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# “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).<sup>1</sup> 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

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

provincial governments. In 1995, Ontario's right-wing conservative government further devolved the file to municipal governments, encouraging them to be entrepreneurial with their newly inherited public stock (Hackworth & Moriah, 2006). In the absence of federal programming, mixed-income redevelopment has only been sporadically adopted by cash-strapped housing authorities, and only for sites with the potential for high-density real estate development. Indeed, attracting and facilitating gentrification is a key part of the Canadian model. This model is made possible in Toronto by intense inner-city gentrification marked by high-density residential development (Lehrer & Wieditz, 2009; Walks & Rosen, 2015). While it is more boldly market oriented, legislation in Ontario prevents the unit loss and egregious displacement seen in the US, by requiring that demolished units be replaced one-for-one, at the same site. In addition, formal screening criteria are not imposed, and residents have the technical right to return to their communities. There is no Canadian voucher program, and so redevelopment does not involve dispersal through tenant-based subsidies. Beyond these differences, the Canadian model has similarities to revitalization programs around the world – it is premised on the presumed benevolence of the middle class, the presumed deviance of residents living in concentrated poverty, and it is designed according to “New Urbanist” conventions. It also facilitates gentrification, the destruction of post-war public housing, and the physical and social displacement of tenant communities.

In 2002, TCHC announced plans to redevelop Regent Park. After the five-phase project is complete, the community's 2087 rent-geared-to-income (RGI) public housing units will be replaced with rebuilt RGI public housing (1877 units), “affordable” rental apartments (262 units),<sup>2</sup> and private market condominiums (5400 units) built by Daniels Corporation, TCHC's developer-partner. This will reduce the proportion of on-site RGI housing from 100% initially, to 25% post-redevelopment. The area will be re-designed, replacing Regent Park's modernist, mostly low-rise brick buildings, open spaces, and walking paths with a “New Urbanist” landscape of densely-packed townhouses and high-rise glass towers, arranged along a new grid-patterned road network (Figs. 1–2). Revitalization will also bring new facilities, services, and commercial spaces.

As each phase progresses, residents are temporarily relocated from their homes, either to off-site units in TCHC's portfolio, or vacant units in Regent Park. Although one-for-one on-site replacement is legally required, TCHC was granted permission to replace 266 RGI units off-site, in three towers built outside of the “footprint” of the original Regent Park during Phase I of revitalization. As such, not all tenants can return to Regent Park. By 2009, tenants from Phase I (relocated in 2005) had returned to new off-site and on-site units. The second round of relocation began in 2010, and residents will have returned to the completed Phase II homes by 2016. In 2014, relocations and demolition for Phase III were underway.

There are clear benefits to be had from revitalization. Tenants who return receive new, modern apartments with updated layouts, technology, and design. They have access to new facilities, parks, and stores. Security-related incidents are also down, as drug-related activities are being pushed out of Regent Park (August, 2014a).

In addition to benefits there are also disadvantages. Many tenants have experienced displacement, in obvious ways (through off-site re-housing and relocation), and more subtle ways (Ibid.). TCHC has altered the number, timing, and location of its phases repeatedly, often without consultation or even notification. Since 2002 the number of planned condos has sky-rocketed, from 2400 to 5400; the number of on-site public housing units has decreased (with off-site re-housing surreptitiously added to the plans); and the method for re-housing tenants has changed (without notice), from a ‘first-out, first-back’ policy to allocation by lottery. As tenants

return, many are experiencing problems with the quality and size of their new units (Ibid.), and questioning—with the massive influx of condo residents—in whose interest revitalization has been planned. Clearly, there are many aspects of redevelopment that tenants might reasonably choose to oppose. There is evidence too, that many were skeptical from the get-go. Colleen,<sup>3</sup> a “community animator” (a resident hired by TCHC to help with consultations) for Phase I, explained:

There were a lot of [tenants] that didn't want this to happen — a lot. Even though they knew the conditions of their homes, they did not want this and I think it's because they knew ‘I'm going to get displaced, I'm going to have to move to another community, and I don't want it.’

Despite these sentiments, tenants have not come together to resist revitalization in an organized way. For some, this absence reflects satisfaction with redevelopment and its progress to date (for details on tenant satisfaction, see August, 2014a). For others, however, there was much to be critical about. Many tenants have expressed dissatisfaction (or expressed mixed perspectives) on their new housing, on the community's new social mix, and on the displacement associated with redevelopment (Ibid.; see also James, 2012; August, 2014b). These critiques have not emerged, I would argue, as the result of exceptionally poor implementation of redevelopment in Regent Park, but rather are to be expected from the mixed-income public housing redevelopment model, which critical scholars are increasingly coming to identify as inherently flawed. What is noteworthy about Regent Park, however, is that despite the reality of discontent (among some tenants), there has been little in the way of organized resistance, suggesting that there is more to the story and that forces may be at work to silence critical voices.

## 5. Roadblocks to resistance: factors preventing tenant organization in Toronto

This paper identifies five inter-related factors that have played a role in limiting or preventing the emergence of organized tenant resistance at Toronto's flagship revitalization site. These factors have emerged in a context—mirroring that in many public housing communities—in which the reigning physical and social conditions, and existing power relations do not provide a fertile environment for tenant organizing in the first place. Before discussing the five factors, it is worth articulating a few of these contextual issues.

In Regent Park, desperation for new housing is a key contextual issue that helps to explain the lack of organized tenant opposition to revitalization. Years of disinvestment and neglect led to serious problems with housing quality and maintenance prior to redevelopment. Tenants faced bug infestations, broken appliances, mold, leaks, and general disrepair. Common areas were often unclean, or commandeered by drug dealers. While residents generally liked their old apartments, they were desperate for repairs and improvements that would make them more liveable (August and Walks, 2012). Speaking to this desperation, Asif, a 3-year Regent Park resident originally from Syria, explained: “I will accept any new unit over this.” According to Karen (a white, 17-year resident), disinvested housing limited her free choice:

Last winter that wall split right open and water came barreling out of it... So I did not want to wait another four years... [Tenants] took whatever came first because we are desperate. It's not really like we have a choice. Because we don't have money, so we don't have a choice.

<sup>2</sup> “Affordable” units are publicly owned (and thus “social housing”), but not rent-geared-to-income. Instead they are offered at 80% of average market rent.

<sup>3</sup> The names of key informants and tenants are pseudonyms. For tenant interviewees, additional information (length of time in the community, place of origin or ethnic identity) are provided, unless these details would undermine their anonymity.





Fig. 1. Old townhomes and 3-storey walk-up apartments in Regent Park.

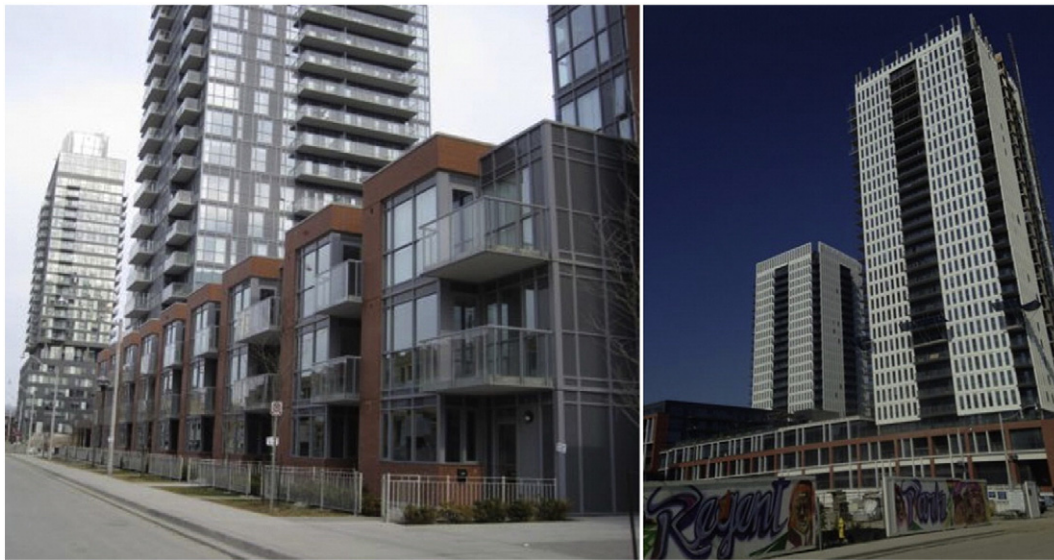


Fig. 2. New townhomes and towers built in Phases I-II of Regent Park revitalization.

Tenants living in deteriorating conditions are less likely to organize resistance, and more likely to accept what is offered to them because they are desperate for improved housing (Goetz, this issue). The Director of a TCHC-funded tenant group acknowledged this reality, noting: “absolutely there were those who were opposed, but not as many as you think. The quality of housing was so bad, most people saw it as an opportunity to get other housing” (August and Walks, 2012, p. 285). In short, tenants facing pressing need for better material conditions are unlikely to mount a challenge against revitalization plans.

The sheer popularity of mixed-income revitalization as a redevelopment model also puts a chill on vocal tenant opposition. In Toronto and beyond, there is a consensus among professionals, mainstream academics, politicians, and the media that modernist public housing is outmoded, and that mixed-income redevelopment, poverty deconcentration, and public–private partnerships are the best practice for moving forward. According to Wright (2006), the power of this prevailing ideology among Chicago’s urban elites reduced the likelihood that critical tenant voices would be heard or taken seriously. Similarly in Toronto, the city’s media and political establishment support revitalization, and frame it as path breaking and benevolent. The language on TCHC’s (2014) website is illustrative:

[W]e are transforming aging housing infrastructure to build better homes, better neighbourhoods and a better Toronto for all. Regent

Park is a ground-breaking example of how [TCHC’s] approach to city building can transform a community into a successful, mixed-income, mixed-use community.

The celebratory, pro-revitalization ideology that prevails in Toronto works to shut down critical opposition. It has convinced many tenants to accept revitalization and buy in to the promise of a better life — creating supporters out of potential opponents. It also creates an unwelcoming context for dissenting voices. Not only must critical tenants ‘rain on the parade’, they must also come up against the full weight of dominant hegemonic discourse, challenging beliefs that are treasured by a range of powerful and influential social and political actors. If they speak out, they face an unreceptive (even hostile) audience. For many, this is a powerful disincentive.<sup>4</sup>

In Regent Park the length of revitalization and reality of off-site relocation has led to attrition among tenants who might otherwise organize resistance efforts. Over 15–20 years, tenants may suffer burnout, disenchantment, and a loss of interest in participating in community organizing. Off-site relocation also reduces tenants’ connection to the community. With hundreds of residents literally removed from the

<sup>4</sup> In 2013, several women in Regent Park found this out first hand, when they faced a public backlash after they were quoted in a newspaper article (Levy, 2012) as critical of revitalization. The women swiftly targeted with a barrage of nasty on-line commentary calling them “welfare queens” and characterizing them as ungrateful.

community, the foundation for organized activism is limited. Colleen, a community animator from Phase I pointed to this problem:

A lot of people tend to slip through the cracks and nobody really understands what has happened with them because they don't have that connection [to Regent Park] anymore. ... It's unfortunate because I think that we've lost a lot of really good advocates that we had in this community throughout this process.

In a context where tenants are desperate for new housing, encouraged to accept a wildly popular model for revitalization, and then put through a lengthy process in which many are physically removed from the community, there are already many barriers to critical opposition. In Regent Park, five additional factors were also at play that worked to stifle tenant organizing and resistance to revitalization.

### 5.1. Benevolent branding: constructing a narrative of tenant-oriented revitalization

The first factor that has worked to prevent critical opposition is TCHC's effective campaign to brand revitalization as tenant-oriented. Building on the mainstream popularity of the mixed-income redevelopment model, two key narratives have served to legitimize redevelopment and deflect criticism.

The first narrative is that tenants came up with the idea to revitalize Regent Park. This origin myth is repeated at meetings and in media stories. In 2010, for example, the ward councilor opened a community meeting by saying: "People will point to here and say, 'wow, how did this happen?' and how it happened was when the people of Regent Park got together, spoke together, and moved together, and got this done." As with any myth, there is an element of truth—tenants in Regent Park have a long history of fighting to improve their community (Purdy, 2004), and that many were involved in the planning for revitalization—both in 2002, and with earlier (failed) attempts at redevelopment.<sup>5</sup> It is a stretch, however, to say that they fought for a mixed-income approach. According to Charlene, a white 26-year resident and long-time tenant leader:

I think that is a lot of hokum. When we started off with revitalization, we were only talking about getting rid of the old buildings and bringing in the new ... it was the government that implemented the idea of having units to sell ... we had a lot of good fighting about it because a lot of us didn't want it that way ... Initially we said, we want you to tear down Regent Park and rebuild it for 'we, the residents of Regent Park.'

Malena (22-year resident), was frustrated with what she saw as false history:

It wasn't the residents who wanted redevelopment ... [TCHC] talked to their little organizations, and *they* made the decision, not the residents. They've been saying that a lot of this comes from the residents. Bullshit! It's not the residents. They made the decision themselves.

Even so, this origin myth plays a powerful role in legitimating revitalization in the eyes of the broader public and tenants who are newer to the community.

The second of TCHC's 'benevolent branding' narratives is that revitalization has been shaped by extensive tenant engagement. According to TCHC (2008), "more than 2000 residents and community stakeholders were consulted for revitalization planning." This includes an original process — used to develop the first revitalization plan (Regent Park Collaborative Team, 2002), and subsequent consultation exercises in

advance of each new phase, and for the new park, community center, and so on. The original process was managed by a consulting firm, which held stakeholder meetings and facilitated four tenant workshops. Community animators were also hired to engage with tenants and with specific ethnic communities (Boston & Meagher, 2003). For TCHC, this process has attained a mythic status — constituting the moment at which tenants allegedly consented to redevelopment. For those who have come after, the historic fact of "extensive consultation" trumps critical concerns in the present moment, effectively dismissing critical opposition.<sup>6</sup>

Many observers have challenged the meaningfulness of these consultation efforts. While TCHC implies that tenants selected, directed, and shaped the plan, a planner hired to draft it in 2002 recalled that the key decisions had been made by TCHC in advance:

By the time we got there [in 2002] the decision had been made that it would be a socially mixed community ... TCHC [also] said to assume that the buildings are going to go, although we were not sure if that was necessary.

In the opinion of Pamela, the director of a community-serving agency, the process was "more gloss than anything else." She explained: "[TCHC] is sincere in wanting consultation, but they want it for a certain amount, and then — go away." While celebrated, TCHC's effort would fall under the category of "tokenism" on Sherry Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation, serving largely to inform residents and manufacture consent. For some, this approach has its value. According to Sumit (10-year resident, Bangladesh): "[TCHC] asked good questions and delivered the information ... they are taking good steps in making people aware of the situation that is going to be happening." Others, like Julia (a white, 41-year resident), were unimpressed: "I've attended all of the meetings, pretty much. They repeat the same thing over and over again: 'It's going to be beautiful', [and] 'we've found that this is a fair way to do things'." Karen had an angrier response:

Do you know what they talk about? The cultural centre that is going to be put in over here! ... I don't give a fuck about a cultural centre; I want to know if there is going to be a roof over my head.

Malena was also critical of the consultation process:

It's all false advertisement ... They're not really *asking* you — they are *telling* you ... [and] it's not the full information. Certain information has been told — only what they want to tell. And the rest they keep to themselves until you find out what's really going on.

Consultation may not have shaped revitalization, but the branding of revitalization as consultative and tenant-driven has likely worked to prevent opposition. This is especially noticeable when compared with Canadian redevelopment sites where a public relations campaign was absent. In Vancouver's Little Mountain, for example, BC Housing imposed mixed-income revitalization with little consultation, and moved swiftly to carry out evictions and demolition to provide a vacant site to their developer-partner. Tenants and allies responded quickly, with weekly protests (called "stands for housing") at busy intersections, and with an "Art-In" — where messages were painted on boarded-up units, protesting demolition (Thomson, 2010).<sup>7</sup> While there are differences between the

<sup>5</sup> The key tenant organization involved in earlier struggles has since been re-launched by TCHC with a mandate to promote revitalization. See section on Cooptation of Resistance (below, p. 11) for a discussion of this shift.

<sup>6</sup> The narrative of *previous* consultation is often used to dismiss contemporary critiques. At a 2013 Consultation Meeting (a legal planning requirement), both tenants and homeowners from the surrounding area raised concerns about the dramatic increase in condos proposed for the third phase of revitalization. At one point the lead planner explained that, "these plans are based on extensive tenant consultation," to dismiss the 'consultation' happening in that very moment. Similarly, the frequent claim that "tenants wanted this" prioritizes the alleged demands of mythologized former tenants over contemporary concerns, and works to invalidate and dismiss them.

<sup>7</sup> The comparison with Little Mountain is also informed by on-camera interviews and observation conducted by the author in 2009 and 2011 in order to create a short video documentary about mixed-income redevelopment: <https://vimeo.com/25835913>.



projects, BC Housing's heavy-handed approach seems to have provoked impassioned resistance, while TCHC's velvet glove of positive branding has built support, won over skeptics, and neutralized critical opposition.

### 5.2. Consultation games

The second and related barrier to resistance comes from active efforts by TCHC to suppress it. Public meetings—where critical questions are asked and answered—ought to provide a forum for tenants to identify potential allies for organizing efforts. Rather than facilitate such a forum, TCHC actively re-designed meeting formats to limit the public airing of opposition. This happened in response to a tenant uprising at a May 2007 public meeting in Lawrence Heights. According to Adam, a community organizer, tenants did not want a repeat of the displacement they had witnessed in Regent Park, so they turned the meeting into a “mini revolt,” which became a “public relations disaster,” and made news headlines (Vincent, 2007). At the next meeting, TCHC canceled the public Q & A, sequestering residents into small groups instead. Adam explained: “they were asked to write down their concerns — no more public forum.”

This approach from Lawrence Heights was also used in Regent Park, where TCHC stopped responding to tenant questions in front of the entire room. Instead, residents were told to approach the staff after the meeting if they had comments. According to Malena:

When I ask questions they always give me the runaround. When I ask, they will say, “Oh we'll meet after the meeting and we'll talk” ... at one meeting I said, “no, you tell me the answer now because I want everyone to hear.” They said, “no,” and I said, “tell me *now*, because this is for everyone to hear — and that is always the case.”

Many Regent Park tenants had concerns and fears about revitalization. At community meetings, the lack of a common forum to hear from one's neighbors limited tenants' opportunities to meet and potentially organize with others who shared their concerns.

### 5.3. Co-optation of resistance

The third factor that has limited opposition is the co-optation of oppositional voices. In Regent Park, one way this happens is when outspoken tenant leaders are hired to work for TCHC or Daniels Corporation. For low-income residents, employment is difficult to resist, even if this means that their critical voice is silenced. Mariella, a four-year resident, found herself in this bind:

I'm going from being part of the solution to part of the problem... I've noticed a few people who are troublemakers all got hired. I'm the seventh [critical] person who got hired. They find those who make the noise. Seven people who were advocates — now they don't show up to the community meetings. What's the saying? Don't bite the hand that feeds — [we] have to be loyal ... We seven, we were always contacting the media ... we brought attention from outside the community.

Similarly, Judy (14-year resident) kept her critical perspectives to herself, as an employee of TCHC. She explained: “I am a [community] animator, I work for them. So it isn't good to say anything bad about the neighbourhood.”

Community-based agencies have been put in the same bind: when offered resources, they may be hesitant to ‘bite the hand that feeds.’ In the context of a broad historical shift from a focus by community-based organizations on advocacy and organizing to a focus on community ‘development’ (Deflippi, 2004), and in the context of diminishing state funding support, representatives from community agencies are hesitant to be political, and can face cooptation. In Regent Park, for example, a representative from an agency spoke publicly against the displacement associated with revitalization. He was contacted almost

immediately by the developer and offered potential assistance with future programming. With this offer, he decided it would be best to refrain from public critique, so as not to jeopardize any future arrangements, and risk harming community members served by the agency.

Co-optation has also affected tenant representational structures in Regent Park. In other cities where tenants have organized to resist redevelopment, pre-existing organizational structures and networks have been in place to support (and to activate) these efforts. In Chicago, for example, tenant resistance was built on a strong network of organizers, community agencies, and tenant groups, with histories of working together and access to resources (Wright, 2006). In Regent Park, the two tenant representation structures that might have created a forum for critical discussion are fundamentally incapable of supporting resistance (August and Walks, 2012). The first, a formerly tenant-run organization, was re-launched in 2002 by TCHC with a mandate to support redevelopment. A former tenant organizer commented on the TCHC-run resident's organization:

[TCHC] didn't give it a life of its own. That's why you don't want management organizing tenants, because they have an objective of *getting* people who are going to cause them trouble ... the point is, if you are a TCHC tenant, you get co-opted. You don't want to fight with [TCHC] because they are going to cause you trouble.

The other structure for representing tenants in Regent Park is the Tenant's Council, an elected body who meet regularly with staff as part of TCHC's tenant participation system. With a narrow mandate that does not include a focus on revitalization-related issues, the Council was simply not designed to support critical perspectives on redevelopment. As such, residents with critical concerns lack the support of a resourced, organized network to help mobilize resistance.

### 5.4. Fear of reprisal

The fourth factor preventing resistance is the reality that tenants fear reprisal from TCHC and influential supporters of revitalization — a trend witnessed in other sites as well (Goetz, this issue; Wright, 2006). Given the power imbalance between tenants and their landlord, many were convinced that speaking out would work against them. According to Malena:

Nobody speaks out. Everybody is afraid ... People don't speak out because they are afraid of how they are going to get treated where they are, or not get service for their apartment ... or that they are going to get something shitty.

Julia felt similarly:

People are afraid to open their faces ... they really don't want to [speak out]. It's because—it's true—sometimes they are not nice to you afterwards. They're really not. So you keep your mouth shut, just for your own survival. So if you don't want them to, you know, be mean to you, or not come and fix your unit, then you keep your mouth shut.

Moumita (a four-year Bengali resident) agreed: “Every person I know has problems but they don't say them out of their mouth because they are scared ... our Asian people are so much scared.” Community agencies were also hesitant to speak out. While representatives shared critical views in private, none that I interviewed were willing to voice critiques publicly. Their fear was not unfounded — in 2008, TCHC moved to evict a community group after members organized a film screening and discussion that was critical of revitalization (August and Walks, 2012).

Speaking out is a scary prospect, and even trenchant critics may shy away from the glare of the media. Jayani (a long-time resident) was quoted in many news stories praising her new apartment, even though

she was upset with its quality and the process of redevelopment. She explained:

Sometimes TCHC staff come and interview us, I don't tell them about our bad attitude, about the problems with our [unit]. People come from [the media] too, I don't tell any of the bad things. I say, "oh good, everything is good."

Zahir (an 8-year resident) also gave a glowing report to the media, despite giving his new apartment a score of *one* (out of ten) in a private interview.<sup>8</sup> He explained that he felt pressure to confirm people's high expectations, especially because the local councilor was looking on during his media interview. Other tenants were convinced that espousing pro-revitalization attitudes would lead to better housing outcomes. Samir, a 17-year resident originally from Sudan was not able to return to an on-site unit, and he felt that among those who had, "all of them, or most of them, spoke to the media and said 'this is a 100% perfect project.'"

### 5.5. Internalized powerlessness

Another factor limiting vocal opposition is the reality that some tenants have internalized the idea that they are powerless. Many who were disappointed by their relocation (or rehousing) options seemed resigned to accept things rather than fight for something better. Omar (13-year tenant, Bangladesh) had a common refrain: "what should I do? I have no choice." Noemie, a 12-year resident, was resigned to being forced off-site, explaining: "I'm fine with whatever. I have no power." These sentiments were often paired with a sense of undeservingness. Chanming, (12-year resident, China), said: "even if I don't like it, it's good enough for me — a low-income senior." Similarly, Nathasha's (9-year resident) Bengali parents did not feel entitled to speak up:

I think they don't really voice their opinions because they feel that they don't have any right to. Because they don't "give back" much so they don't expect that they should receive anything back. I think if you asked a lot of low-income families here: "How do you feel that you can't return back [to Regent Park]?" They would say, "What can I do? The fact that I was even here was a blessing." I think they make themselves feel better with saying, "Okay, I deserved that."

In some ways, these are rationale responses to a situation in which tenants do have limited power and choice. They reflect the internalization of hegemonic ideology—not unique to Regent Park—which positions poor and racially marginalized residents of social housing as inferior and undeserving, and a social reality in which they are disadvantaged by persistent race, gender, and class inequality. At the same time, these attitudes self-fulfill the prophecy of tenant powerlessness, ensuring that an increasingly compliant tenant population will go along with whatever plans are imposed. Perhaps, as the next section suggests, tenants have more power than they realize.

## 6. The potential for tenant power

While the forces that limit tenant resistance are considerable, tenants who do organize can have success. Even small efforts by a handful of people can alter redevelopment for the better. In Don Mount Court, for example, residents successfully fought to split revitalization into two phases (only one was proposed), to prevent wholesale community displacement. According to Marlene (a tenant active in the process): "that was our strategy, they can't kick us out when we are still living here, and if

we have some type of connection." Their efforts were successful, and some tenants were able to stay on-site during redevelopment.

In Lawrence Heights, tenants had the benefit of watching things unfold at Regent Park, and came to the table armed with critical perspectives. According to community organizer Adam: "this didn't happen in Regent Park because there was no history to look back on, [but] in Lawrence Heights there is a mass of criticism against the whole project." In addition, a well-organized network of agencies was in place to support grassroots tenant organizing. According to Roseanne, a tenant organizer: "I don't think Regent Park really had the support we had ... a bunch of stuff was happening that really helped build the whole momentum of residents being empowered." With this momentum, residents fought for and won a commitment to "zero displacement" during revitalization, ensuring no one would be relocated off-site. Tenants played a role in selecting a developer, and insisted that short-listed developers present their proposals to the entire community, not only to TCHC. They also successfully fought for a new central park, despite being told that it could not be built.

Roseanne reflected on the power of tenant voices, explaining: "It is the power of words: you don't know where that language, that word, that concept will fall; whose ears will hear it, who might acknowledge that need, and what is going to happen." In Lawrence Heights, successes from speaking out have further empowered and emboldened residents. Tenants secured funding from TCHC to support their grassroots group, and taken steps to prevent it from being co-opted. According to Roseanne:

Even if [TCHC] tried to be part of our meetings—and I know there have been attempts—we say: 'you are going to have to step back ... your presence is not needed, we can form our own agenda. We do need your connection for certain things, but we've got this.'

While the deck is clearly not stacked in their favor, organized tenants can make real gains. In Toronto, these have tended to work within the confines of an imposed revitalization model. It is conceivable however, that broad-based, concerted tenant mobilization could effect more transformative change — challenging the implementation of redevelopment altogether, and demanding interventions that are truly targeted to improved tenant welfare and quality of life. Roseanne felt hopeful about tenant power, despite the many barriers to it:

I don't think Regent Park knew the secret to the power. None of it could have happened if residents didn't want it. So if residents had gotten together and fought revitalization, it couldn't have happened.

## 7. Conclusions

In Toronto's Regent Park, surprisingly little tenant resistance emerged in response to mixed-income revitalization, compared to other cities where organized tenants have fought against displacement, gentrification, and community destruction. This paper has pointed to several, inter-connected dynamics that have contributed to this absence, in a context where tenants were desperate for new housing, faced with a very popular revitalization approach, and experiencing attrition in their numbers over a lengthy redevelopment timeline. Tenant resistance was hampered (1) by a successful campaign to brand revitalization as progressive and tenant-oriented, (2) by TCHC's efforts to limit meaningfully consultation, (3) by tenants' fear of reprisal for speaking out, (4) by the co-optation of resistance, and (5) by tenants' internalization of a narrative that they are undeserving and should accept what they are given. No single factor on its own explains why limited resistance emerged in Regent Park, but when these forces are considered together, it is not surprising that very few tenants have come up against revitalization. For outspoken critic Karen, the reality for tenants was that: "it's all about power and you have none."

<sup>8</sup> Tenants were asked to rank their satisfaction with their new and old apartments. Zahir gave his brand new apartment this low score because it was much smaller than his old one and offered his family less privacy.



While the barriers to resistance are formidable, tenant organizing efforts that have emerged show that tenants do have power when they mobilize together. In Toronto these efforts have worked to tweak existing revitalization plans, but their success suggests that a more concerted campaign could reshape, transform, or even stop revitalization altogether, in favor of a tenant-oriented strategy for public housing renewal. For public officials and planners, there is much that can be done to support rather than suppress tenant voices. It is necessary to support (but not control) independent organizations for tenant representation, and adopt radically open consultation processes in which input truly shapes decision-making. Public officials must refrain from repeating idealized histories and questionable discourses to dress up real estate development projects as benevolent and tenant-oriented. Committing funds to public housing maintenance and community facilities—for the sake of sitting residents, and not as part of a gentrification scheme—would also be ideal. Even better would be efforts to undermine the structural inequality that makes resistance necessary in the first place.

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