

From the 1920s to the 1940s, what is now Regent Park was referred to as Cabbage Town South due to residents growing vegetables and specifically cabbages on their front lawns. Although it was seen as one of the poorest areas in the city, this was partially a dismissive view of City reformers who misunderstood the community. Many of the predominantly English and Irish immigrants who lived there were skilled and semi-skilled with more than 10% having businesses on their own premises. Cabbage Town at the time was a mix of residential, industrial, and commercial establishments. Although incomes plummeted and the physical deterioration of buildings and poverty increased during the depression years, the area remained a diverse and vibrant community.



Photo: City of Toronto Archives, 1947

Local reformers had been calling for the redevelopment of Cabbage town since the mid-'30s but there was little interest among the citizenry. In fact, the results of a 1937 Toronto referendum voted against funding the project. By 1945, however, there was a renewed interest. With soldiers returning from WWII, Toronto was facing a serious housing deficit. In 1948 a massive 'Slum Clearing' would begin. All existing structures on the site were finally razed to the ground.



Photo: Harold Robinson / The Globe and Mail Inc. July 17, 1956



Regent Park North was envisioned as a 'Garden City' and with its open green spaces and trees, it was considered a beacon of community housing at the time. The new buildings were primarily small two and three-storey apartments and two-storey townhouses facing inward and away from the city. With all but two of the original roads remaining and fewer connections between the buildings, it was considered a safe and healthy environment for children to play. Residents were also encouraged to plant gardens around their units. With the exception of one church and one school, Regent Park had become a completely residential neighbourhood.



Photo: Harold Robinson / The Globe and Mail Inc. March 25, 1953

Construction was finally completed in 1956 and in the first number of years after completion, the new Garden City model of Regent Park seemed to have been widely used and well cared for. There is evidence of community gatherings, sporting events and well tended gardens. It should be noted, however, that the residents who returned to Regent Park were carefully vetted to ensure that they would make suitable tenants. Most of the very poor original residents simply didn't make the grade.



Photo: The Globe and Mail Inc. March 29, 1949



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Photo: Harold Robinson / The Globe and Mail Inc.  
March 25, 1953

Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s discontent was rising among community members as Regent Park was again falling into disrepair due to the neglect of all governments to maintain and repair important public housing assets. While newcomers to Canada saw the area as an affordable community to live in, the neighbourhood was increasingly under-resourced. The lack of investment in social supports and economic opportunities was exacerbated by intolerance and racism, and Regent Park saw a rise in crime and gang violence.



Photo: Dave Norris / Toronto Star, June 7, 1976



As time went on, the neighbourhood was increasingly known for being unsafe. Even the green spaces that were once considered an asset became more conducive to criminal activity and residents felt a greater risk to their personal safety. Regent Park was routinely subject to negative media stereotyping and over-policing. Black youth in particular were surveilled and disproportionately targeted by police. However, despite its reputation, Regent Park was a vibrant, close-knit community. Residents supported one another through mutual aid and worked proactively to address the social issues affecting their neighbours.



Photo: Mike Slaughter / Toronto Star, September 6, 1989

For example, throughout the 1980s, Regent Park residents had envisioned a community centre run by residents that would provide a safe place for their children to gather. To show their commitment, residents voluntarily agreed to commit \$2 per month for three years to raise money for their vision. Seeing this as a commitment to community building, municipal agencies provided an additional \$160,000 in capital.



Photo: Dale Brazao / Toronto Star August 22, 1989



Although not enough to fund the development of the community centre, the community's advocacy persuaded the federal and provincial governments to fund and build the South Regent Community Centre. The funds raised by the community and municipal agencies were turned into an endowment fund known as the Legacy Fund for local resident-led initiatives.



Photo: City of Toronto Archives



Community advocacy for change in Regent Park didn't stop there. The neighbourhood's aging building stock, lack of government funding for capital investment, maintenance and poor urban design which resulted in the community's isolation were the driving forces behind calls for revitalization.



Photo: Jim Wilkes / Toronto Star January 16, 1998



Although Regent Park was originally built by the federal government, responsibility for Ontario's social housing communities was downloaded to the provincial government in 1964, and then subsequently delegated to municipal authorities in 2002 with the creation of Toronto Community Housing (TCH). As TCH reflected on the physical state of Regent Park's housing stock, and received feedback from the community about maintenance issues and repair needs, discussion about a redevelopment gained traction. Finally, in 2003, Toronto City Council approved the Revitalization of Regent Park.



Photo: The Globe and Mail Inc. October 3, 2019



Regent Park at this time was made up of 100% social housing units, specifically rent geared-to-income housing. Given the state of disrepair of the buildings, TCH understood that the existing community would have to be razed and subsequently rebuilt. Raising funds for such a redevelopment would be challenging, but TCH saw an opportunity to transform the community with an innovative public-private partnership model that would enable them to use the proceeds from the sale of publicly owned land to finance redevelopment.



Photo: Andrew Francis Wallace/Toronto Star 2012



In 2005, The Daniels Corporation (Daniels) was selected by TCH to redevelop 53 of the 69 acres of Regent Park. The redevelopment plan sought to replace all 2,083 units of rent-geared-to-income housing in the area and add additional market housing for a total of 5,400 units; it would also create opportunities to welcome commercial and institutional uses into the neighbourhood for the first time. But, transforming Regent Park into an inclusive and vibrant mixed-use and mixed-income community would require a focus on not just the physical redevelopment, but also social development. From the outset, improving the quality of life for existing residents was identified as a priority.





The community's vision was articulated in the Regent Park Social Development Plan (SDP), which was developed through community consultation. Its goal was to promote social cohesion and inclusion by building trust through collaboration for a mixed income neighbourhood. An important feature of the SDP was that it identified a 'right to return', which secured the right for residents who were to be displaced during redevelopment to return to the community.





Demolition began in earnest in 2006. Because local employment had also been identified as a priority in the SDP, the demolition contractor, Restoration Environmental Contractors, worked with the neighbourhood association and community development agencies to train and provide employment to local residents. A total of 14 local residents were employed through in the early demolition work.





Local employment opportunities, however, did not end with the demolition process. In phases 1-3, close to 582 jobs were created for Regent Park residents through opportunities directly related to the revitalization. In addition, Daniels worked in collaboration with community organizations, local social service agencies and TCH to develop employment training programs for high school students, community members looking for opportunities in unionized trades, and foreign-trained professionals looking to gain Canadian experience.





The revitalization also brought with it new social infrastructure that has offered spaces for people to gather, facilitating social cohesion in the neighbourhood. Daniel's Spectrum is an arts and cultural hub, performance and learning space that also provides space for the community to gather informally. In addition, the community now boasts a "Big Park" with a playground, the Pam McConnell Aquatic Centre, a new Regent Park Community Centre, and the Regent Park Athletic Grounds. These spaces bring people together over recreation. Ongoing innovation and advocacy in regard to all these spaces have aimed to make them more accessible and responsive to the full range of community groups and needs.





Community organizations and grassroots groups also continued to develop programs and initiatives to support the SDP. However, 13 years into the revitalization, no direct funding had been provided to address SDP goals. As a result, City Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam, City staff, the Regent Park Neighbourhood Association, and agency executive directors came together to request funding from City Council. After a year of advocacy, they secured \$2.5 million and a dedicated city staff person, to support the implementation of community initiatives that addressed SDP goals. Securing this funding was an important milestone. Regent Park residents of all backgrounds had been involved in the advocacy around resourcing the SDP.





Although work remained to complete the physical and social redevelopment, the first 15 years of the revitalization had successfully brought together community members under a shared vision. In 2018, TCHC requested proposals from developers for the completion of phases 4 & 5. In 2019, The RPNA created the Community Benefits Coalition, which was made up of residents living in TCH and market buildings, local agencies, grassroots groups and government representatives. The coalition engaged with hundreds of residents, articulating community priorities in a report and community benefits framework. Both were endorsed by TCHC and RPNA setting the stage for the first community benefits agreement.





In 2020, the community learned TCH had selected Tridel as its development partner for the remaining phases of the Regent Park revitalization. Soon after this news, The Coalition has worked hard to ensure that community benefits continue to be part of the redevelopment plan for phases 4 and 5. As has been the case throughout the revitalization, TCH and Tridel continue to be committed to social development and the creation of local employment opportunities. With over \$26 million secured for community benefits, the Coalition is working with stakeholders to identify funding priorities and continues to advocate on behalf of all regent park residents.



Photo: Walied Khogali



The RPNA coalition continues to advocate on behalf of all regent park residents as Tridel and TCHC consider a rezoning application in 2022.

Story to be continued...