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TORONTO

Revitalization in Regent Park 12 Years Later

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Introduction

Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) started its revitalization program as a way to leverage public assets to address a growing capital repair backlog, improve the living conditions for tenants and correct some of the planning mistakes of the past. After almost 20 years of experience with revitalization efforts and redevelopment of public housing sites into mixed-income communities, we can reflect on valuable lessons learned and share what has worked. The development process has created a lot of challenges, but also many opportunities to create social housing communities. This chapter outlines the lessons learned from planning and implementing the revitalization program, particularly focusing on the Regent Park community.

Regent Park was one of the oldest public housing communities in Canada (Figure 10.1). Built between 1948 and 1959, Regent Park was home to 2,083 units of rent-geared to income (RGI) housing spread over 69 acres. Similar to other developments, which occurred during that time, Regent Park was designed as a self-contained community with no through traffic and buildings located in open field settings (GHK International, 2003).

Regent Park Revitalization Plan

In 2002, the TCHC Board of Directors approved proceeding with a due diligence process to explore the feasibility of redeveloping the Regent Park community along with the development of a planning and engagement framework to guide the redevelopment process. In 2003, the *Revitalization Plan for Regent Park* was approved. The plan was developed around 12 principles:

1. Renew the Regent Park neighbourhood
2. Re-introduce pedestrian-friendly streets and park spaces
3. Design a safe and accessible neighbourhood
4. Involve the community in the process
5. Build on cultural diversity, youth, skills and energy
6. Create a diverse neighbourhood with a mix of uses
7. Keep the same number of rent-geared to income

FIGURE 10.1 Regent Park in 2005.

Source: Toronto Community Housing.

8. Minimize disruption for residents from relocation
9. Design a clean, healthy and environmentally responsible neighbourhood
10. Develop a financially responsible strategy
11. Create a successful Toronto neighbourhood
12. Improve and maintain existing parts of Regent Park as redevelopment occurs.

TCHC began implementing the revitalization in 2006, with the first phase consisting of 10 acres at the southwest corner of the community, which included four development parcels. One of these parcels is currently the site of the Regent Park Management Office and Sales Centre to be developed in the future. Since the start of the revitalization process, TCHC has rebuilt approximately 1,350 social housing units. Of the 1,353 units, 364 are affordable rental (rents at 80% of AMR) and 989 RGI rental replacement units. In addition, TCHC with our private sector developer partner has added 1,769 market units (rental and ownership). Of the housing completed, 43% of the units are at below-market rates and 57% of the units are at market rates. Figure 10.2 illustrates the progress achieved, the built form of new residential developments and their integration with the existing communities in downtown Toronto.

The Original Plan, 2005

The *Revitalization Plan for Regent Park* was developed through extensive consultation with tenants, stakeholders and surrounding communities. The original six-phase plan proposed 1,779 RGI units be replaced on site, 304 RGI units to be replaced in other buildings in the Downtown East area and the addition of approximately 3,300 new market units. As part of the City

FIGURE 10.2 Regent Park Phase Two Development.

Source: Toronto Community Housing.

planning approvals process, 65% of RGI units and 85% of the social housing had to be replaced on site. Social housing was defined as rental housing units owned by the TCHC, or on their behalf by a non-profit corporation, or a non-profit housing co-operative, and operated by or on their behalf to provide accommodation primarily to persons of low and moderate income. The intent was that no less than 25% of all units in Regent Park would be RGI and no less than 32% of all units would be non-profit rental.

Updates to the Plan, 2007–2013

Beginning in 2007, TCHC began exploring revisions to the existing phasing for Regent Park to deliver the park sooner (planned for phase 5) and to consolidate a number of smaller parks located throughout the community into a central green space. Central to this move was the advancement of capital funding for a new aquatic centre which would be located within the central park space. A rezoning was granted by Toronto City Council in 2009.

In 2013, Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment began discussions with TCHC to build a sports and athletic field within the footprint of Regent Park. To facilitate the development of this new sports field, TCHC submitted a rezoning application, which was approved in 2014. As part of the rezoning, TCHC proposed reducing the number of phases from six to five and increasing the number of housing units from 5,400 to 7,500 (Figure 10.3). The increase in density allowed TCHC to offset costs for replacing the rental housing, which was seeing significant cost increases year over year due to rising construction costs.

FIGURE 10.3 Current Master Plan for Regent Park.

Note: Regent Park Target Phasing Plan, Scale 1:2,500; Regent Park Revitalization Project, Diamond Architects, August 15, 2016.

Source: Toronto Community Housing.

Regent Park is now past the halfway point in its implementation. The new buildings in Regent Park dominate the landscape, although a small segment of the original buildings was retained.

Lessons Learned 12 Years Later

The following are the key lessons learned, not necessarily in the order of priority, from 12 years of implementing revitalization in Regent Park. Now past the halfway point and prior to starting the implementation of the final phases of the plan, it is the perfect opportunity to reflect on what worked and what has not in the first three phases.

Shorten Timelines

Revitalization is about improving the lives for those who are presently living there, the social housing tenants. Tenants' lives are improved through brand new homes and transforming the socio-economic reality in which they live (Regent Park Collaborative Team, 2002).

In 2003, it was recognized there would be a shortfall of approximately 79%, with the majority of funding coming from operating savings. TCHC was open to the possibility of revitalization because it would transform the neighbourhood and help reduce operating costs. Since then, the shortfall has been reduced to 50% as a result of higher revenues from profit shares on the condominium units. Despite this, decision makers and politicians see less value in continuing to

invest in the project. They are balancing competing demands and priorities on shrinking municipal funds. A 20+ years project is a long time. While the goals and objectives were clear when the project started, a decade later, that clarity becomes less prevalent. Many of those who were involved with making the original decisions are no longer involved in project management and execution. Many tenants no longer remember what it was like to live in the old Regent Park, or may only know the new Regent Park moving to the community after revitalization was already underway. For comparison, the majority of the St. Lawrence neighbourhood, which is long-touted as one of the most successful mixed-use mixed-income communities in Toronto, was completed within a decade, providing enough time to reflect on whether the plan is working, but not taking too long that its implementation becomes less of a priority due to competing interests (Gordon, n.d.).

Adapt, Remain Flexible and Embrace Opportunity

Part of the success of Regent Park thus far has been the public and cultural amenities that have added to the vibrancy of the community. Not all of these were in the original plan. As opportunities presented themselves, TCHC adapted and changed its plans to ensure they could be accommodated. This happened early on with consolidation and delivery of the central park to not only accommodate the new aquatic centre but to also provide a key community amenity earlier on in the revitalization as opposed to near the end as originally planned.

In 2013, another opportunity presented itself when Maple Leaf Sports Entertainment Foundation (MLSE) approached TCHC to locate a basketball court, soccer/cricket pitch, running track, hockey rink and field house within the Regent Park community (Figure 10.4).

FIGURE 10.4 Maple Leaf Sports Entertainment Athletic Grounds in Regent Park.

Source: Toronto Community Housing.

FIGURE 10.5 Daniels Spectrum Arts & Cultural Centre.

Source: Toronto Community Housing.

The Regent Park Athletic Grounds, the central park and the aquatic centre have all been vital to the transformation of this neighbourhood. More than any other business or service, these amenities, along with the Daniels Spectrum Arts & Cultural Centre (Figure 10.5), have been the main draw for people across the City visiting this community. Part of removing the stigma of the old Regent Park is about reconnecting this neighbourhood to the fabric of the City.

Pre-Zoning Not Necessarily Faster

TCHC is in the process of rebuilding close to 5,000 RGI social housing units across the City of Toronto. In three instances, TCHC undertook the required entitlements work to implement its revitalizations. What TCHC has found is that pre-zoning sites prior to seeking a private sector partner does not provide the certainty and expediency that pre-zoning strives to achieve. More often than not, once a developer partner is brought on board, they provide a lens that the public sector may not have considered, such as how to maximize revenues through built form and siting. In every instance where TCHC has undertaken the regulatory amendments required, TCHC has had to go back and amend those plans adding both time and cost.

What TCHC has found across its seven revitalization initiatives is the private sector knows what the market is seeking in terms of size of buildings, and the types of units and amenities being offered. The market insight is critical in order to maximize value, which in the case of TCHC is reinvested in rebuilding social housing units.

TCHC's revitalization programme is also structured on partnerships as opposed to land disposition. Having a private sector partner engaged from the beginning co-developing a development plan generates buy-in and ownership from all parties involved. In TCHC's experience, when partnering on a site that has already been zoned, the private sector is bidding on land with

entitlements with the assumption the land is clean from contamination and no further approvals are required. The onus has fallen on TCHC to rectify any issues through minor variances and to ensure all site plan and subdivision conditions are satisfied along with all soil remediation. When a partner is brought in at the outset, many of those responsibilities, risks and costs are shared rather than borne by the landowner.

Skin in the Game

The public sector is increasingly risk averse as municipal governments and public sector entities are facing budget pressures. The same is true for TCHC, and the revitalization programme has had to adapt to the changing public sector landscape. The common approach has been to move away from partnerships with the private sector to a land sale model, whereby the market risk is borne solely by the private sector. TCHC took this approach when implementing phase 3 where a land sale model was seen as mitigating a projected downturn in the market. The downturn never happened and went in the opposite direction where the price per square foot for real estate has increased 36% from 2013 to today. The funding gap has widened, and TCHC was not able to benefit from the upswing in the real estate market.

The lesson learned for TCHC has been that in order to leverage its assets (land) to the fullest, it has to take on some of the risk. The added benefit to partnerships as opposed to land sales has been that TCHC has a seat at the table on decisions around the market buildings and can ensure greater integration with community in terms of public realm and architecture.

Diversity of Landowners

One element originally envisioned but yet to implement in Regent Park has been diversifying the social housing ownership. To date, all social housing replacement units within the Regent Park footprint are owned and managed by TCHC. Many have argued that a diversity of landowners and non-profit housing providers is why the St. Lawrence neighbourhood has been so successful (Gordon, n.d., p. 6), ensuring a true mix of incomes and socio-economic backgrounds is represented in the new community (Preville, 2018).

While RGI and affordable housing make up 32% of the revitalized neighbourhood where it used to be 100%, TCHC still remains the largest landowner in Regent Park. Vacancies are filled using the City of Toronto social housing waitlist as opposed to co-operative housing, which use both the social housing waitlist and their own waitlists providing a diversity of incomes and socio-economic backgrounds.

Urban Design Best Practices Need to Reflect Reality

Regent Park was planned using urban design best practices – primarily focused on reintroducing the historic Toronto street grid, providing a pedestrian scale to buildings and properly framing streets and public spaces with buildings to provide what Jane Jacobs called passive surveillance with “eyes on the street”.

A different reality has emerged that was never truly contemplated. For example, urban design best practices have been used to locate garbage and loading areas away from street view. Loading and servicing areas have been located in laneways in the newly built parts of Regent Park. Vehicular laneways reduce curb cuts from multiple driveways interrupting the street, creating a safer pedestrian environment. In some instances, these laneways have become difficult

for surveillance as they typically do not have active uses fronting on to these spaces and have proven difficult for TCHC's Community Safety Unit to monitor.

Toronto has seen increasing incidents of gun violence over the past few years, and TCHC has been seeking design interventions to deal with the rise. While TCHC recognizes the importance of grade-related units and units with multilevel living for families, rebuilding social housing in a townhouse form is not responsible from both a cost or land use perspective. TCHC also finds it more difficult to secure blocks of townhouses spread across a neighbourhood rather than having units located within a building. For these reasons, TCHC has moved towards grade-related multilevel units within the podiums of buildings rather than rebuilding low-rise townhouses.

Another reason why TCHC is moving away from townhouses is the operating costs and staffing efficiencies. Townhouses, which are spread over a wider area, require operations staff to oversee a larger footprint. In Regent Park, due to the large scale of the development, this is making it more time-consuming to do regular duties such as managing waste or landscaping.

Scale

At approximately 69 acres, Regent Park is able to deliver the public and institutional amenities along with neighbourhood amenities such as retail that deliver a truly mixed-use neighbourhood. The St. Lawrence development was also successful in delivering these amenities across a 56-acre site. TCHC has rebuilt social housing in communities as small as 2.6 acres, and while they are still important to undertake and improve the living conditions for social housing tenants, their ability to deliver transformative change at a broader level is more limited. Smaller sites do not have enough land to provide for spaces which serve as regional nodes of activity, drawing in populations near and far.

Mix at Different Scales

The success at Regent Park can be attributed to mixing at various scales – within buildings, at street level and across the entire neighbourhood. One of the lessons learned from the St. Lawrence neighbourhood is the idea that mixing of RGI units and market units in the same building provides integration and stability, with more residents wanting to stay and live in those buildings (GHK International, 2003). Details around why residents of St. Lawrence found the integration to be a stabilizing force were not provided, but it is a concept that TCHC has implemented in Regent Park, with approximately 25–33% of all units in TCHC rental buildings being rented at 80% of average market rents. Rebuilding rental buildings that are not 100% RGI does provide a mix of people from different socio-economic backgrounds and does contribute to a more diverse neighbourhood that is not only RGI tenants and residents of market buildings.

The revitalization has also ensured there is a mix of built form and affordability at street level. The *Master Plan for Regent Park* was designed to mix market and rental replacement buildings in alternating blocks so there is never a concentration of one type in any given part of the neighbourhood. Both market and rental replacement units also ensure there are grade-related units for both, so there is a consistency to the streetscape, making both types indistinguishable from one another. This is to remove the stigma that has long been associated with living in social housing.

FIGURE 10.6 Regent Park Boulevard Mews with Retail.

Source: Toronto Community Housing.

Vital to the success of Regent Park has also been the mix of uses throughout the neighbourhood. Significant efforts continue to be made to ensure the right balance of commercial retail, services, institutional and cultural amenities to serve Regent Park residents (see Figure 10.6). To date, Regent Park has successfully added grocery stores, restaurants, banks and a barbershop to name a few. Second-floor spaces have been leased out to institutions and agencies such as George Brown College. A birthing centre and the Regent Park Arts and Cultural Centre also serve different needs in the community. TCHC and its current developer partner have also formed a retail committee to explore ideas for future tenants that residents would like in the community. The difficulty, moving forward, will be the state of the retail industry itself which is struggling in many communities around the world as more people move to online shopping. The master plan will need to adapt to ensure the revitalization principles are met and that Regent Park continues to have thriving streets with grade-level animation.

Social Infrastructure

Revitalization is about more than just housing. Revitalization is about improving both the physical and social aspects of a community. Considerations should be made to relocate community amenities such as a community centre or library to the new community. One of the most transformative parts of Regent Park has been the new aquatic centre. It has become a destination in the community and well used by residents of Toronto near and far.

TCHC has also made economic development a priority in the community. The developer partner has a commitment to provide a minimum 10% of all job opportunities for Regent Park tenants.

Today, over 1,600 jobs have been filled by tenants since revitalization began. Opportunities were also created with retailers who have opened in the neighbourhood. Investments have also been made in education and training for tenants to ensure they are prepared for the job opportunities offered in the community. TCHC and its partners leverage their relationships to extract benefits for tenants in this regard. As part of the procurement process, economic benefits to tenants is a priority, and TCHC seeks out proposals, which provide robust plans to connect tenants with jobs and training.

Community Engagement

Community engagement has been a cornerstone from the beginning of the planning stages for revitalization of the Regent Park community, and TCHC's goal is to engage as many people as possible throughout the revitalization process. The corporation recognizes that revitalization is an enormous change for residents that creates uncertainty and affects their ties to the community. To ensure the broadest reach possible, TCHC has employed a variety of methods such as using community animators, who are TCHC tenants, to facilitate the exchange of information between TCHC and tenants. This has proven to be extremely effective, as many tenants may feel intimidated speaking directly to their landlord about certain issues. It also helps that these tenants are usually known in the community and easily accessible to others that may have concerns or questions.

TCHC has also employed other methods of communication such as lobby intercepts and door-knocking in addition to more traditional methods such as meeting notices, flyers and newsletters. TCHC has found lobby intercepts and door-knocking to be two of the most effective means of outreach to tenants. Many tenants do not feel comfortable asking questions in front of their neighbours at larger community meetings or they may ignore paper mail and miss critical information. By interacting with tenants in person, it allows tenants to recognize the engagement team and allows the teams to identify potential barriers that will need to be addressed in future communications and/or outreach (e.g., translation and language services, accessibility requirements). As the revitalization progresses, the engagement process has become more complicated due to the fact that new residents, who are not TCHC tenants, are being included in the conversations. TCHC has had to adapt to ensure all voices are being considered, even though it has an obligation to engage with its own tenants and ensure their needs are being met.

TCHC released a request for proposals (RFP) process to seek a developer partner for the remaining phases of Regent Park in early 2019. After hearing from residents who felt they did not have a voice in the process, the procurement practices were adapted to include residents through:

1. An RFP procurement committee made up of TCHC tenants and condominium residents to review the terms of the RFP and ensure the community vision and resident expectations were reflected in the terms of reference;
2. A revitalization working group was created and tasked with the co-creation of the community engagement strategy around the RFP. Many of the recommendations have been incorporated into the process;
3. Two RFP informational open house were held where the community could do a page-turn review of the final document prior to it being issued;
4. TCHC held two "community conversations" which were forums where the community could share their priorities and recommendations for the revitalization of the phase 4 and 5

- lands. The priorities were compiled into a Community Conversations Report, which was shared with the proponents via an RFP addendum;
5. A presentation to the community by the shortlisted proponents was incorporated into the process, where residents will hear the different visions and community economic development plans and evaluate those parts of the proposal. The final scores make up 20% of the proponents' overall score; and
 6. Once the developer partner has been selected, a plan for community benefits will be entered into by TCHC, the successful proponent and representatives of the community. The plan will secure the benefits to residents and hold the developer partner and TCHC accountable for delivering on those commitments.

References

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