



When 'just right' is not right: Pushing back against austerity in Toronto

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Abstract

In Toronto, selected social housing communities are being 'revitalized' in partnership with the private sector. This move is widely embraced by policymakers, politicians and social service agencies all of whom applaud its utility in transforming neighbourhoods of concentrated poverty into mixed-income communities. However, residents and community groups criticize this form of top-down neoliberal governance as regulating the morality of space. We explore here the met and unmet demands of residents of three social housing communities targeted for revitalization in Toronto, and highlight resident wins and losses and share lessons for housing activists involved in other similar situations.

We see this provocation as part of a multi-scalar push back against austerity in housing. Specifically, while the 2008 crisis did not directly affect Canadian housing, it did play a role in solidifying austerity-as-common-sense as the over-arching frame of neoliberal governance at the local, provincial and national scales. As the examples in this article underscore, this has had significant and damaging impacts on hegemonic housing policy, with government action on housing being strategically limited in ambition.

Keywords

Toronto, austerity, social housing, revitalization, multi-scalar

Introduction

‘Just right’ is how Toronto Mayor John Tory described the City’s 2018 \$11- billion operating budget approved by Council in February of that year (Rieti, 2018). In spite of a dire need to invest in aging social housing communities, decaying public schools and severely overcrowded public transit, Tory was determined to craft a budget that would keep property tax increases at or below the rate of inflation. We take a very different view and say this budget is ‘*not* right’ and offer this provocation as an incitement to housing activists to attack the austerity-as-common-sense argument that undergirds urban governance in Toronto today.

We write from a perspective that combines our individual past and continuing involvements in housing activism in Toronto: as resident and tenant activist of a social housing community redeveloped as a mixed-income neighbourhood, as project manager in an organization that developed social housing, as allies of residents of social housing slated for renovations and possible displacements, as student and teacher of housing issues at a large public university. Our lived experiences and activism range from the central core of the city to marginalized post-war suburbs.

While the 2008 crisis did not directly affect Canadian housing due to the organization of the banking sector and mortgage lending practices, it did play a significant role in solidifying austerity-as-common-sense as the over-arching frame of neoliberal governance at local, provincial and national scales. This has had a significant and damaging impact on housing policy. Government action on housing is strategic and limited in ambition, an approach that has acquired hegemonic status. A recent reflection by Martin Lukacs (2018) on federal politics in Canada notes ‘None of neoliberalism’s consequences is more insidious than the structural timidity it has entrenched’ (Lukacs, 2018), a timidity celebrated in the ‘just right’ approach.

At the local scale in Toronto, ‘revitalization’ of selected social housing communities in partnership with the private sector is being widely embraced by policy makers, politicians and social service agencies all of whom applaud its utility in transforming neighbourhoods of concentrated poverty into mixed-income communities. However, residents and community groups criticize this form of top-down neoliberal governance of the morality of space. They argue that if neighbourhood revitalization is genuinely to be a pathway out of poverty to greater social opportunity, residents need to participate in the planning process as equal partners and they need more in the way of tangible results than a new dwelling unit.

We explore the met and unmet demands of residents of social housing communities targeted for revitalization in the City of Toronto by case study examples we have direct lived experience of: Regent Park (the largest and oldest public housing project in the country), 60 Richmond St. E. (a non-profit co-op built to house displaced Regent Park residents), and Firgrove (an inner suburban social housing community targeted for partial physical rehabilitation). We highlight resident wins and losses and point towards lessons for housing activists involved in other similar situations. We see this provocation as part of a multi-scalar (local, provincial and national) push back against austerity in housing.

Toronto

Toronto, the capital of the province of Ontario, is a city of 2.8 million people in a region of more than six million. While as recently as the 1960s, Toronto's population was largely white and European, today the city prides itself on being one of the most ethno-culturally diverse in the world. The regional population increases by approximately 100,000 people per year, many of whom are immigrants from the Global South. Often ranked as one of the most livable cities in the world, Toronto is a globally important financial centre, and a major hub of government, higher education, healthcare, culture, and entertainment. At the same time Toronto is a place of increasing social polarization, a situation documented in a 2007 study by University of Toronto researcher, David Hulchanski, titled *The Three Cities Within Toronto*. In it he describes a city of affluence that is expanding, a city of median incomes that is shrinking, and a growing city of poverty, each of the three cities occupying different physical, social and political space within the boundaries of Toronto.

Austerity governance

We start from a position of understanding neoliberalism as a constructed project (Theodore and Peck, 2011). While the general terrain of neoliberal urban governance might look similar in many locations around the world (for example in an increasing reliance on private sector actors to help address urban issues), the details of neoliberalism on the ground are locally inflected: shaped by local histories and present-day realities of politics, policies, economy and social formation. In Toronto a key event was the 1995 election of a Progressive Conservative provincial government that promised a 'Common Sense Revolution.' During their eight years in power, they launched an aggressive roll-back and roll-out (Peck and Tickell, 2002) neoliberal agenda that included the cancellation of new social housing construction, downloading of responsibility for operating social housing to municipalities, deep cuts to social assistance payments, deep cuts to personal income tax, and downloading of the full cost of operating public transit to municipalities. While municipalities were saddled with many new governance responsibilities they were not provided any new sources of revenue. This downloading practice 'has been a particularly powerful incubator of urban austerity' (Albo and Fanelli, 2018), with austerity particularly dominating urban governance post-1995 in response to 'a state of permanent fiscal crisis' in municipal finance (ibid., 2018).

Impact on housing

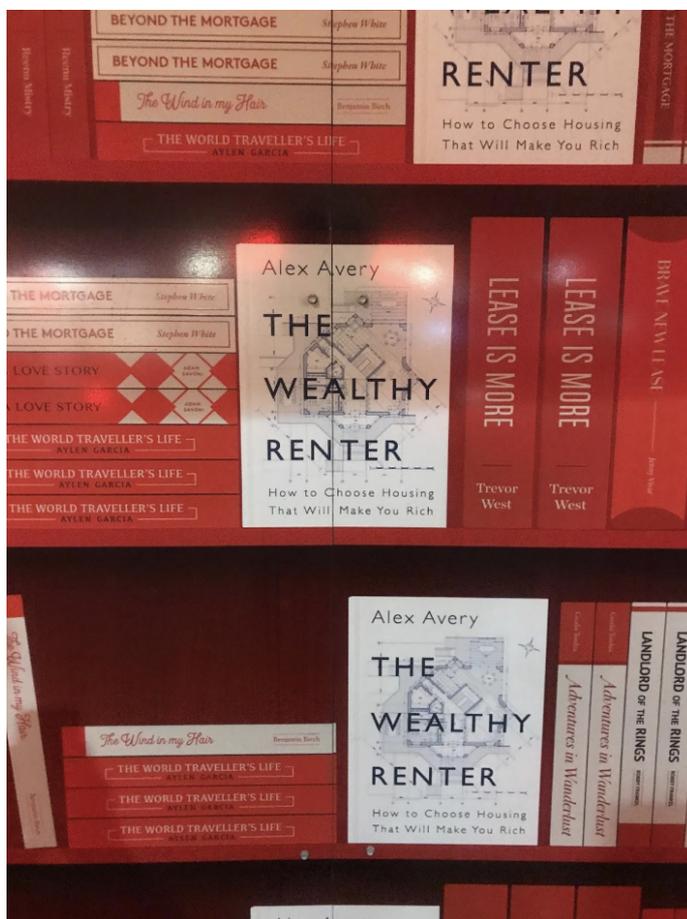
In twenty-first century Toronto, housing affordability is an ongoing crisis. Very few net new social housing units have been built in the past twenty years and the waiting list for Rent-Geared-to-Income (RGI) housing in the city has grown to more than 80,000 households (Ontario Nonprofit Housing Association, 2016). The local social housing agency (Toronto Community Housing Corporation or TCHC), with a portfolio of 58,500 units, faces a maintenance backlog of \$2.6 billion (Toronto Community Housing, 2017). In the private sector very little rental housing has been built for several decades, and until 2017 units built after 1991 were exempt from rent control. The rental vacancy rate is 1.1% (Canada

Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2016). Just under half of Toronto households are renters, and 47% of them pay more than 30% of their income on rent (City of Toronto, 2018). It is in this combined context of a local crisis in housing affordability and austerity in Toronto that we turn our attention to three social housing communities.

Figure 1

A construction hoarding board mocking Toronto's wealthy renters.

Source: Mehedi Khan, Spring 2018



Regent Park

Regent Park was Canada's first public housing project. It was developed from the late 1940s to the late 1950s in the city's downtown and was home to 7,500 people (Rowe and Dunn, 2015). Initially praised as a successful venture, the community quickly became known as one of the poorest and most stigmatized neighbourhoods in Canada with nearly seventy percent of residents living below the low-income cut-off rate (James, 2010 p. 74). In 2005, the Regent Park Revitalization project was launched as a multi-level government plan to rebuild the entire neighborhood in fifteen years (ibid.). TCHC not only planned to demolish and replace the public housing but also aimed to add several thousand units of private sector condominiums. New community facilities were also to be created to 'reinvigorate' the area, improve both the quality of life of residents and the image of the area, including an aquatic centre, a cultural hub, a community centre as well as new park space. During the redevelopment process current Regent Park residents are temporarily relocated to other parts

of the city. Once the homes are rebuilt, the original residents are given the opportunity to return to live within the community.

As the Regent Park Revitalization project now enters its final phase, its contradictory results and many unanswered questions are revealed. On the one hand there are many positive aspects of the revitalization: replacement of all public housing with new units, new streets and open spaces, attention to high quality architectural design, and the addition of more social services and facilities. On the other hand, the downside includes the offsite replacement of some 300 of the 2087 public housing units at other downtown locations, and the lengthy (at least 15 years) redevelopment process. Both of these factors have had significant disruptive impacts on what was a socially cohesive community. But most important, a major opportunity to tackle Toronto's housing crisis was missed. While all of the 2087 public housing units will be replaced (1800 units onsite in the neighbourhood) and 5,400 condominium units will be developed, there will be no net increase of public housing units despite the growth in housing need.

Based on the experience of Regent Park we believe that residents of other TCHC communities that are slated for revitalization should insist on two things. First, to minimize disruption to the community being redeveloped, all units should be replaced onsite. Second, to address the housing affordability crisis in Toronto there should be a significant net increase in the number of social housing units at each revitalization site.

Figure 2

Regent Park demolition
underway summer 2006.
Source: Douglas Young,
Summer 2006



Figure 3

The first condominium development in Regent Park, one cole, under construction.

Source: Douglas Young,
Summer 2008



Figure 4

Original Regent Park low rise public housing units contrasted with new condominiums.

Source: Mehedi Khan,
Summer 2018



Figure 5

Residents of Regent Park playing basketball on a new neighbourhood court.

Source: Mehedi Khan,
Summer 2018



60 Richmond

60 Richmond St. East, located about one km west of Regent Park, was completed in 2010 as offsite replacement housing for Regent Park residents displaced by the revitalization project. The 85 unit mixed-income and mixed-use space is an award-winning and innovative design that places much-needed attention on the global energy crisis. This TCHC-owned social housing structure was built with high energy efficient design features and includes an open courtyard garden irrigated by stormwater. Residents actively participate in the upkeep of the courtyard garden because of the unique co-operative housing governing model implemented by TCHC in this development. Many believe the co-op model's facilitation of resident involvement in their homes leads to higher personal satisfaction and greater commitment to the well-being of the collective dwelling space. 60 Richmond St. East is a strong example of how social housing can achieve multiple and inter-linked goals: reducing the demand for energy and strengthening bonds of community. We argue that 60 Richmond St. East provides a model that should be followed in all future TCHC Revitalization projects. This model is founded on cutting-edge innovative green design, the inclusion of mixed-income and mixed-uses within a single building, the co-operative governance model, and the relatively small scale of the development. This approach to social housing need not be a one-off. TCHC has the mandate to operate buildings as co-operatives and all new projects are required to meet green building standards. 60 Richmond represents the result of pressure from the local City Councillor, a strong supporter of co-ops, that it be operated as a co-operative, and the particular commitment of its architect, Teeple Architects Inc., to design excellence and sustainable architecture. If this approach worked in this case, why not replicate it in all future revitalizations?

Figure 6

60 Richmond redefining
urban social housing design
completed in 2010.
Source: **Mehedi Khan,**
Summer 2018



Firgrove

In 2015, the TCHC community of Firgrove Crescent (also known as ‘Connections’) was designated as one of the sites for TCHC’s “ReSet” Pilot program. ReSet is described as a major capital repairs program “with resident input on planning, design and decision-making at the forefront” (Toronto Community Housing, 2015). Firgrove is comprised of 388 dwelling units (137 high rise units, 251 rowhouses) and was built between 1971-1975. Its location 15 km northwest of downtown Toronto was at the suburban periphery in the 1970s; today it is considered a stigmatized ‘inner’ or ‘older’ suburb characterized by high levels of social need. Firgrove is part of one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Canada with a median annual household income of \$33,376 (Census Mapper, 2016).

ReSet was presented as a pivot from the Regent Park revitalization process to something better in that it would be a less disruptive revitalization with no demolitions or displacement and residents would be at the forefront of the decision-making process. However, our analysis of Firgrove suggests that residents were co-opted in the ReSet process. A classic work on participatory planning is Sherry Arnstein’s 1969 article, *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*. Arnstein’s ladder analogy consists of eight rungs: two levels of non-participation (manipulation and therapy), three rungs of tokenism (informing, consultation and placation) and three rungs of citizen power (partnership, delegated power and citizen control) (Arnstein, 1969, p. 218). In the case of Firgrove residents, they were tokenized by not being given real decision-making power and offered instead binary choices within an austerity budget determined by TCHC. For example, would tenants rather have kitchen cabinets replaced or bathrooms redone? Ultimately, TCHC suspended the program entirely because of lack of funding and closed 134 homes as unfit for human habitation.

Resident participation in ReSet required an acceptance that there was not enough money to do a thorough building renovation; that is, an acceptance of austerity as common sense. Tenants were then enlisted in making the difficult choice of what would be left unaddressed in the revitalization project. In that sense, they were being asked to act as agents of austerity working against their own interests as residents. We believe the Firgrove case makes clear that in future revitalization projects, residents should reject the austerity budgets created by the landlord, and they should demand a position higher up the ladder of participation.

Figure 7

Exterior of a 1975 townhome in Firgrove to be demolished.
Source: Mehedi Khan,
Fall 2017



Figure 8

Inside a townhouse unit at Firgrove.
Source: Mehedi Khan,
Fall 2017



Figure 9

Inside a unit at Firgrove that is slated for demolition.
Source: Mehedi Khan,
Fall 2017



Conclusions

On June 7 2018 the provincial election in Ontario was won by the Progressive Conservative (PC) party, the party that implemented the radically neoliberal ‘Common Sense Revolution’ in the 1990s. This time round their leader, Doug Ford, ran on the populist promise to ‘stop the party with the taxpayers’ money.’ The PC victory suggests that four years of even deeper austerity governance and more pressing challenges related to housing affordability lie ahead. We believe that the oncoming redirection of social policy away from public services and neoliberal government operations in Ontario calls for a strengthened pushback by all housing activists and social housing providers and residents. We hope that our brief analysis and personal knowledge of the three social housing communities in Toronto will provide some direction for this resistance.

Disclosure Statement

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