview or survey), the data obtained with this approach provided rich and nuanced detail, and rounded out my understanding and analysis of community dynamics and post-redevelopment outcomes in Toronto communities undergoing mixed-income redevelopment.

4. Public housing redevelopment in Toronto’s Regent Park

“Canadian-style” redevelopment in Regent Park has some differences from the American approach. Most notably, Canada has no federal housing program. In 1993, the federal government downloaded the responsibility for funding and administration of social housing to

¹ Of the thirteen confirmed sites, planning is underway at Allenbury Gardens, Leslie Nymark, Don Summerville, and 250 Davenport.

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