



# **Inner-Suburban Neighbourhoods, Activist Research, and the Social Space of the Commercial Street**

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## **Abstract**

This paper tracks the transition of “creative city” planning from the gentrified downtown to the disinvested inner-suburbs. It attends particularly to contradictory notions of community mobilized by proponents of inner-suburban revitalization and by residents and business owners who daily inhabit inner-suburban commercial streets where cultural planning interventions are typically



targeted. It further argues that those contradictory notions indicate immanent displacement pressure. The argument builds around data gleaned from an action research project in Toronto's Mount Dennis neighbourhood, a former manufacturing neighbourhood that is now home to a large number of precariously employed new immigrants. We contend that community engaged research not only allows for an analysis of the race and class dimensions of creative city planning, it consolidates marginalized perspectives and opens up alternative possibilities for planning and development. We also claim that the relational, exploratory and sometimes fraught process of sharing knowledge with community-based researchers enriches critical research on the exclusionary politics of redevelopment planning.

## Introduction

Recently, urban officials, planners, and consultants have borrowed “creative city” initiatives developed over the past two decades for the purpose of reviving post-industrial downtown cores, and they have directed them toward disinvested suburban communities (Bain, 2013; Leslie and Hunt, 2013). A common approach in many North American cities is to graft community economic development strategies onto large-scale infrastructure projects that are already underway. Proponents of urban development collaborate with local “main street” business leaders in particular to revitalize commercial streets with artisanal markets and “pop up” shops (temporary shops set up in abandoned or underutilized commercial spaces). These modes of development express a common aim among private-sector investors and public officials to attract the “creative class” to the suburbs, and specifically to replace low-margin businesses—the much stigmatized variety stores, nail salons, bars, and coffee shops that tend to concentrate in the commercial areas of disinvested suburban neighbourhoods—with “higher value” storefront uses. The expectation is that these processes will transform disinvested neighbourhoods into spaces of consumption attractive to investors and middle-class professionals, thereby sparking economic development that will improve the area for all (Barnes et al., 2006; McCann, 2007; Zukin, 2009, 2010; August and Walks, 2012; August, 2014).

Critical urban research has shown how such planning strategies in practice create contradictory possibilities of investment and displacement. On the one hand, they catalyze investment in communities long neglected in social planning processes; on the other hand, these initiatives also commonly catalyze racialized and classed processes involving displacement and territorial stigmatization of existing marginalized communities, as infrastructure development and creative-city planning draw new people to poor neighborhoods (Rankin and Mazer, 2011; Slater, 2006). Of course, it is hard to argue *against* development; dissenting voices are few, even among those who stand to lose the most as property values and rents inevitably increase. Yet the contradiction warrants some exploration in planning

circles if the stated objectives of improvement for all are to be genuinely pursued (Rankin, Kamizaki and McLean, 2014).

Less well recognized even within academic circles, and equally significant for pursuing progressive outcomes, is another contradiction—the visions of community that inform creative-*suburb* revitalization efforts, compared to the actually existing practices of community that animate inner-suburban neighbourhoods. While planners and community groups envision re-inventing disinvested commercial strips with “creative” amenities that will catalyze vibrant social encounters on the street, existing stores constituting these spaces already serve as heterogeneous sites of interaction and community. The latter sources of community are largely overlooked in the former visions of community—even as everyday commercial spaces function as key sites of social reproduction that could prove significant for community capacity building in the context of ongoing cuts to public funding for community services, should planners learn how to recognize them (Kern, 2012; Parlette and Cowen, 2011). At the same time, new forms of wealth associated with creative-suburb planning threaten to undermine the wealth of social relations that take place in low-margin, immigrant-owned businesses. Responding to these dynamics, some urban scholars have engaged in participatory action research with residents and storeowners to give voice to underrepresented shopkeepers at risk of displacement and to critique gentrification (Curran, Hague and Gill, 2009; Gonzalez and Waley, 2013). But critical, community-engaged research on this topic, especially analyses that broach the racialized and classed dynamics of power redevelopment planning entrenches, remains underdeveloped.

Here we contribute an immanent critique (Goonewardena 2005) to debates about creative city policies in the suburbs. To do this, we draw from our experience co-researching neighbourhood change with residents and community advocates left out of exclusionary planning processes in Mount Dennis, a former manufacturing area in Toronto’s inner suburbs. We argue that, contrary to redevelopment proponents’ depictions of Mount Dennis’s inner suburban commercial strips as empty and deficient, the neighbourhood’s shops are vital spaces for mentorship and solidarity, especially for precariously employed new immigrants. We also contend that community engaged research not only allows for an analysis of the race and class dimensions of creative city planning, it consolidates marginalized perspectives and opens up alternative possibilities for planning and development. And we argue that the relational, exploratory and sometimes fraught process of sharing knowledge with community-based researchers adds complexity to critical research on the exclusionary politics of redevelopment planning.

This paper begins by setting the context, showing how Mount Dennis lies at the interface of inner-suburban decline and creative-suburb planning, as well as detailing the anti-racist and feminist foundations of our engagement with

community-based collaborators. A subsequent section of the paper reviews contributions in the critical urban studies literature that point to the significance of inner-suburban commercial streets for understanding new terrains of gentrification and displacement. Two empirical sections contrast stigmatizing representations of the commercial street emanating from a coalition of area planners, rate payers, and community organizations, with those of low-income, primarily new-immigrant shopkeepers and community-based researchers whose perspectives had not yet been accounted for in creative-city planning processes at the time of our research. A final section elaborate how the sometimes fraught process of community based research catalyzes possibilities for building solidarity and challenging hegemonic racializations in the redevelopment process.

### **Action Research in the Gentrifying Suburbs**

Mount Dennis is a classic North American inner-city neighborhood dating from the post-World War II period, located between a now thoroughly gentrified urban core and the expanding corridors of new suburban growth—an urban location recently referred to as the “in-between city” (Young and Keil, 2009). The neighbourhood’s current struggle with poverty and crime is connected to a broader history of economic restructuring, demographic changes, and spatial shifts (Rankin, Kamikazi and McLean 2013). The original immigrant settlement of Mount Dennis followed the establishment of a Kodak manufacturing plant in early 1917. The plant catalyzed the development of an ‘unplanned blue-collar suburb’ comprised of self-built worker housing and a nearby commercial street catering to the needs of resident factory workers (Harris 1999). Kodak built homes for its workers and furnished on-site recreational facilities, sports teams, summer jobs for employees’ children, and, of course, middle-income wages (Mount Dennis Community Association, 2007). Historical sources and key informant interviews describe the vitality of the commercial street during this era, especially the lunch-hour traffic that guaranteed patronage of local restaurants and retail shops.

Kodak employed 3,500 people for nearly 90 years before downsizing dramatically to 320 employees in the early 1990s, then closing completely in 2006. Like the closure of other manufacturing establishments in Toronto’s northwestern inner suburbs (Canada Cycle & Motor Co. Ltd., Dominion Bridge Company, Moffat Stoves, Conn-Smythe Sand and Gravel, among others), Kodak’s reflected the movement of industrial production from cities in advanced capitalist countries to lower-waged regions of the world—as well as specifically the emergence of digital photographic technologies. The global reorganization of North American-based manufacturing from the 1970s, in turn, contributed to the emergence of a service-oriented economy in Toronto (and other North American cities), characterized by a proliferation of low-wage, low-skilled jobs inadequate to sustain blue-collar, middle-class lifestyles.

These economic transitions manifested in pronounced spatial inequalities, with high-wage professionals concentrating downtown and low-wage, under-employed service workers moving increasingly to the inner suburbs. The spatial polarization reflects long-term city planning decisions, particularly the construction of low-rent apartment towers in the inner suburbs, just as downtown property values had started to increase (Young and Keil 2009, Parlette and Cowen 2011). Shifts in immigration policy have also played an important role in changing the demographic character of Mount Dennis and other inner-suburban communities in Toronto. Workers settling the area in search of blue collar manufacturing jobs had been primarily British immigrants arriving around the turn of the century. These families can still be found in the single-family housing on the side streets of Mount Dennis. Since the 1960s, the primary source countries for Canadian immigrants shifted from Europe to Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and Central and South America (Toronto received 44% of all arrivals to Canada in 2001 and 45% in 2006; Lo 2009). Racism in labor markets, combined with the failure of Canadian employers to recognize foreign credentials, has resulted in a concentration of new immigrants in low-income, often under-the-table service jobs (Lo 2011). Because Toronto social service infrastructure was originally designed for downtown spaces, not traditionally blue-collar suburbs, neighborhoods like Mount Dennis typically lack adequate public space and community support, including social services for newcomers (Cowen 2005; Parlette and Cowen 2011; Lo 2011; Rahder and Mclean 2013).

Fifty-seven percent of the population in Mount Dennis is foreign born, and the neighborhood is known as an immigrant “landing” area, with well-worn paths from East Africa, Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America. The average, after-tax household income in 2006 was \$23,828, with 28.6 percent of households falling below the low-income cut off, making it the poorest riding in Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2006). Mount Dennis is also currently experiencing some of the lowest commercial rents in the city; storefront turnover and vacancy rates are high and local businesses experience relatively low average sales. Compounding this marginality, Mount Dennis is subject to racialized representations of crime and violence in the media as well as to intense police surveillance (CBC radio, 2012).

To address issues of inner-suburban poverty, in 2005, a joint City of Toronto and United Way task force identified thirteen “at-risk” “priority neighbourhoods and called for programming that would promote “strong neighborhoods...safer streets, engaged, active residents and ultimately a more prosperous economy” in the inner suburbs (City of Toronto, 2005, 3). Since receiving this designation, a range of public and non-profit actors have targeted Mount Dennis with community outreach and social service provision initiatives that include placing “Action for Neighbourhood Change” (ANC) offices in each “priority” area. The ANC’s mandate is to work with residents, businesses and non profits to organize around issues that are important to the community and develop

“creative, locally-based solutions for sustainable community economic development” (ANC 2014). Critics have argued that the so-called Strong Neighbourhood strategies stigmatize neighbourhoods as spaces of deficiency while obscuring analysis of structural dynamics of inequality across the city and region. Leslie and Hunt (2013) go so far as to suggest that city boosters originally initiated Strong Neighbourhood policies out of concern that the number of gun related homicides in disinvested neighbourhoods gave Toronto a bad reputation and scared away potential investors.

However cynical the intentionality of urban planners may or may not have been, for our purposes it is also worth emphasizing that the Action for Neighborhood change office opened up a space for citizen-led voice in urban planning processes in each of the priority neighborhoods (later re-named, priority areas, in order to identify neighbourhoods with poor access to services and social infrastructure). Just how that voice consolidated, through what cultural-political processes, of course varies significantly from neighborhood to neighborhood. We chose Mount Dennis in particular as a research site in part because the ANC was staffed by local community organizers who regarded their role as advocating on behalf of the area’s vulnerable and marginalized populations and who had already recognized the need to build the capacity of existing, low-margin small businesses.

As is mandated by the Strong Neighborhoods official strategy (and typical of neoliberal strategies to catalyze local participation in general; Larner and Craig, 2005), the Mount Dennis ANC has collaborated with a wide range of community partners on a range of projects. Most significantly for our purposes, the Mount Dennis ANC works closely with the York Youth Coalition, a group also catalyzed by the “Strong Neighbourhoods” strategy. The Coalition actively adopts an anti-racist stance that most certainly conveys a structural critique in the form of workshops on anti-racism and various public events designed to enroll politicians, planners and other city officials in public dialogue on issues (such as police carding) of critical concern to marginalized and racialized youth. The Mount Dennis ANC and York Youth Coalition share office space and organize events together; they also jointly collaborated with our research project on “commercial gentrification” in order to begin developing linkages between local youth and small businesses.

Mount Dennis also furnished an opportunity to concentrate on an area that has not yet been gentrified, but which is experiencing redevelopment pressure, in order to generate a picture of the social role small businesses play in neighbourhoods with populations at risk of displacement. The demographics of local business owners is extraordinarily diverse: business owners who identify as Afro/Caribbean make up 23% of the shops along the main commercial strip, while 26% identify as South Asian and East Asian, 17% as African, and 17% as White (Rankin, Kamizaki and Mclean, 2014). The commercial streets of inner suburban

neighborhoods like Mount Dennis constitute an increasingly significant site of creative-city planning, yet most studies of this mode of post-industrial redevelopment and gentrification still tend to concentrate on downtown areas. Engaging activist research in the “in-between city” helps to foreground the experiences of those who are at once the most marginalized and racialized inhabitants of the city, and therefore the most vulnerable to displacement in gentrification processes.

Our affiliation with ANC in Mount Dennis originated through a research project on “Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning” (APCOL) based at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (Sawchuck, 2003). APCOL was engaged in Toronto-wide, neighborhood-based, comparative research and sought an academic “lead” to coordinate the research in Mount Dennis. Our own interest in “commercial gentrification” articulated well with ANC’s interest in leveraging academic research to support low margin, predominately immigrant-owned businesses in Mount Dennis. Although a few businesses had successfully galvanized the city’s Business Improvement Area (BIA) mechanism to secure resources and opportunities, most businesses in Mount Dennis lacked formal sources of support. ANC also sought to strengthen the capacity of underrepresented businesses and residents to advocate for their needs in the context of the significant planning and redevelopment initiatives currently underway in Mount Dennis. The neighborhood’s ratepayers, urban planners, BIA leaders, and long-time progressive Left constituency had organized effectively to leverage some significant redevelopments in conjunction with a planned transit expansion. These centred on establishing Mount Dennis as a “creative” and “green” destination. ANC’s organizers had grown increasingly concerned that these visions overlooked the perspectives and experiences of local shop keepers and that they could set in motion processes of displacement that would favor commercial enterprises considered more desirable for creative-city planning.

Inspired by ANC and APCOL’s commitment to anti-poverty activism and grassroots community mobilization, we set out to undertake research on commercial gentrification in a way that would challenge dominant (neoliberal, creative-city) paradigms, reflect a commitment to critical race and feminist praxis, and express an ethic of care (Smith, 1999; Cahill, 2007; Cahill, Sultana, and Pain, 2007). We hoped to manifest these commitments methodologically in several ways. First, we sought to trouble the boundaries that typically separate expert from experiential knowledge and theory from practice. Second, we sought to hold the imperative of building solidarity among and within marginalized constituencies of neighborhood redevelopment in tension with the challenge posed by the differences and intersectionalities of power operating in our collective work as well as within the wider “community” of community economic development practitioners (a discipline that others have referred to being “as white as professional golf”; D. Delaney cited in de Leeuw, Cameron, and Greenwood, 2012). And third, we sought

to direct our collaborative research toward generating advocacy tools with which our community partners could challenge hegemonic racializations in the redevelopment process (Galabuzzi, 2007).

Over the course of several introductory meetings with ANC, we established a common purpose: we sought to collaboratively conduct research on commercial change while also building the capacity of a cohort of community-based researchers to organize and advocate on behalf of existing tenants of the commercial street. The research would document commercial change by 1) documenting historical patterns of change in the neighbourhood's commercial structure, 2) investigating the challenges and opportunities that businesses face, and the range of economic and social practices in which they engage, and by 3) identifying the strategies for economic development currently pursued by institutionalized stakeholders (Rankin, Kamizaki and McLean, 2013). ANC identified four community-based researchers (CBRs) who were residents of Mount Dennis's social housing and low-rent apartment buildings and who had already demonstrated a commitment to community development. The CBRs collaborated with four university-based research assistants and the Principal Investigator (PI) to vet research instruments, conduct interviews, and collectively debrief interview findings in bi-weekly meetings. As our research progressed we collectively identified the various competing groups involved in redevelopment planning in Mount Dennis that we refer to in this paper (for example, revitalization proponents, historic preservationists). As elaborated in the final section of the paper, the community-based research team and ANC eventually formed an advocacy organization to extend the work beyond the life of the research project—with a specific mandate to build the capacity of low-income shop owners in Mount Dennis and to hold redevelopment planners accountable to the racialized poor.

The paper draws on the qualitative data generated by the research project, namely, interview transcripts, transcripts of the bi-weekly debriefing sessions, and our own observations of social interactions in shops on Weston Road, Mount Dennis's main thoroughfare and the primary site of our research. We employ a narrative voice that centres our experiences working with university and community researchers in Mount Dennis, with the aim of highlighting the social role of commercial spaces in disinvested suburban neighbourhoods slated for "creative" makeovers. This narrative mode also allows for reflection on how researching the social space of the commercial street also constituted a social space of research, through which relationships were forged between academic and community-based researchers, knowledge shared, a new organization catalyzed, and material opportunities to support existing store owners pursued.

### **Suburban urbanization: New trends in critical urban studies**

Within the field of planning, longstanding critiques of the North American postwar suburb (Mumford, 1937; Jacobs, 1961) have consolidated into a more



affirmative orientation to the suburbs as a terrain for practicing smart growth and new urbanism (Calthorpe, 1993; Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck, 2000; Knaap and Talen, 2005). Like other North American metropolises, Toronto is undergoing a major “suburban reinvention” guided by these principles. The resulting green-field developments in ex-urban regions have been the object of much scholarly attention (Bunce 2004; Young, Burke-Wood and Keil, 2011). In the old post-war inner suburbs, suburban urbanization necessarily contends with an existing built form and social demographic—the low density post-war bungalows, 1970’s social housing developments, predominantly anglo, lower-middle-class homeowners, and the growing cohort of new-immigrant working poor. In this context, pursuing the twin objectives of new urbanism and smart growth entails a redevelopment of an existing social fabric and built environment, which raises the spectre of gentrification just as the urban renewal programs of the 1990s once did (Young, Burke-Wood and Keil, 2011).

For us this spectre becomes particularly poignant in the context of recent initiatives to engage creative-city planning strategies to “revitalize” commercial spaces in disinvested suburbs in North America and Europe (Bain, 2013; Leslie and Hunt, 2013). Critical urban geography scholarship has documented how public-private partnerships involving arts organizations, BIAs, urban planners, local politicians and real estate developers seek to attract a new cohort of artists and arts consumers to the inner suburbs. The incentive for the private side is often leveraged through public investments in neighbourhood and regional-scale infrastructure. Recent initiatives in France, for example, have combined large-scale transit infrastructure redevelopment with culture-led regeneration planning to catalyze investment in disinvested suburban neighbourhoods (Bertolini et. al, 2012; Peters and Novy, 2012). Thus, creative-suburb partnerships fall within a broad repertoire of urban development initiatives aimed at re-branding and upscaling neighborhoods in an era of heightened inter-urban competition, and they extend these strategies to the terrain of the inner-suburb (Peck 2005, 2011; McCann, 2007; Catungal, Leslie and Hii 2009; Edensor et. al. 2009).

Our research on the inner-suburban commercial street as a site of creative-city planning contributes to a small body of work that has begun documenting the transition of creative-city approaches from downtown to suburban contexts (Leslie and Hunt, 2013), as well as to a broader terrain of research on the contradictory politics of investment and displacement in inner suburban neighbourhoods (Cowen, 2005; Keil and Young, 2009; Young, Burke-Wood and Keil, 2011; Parlette and Cowen, 2011). Critics of this planning framework have contended that the neighbourhood-scale thrust of these projects reinforces and reproduces broad agendas of neoliberalization in two respects (Chatterton, 2000; Peck, 2005, 2012; Parker, 2008; Creative Class Struggle 2010; Mclean 2014). First, it manifests a downloading and rolling out of governance as municipal officials encourage community-based groups to play a major role in brokering entrepreneurial

community planning partnerships. Coterminous with cuts to urban planning budgets, increasing terrains of social protection and responsibility devolve to local communities or become absorbed by various creative-city partnerships (McCann, 2007; Ward, 2011). Second, this planning mode entrenches spatial inequalities amongst neighbourhoods, or “inter-urban” fracturing, as neighbourhood-booster coalitions compete with each other for investment (Schaller and Modan, 2005). Within these coalitions, moreover, groups promoting local economic development become positioned as official spokespersons for neighborhood interests—authorized to speak on behalf of constituents with fewer resources and less social and cultural capital. Businesses that do not align with normative understandings of “development,” or that do not reflect the tastes and habits of the gentrifying classes, are left behind in these strategies that construct creativity and cultural participation as ideal modes of contemporary citizenship (Grundy and Boudreau, 2008).

To this work we add a critical analysis that compares the visions of community that guide creative city planning with the rich social life of commercial spaces that BIA representatives, planners and policy makers often overlook. Creative-city planning in a suburban context justifies commercial-street redevelopment through the same discursive techniques as Doreen Massey (2005) describes in relation to former industrial lands, techniques that codify existing spaces as undesirable, dangerous, and indeed as “empty space.” Such diagnoses are premised on a strategy that assigns boundaries to particular neighborhoods and specifies them as discrete “territories” open for business (Amin, 2004). These discursive techniques also ignore the heterogeneous social relations that already animate the inner-suburban commercial street, a social space which we take as a fertile terrain for investigation and analysis. Given the recent patterns of racialized segregation of the poor in inner-suburban regions of North American cities (Cowen, 2005; Hulchanski, 2010), examining creative-city planning processes in a suburban context also highlights the role of structural racism and white privilege in redevelopment planning, as well as the constitutive role of racialization in processes of neoliberalization (Catungal and Leslie, 2009; Goonewardena and Kipfer, 2005; Rankin and McLean 2014). We take up these themes in relation to competing visions of community as well as the politics of doing community-based research.

The commercial street itself figures little in the critical urban geography literature. Analyses of gentrification have tended to focus on residential aspects and critical geographies of retail “upgrading” on the tastes and desires of the middle class (Dowling, 2009; Slater, 2006). In relation to the policy orientation toward social inclusion, especially in the UK, some recent scholarship has investigated the role local shops play in providing neighbourhoods with unanticipated spaces of social encounter—where people forge connections, mediate differences, and establish mutual dependencies (Bridge and Watson, 2000; Bridge, 2004; Stillerman, 2006; Watson 2009). In a similar vein, some claim that planning efforts

to redesign and reanimate disinvested neighbourhood can foster more inclusive and convivial engagement with public space (Koch and Latham, 2011). Such accounts challenge writings about the demise of public interaction and the pervasiveness of relentless individualism that is commonly understood to accompany neoliberalization processes (Sennett 1998). At the same time, when taken up within entrepreneurial planning paradigms they risk romanticizing social encounters without broaching seriously racialized and other dynamics of power. Wary of celebratory accounts of “social encounter,” others have worked to recast social practices within disinvested commercial areas as the labor of social reproduction. This work demonstrates how low-margin shops develop informal networks of bartering, trading, and gifting to support one another; or how they furnish spaces of recreation, assembly and collective consumption for low-income communities at a time when state actors are rolling back social protections (Gonzalez and Walley, 2013; Kern, 2012; Mazer and Rankin, 2011; Parlette and Cowen, 2011). We build on the basic insight about the commercial street as a social (not merely economic) space, while also being attentive to the dangers of romanticizing social encounter and committed to emphasizing how conflict, power and precarity play out in the under-serviced, low income, racialized, yet about-to-be gentrified inner suburbs.

Participatory action research involving collaboration with community-based activists and researchers yields particularly effective insights into the social role of small business in disinvested inner suburban neighbourhoods. It does so by creating a space for community members typically left out of hegemonic planning processes to reflect on their lived experiences in neighbourhoods slated for redevelopment. Most fundamentally, such collaboration begins with an understanding that people in marginalized social locations can bring life experience to bear productively on shaping the questions and interpretations of research (Torre and Fine, 2006). A key role of the university-based researchers, in turn, is to help frame that knowledge of everyday life in relation to broader political-economic dynamics such as exclusionary systems of city building, racism in labour markets, deindustrialization, and changing immigration policy (Cahill, 2007, Rankin and McLean, 2014). Finally, participatory action research not only builds knowledge collaboratively but also creates a social space of research within which it becomes possible to expand the study of the commercial street into the terrain of organizing and advocacy on behalf of businesses providing affordable goods and services (Rankin, Kamizaki, and McLean, 2013).

### **Creativity in the suburbs**

In the remaining, more empirical, sections of the paper, we contribute to critical discussions about the role of commercial spaces in neighbourhoods slated for “culture-led” community development—beginning with an examination of how revitalization proponents’ visions for “improvement” exclude the perspectives and experiences of racialized new immigrant store owners. In Mount Dennis

opportunities for suburban redevelopment are amplified by planned transit expansions that could leverage private sector investment in commercial and residential real estate. These initiatives include the Eglinton-Crosstown Light Rail Transit (LRT) line that intersects Mount Dennis's major thoroughfare<sup>2</sup>, as well as the Pearson-Union Air Rail link, a transit line connecting downtown Toronto's Union Station with the Pearson International Airport. Accompanying this development, Metrolinx, the regional transit agency in charge of the transportation planning and construction, is building a maintenance and storage facility on the former Kodak industrial lands. This facility will include a transit connection linking the LRT to regional trains, and a passenger pick up and drop off area (Rankin, Kamizaki and McLean, 2013).

A network of local revitalization proponents comprised of the BIA, ratepayers' associations, local politicians, and a strong environment lobby has been working with area planners to develop a community benefits agreement (CBA) that would hold these developments accountable to local economic development initiatives. Along with the requisite guaranteed construction jobs, these initiatives include improved streetscapes premised on a creative-economy vision of green and arts-based amenities like a farmer's market and community murals program (Lorinc, 2012). For this coalition of revitalization advocates, transportation infrastructure projects thus present exciting opportunities to catalyze investment in a neighbourhood that has struggled with massive manufacturing job losses, a lack of community services, and concentrated poverty.

Yet a close look at the visions of community that inform these efforts raises vexing questions about how the benefits will be distributed and what other visions of community have been sidelined in the redevelopment process. Our interviews with revitalization advocates paint a compelling portrait of the predominant visions, which hinge most fundamentally around ambitions for an economically "successful," "green," and "creative" Mount Dennis retail strip able to attract shoppers and investors (Rankin and McLean, 2014). Several interviews explicitly evoked specific gentrified downtown neighbourhoods in Toronto—all featuring place-marketing brands, flower stalls, bicycle paths, and coffee shops—as ideal models to be emulated. The success of these neighborhoods is characterized in terms of their attractiveness to people with disposable incomes, with no regard demonstrated for their inaccessibility to the racialized and precarious poor who now predominate in Mount Dennis (see also Pozinni and Rozzi, 2014, on revitalization discourse in Baltimore). Proponents of revitalization in Mount Dennis seek to replicate the "downtown feel" of gentrified spaces by transforming

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<sup>2</sup> The Eglinton Crosstown LRT is a 19 km transit corridor connecting Scarborough to the East and Mount Dennis. The project includes 26 stations that link the Yonge Subway, University-Spadina subway, Scarborough LRT, and regional GO trains.

empty storefronts along Weston Road into pop-up shops making space for low-income residents to repair bicycles and sell crafts (Key Informant interview, June 14, 2011). They have also encouraged the adaptive re-use of a former bank into an artisanal and farmer's market. Such practices emphasize cultivating neighbourhood "distinctiveness" in order to attract professionals with disposable incomes (Zukin, 2011).

Mount Dennis-based revitalization advocates have recently collaborated as well with an arts-led revitalization strategy, dubbed "Weston 2021", aiming to transform the commercial strip of the neighboring Weston community into another cultural corridor (DTHA Projects, 2014). This latter coalition encompasses major citywide development agencies, namely Metrolinx and Artscape (a Toronto-based, not-for-profit cultural facility and consultancy group). A key aim of Weston 2021 is to attract artists and creative workers priced out of Toronto's increasingly gentrified downtown core to settle in the Mount Dennis-Weston neighborhoods. Artscape's pilot study anticipates that the strategy will "put challenged neighbourhoods on the map for creative people" by implementing mixed-use planning (featuring condominiums, live-work studios, and boutiques) and promoting a commercial streetscape that will generate a "coffee culture" (Artscape, 2011, 41). In order to put these plans in motion, Metrolinx has committed \$1.1 million to establish the farmer's market and support local arts-based initiatives.

Interviews with revitalization advocates revealed how the predominant vision for a creative Mount Dennis commercial strip entails a process of territorialization. Specifically, the neighbourhood gets mapped as an empty and blighted space lagging behind the gentrified downtown core. This representation designates a territorial identity (Amin, 2004): a "blank slate" ready for and desirous of redevelopment. For example, echoing the colonial discourse that gentrifiers so often mobilize (Smith, 1996), one local environmentalist described the commercial strip running through Mount Dennis as an open "frontier":

[O]ur greatest opportunity is it is a blank slate for anybody to come in and create. The community will work with whoever is a positive connection here. We would certainly welcome, roll out the red carpet for, anyone in business or industry that would like to connect here.... Our neighbourhood is—that's what we joke: it's a neighbourhood of variety stores and beauty salons. There's no shopping, per se. (Key informant interview, July 12, 2011).

Another historic preservationist disparaged Mount Dennis's and Weston's chain-store coffee shops (Key Informant interview, June 10, 2011). For her, the Somali men hanging around all day in these shops were not "very productive" and they gave the neighbourhood a "trashy feel" (ibid). Revitalization proponents referred to the bars, beauty salons, and barbers that proliferated along the Mount Dennis strip as indicators of the neighbourhood's failure as a shopping destination (Key

Informant interviews, June 2011). For redevelopment proponents, success hinges on the removal of these kinds of ordinary commercial spaces that cater to low-income, new-immigrant residents in the neighbourhoods.

The characterizations of space as empty, “invisible/forgettable” (McKittrick and Woods 2007, 5) are accompanied by racialized representations of the shops and store owners. One revitalization proponent stated, “the Somalis who have moved in, opened variety stores, beauty salons, and [they] go to mosque five times per day, these are the ‘wedges that drive people away’ (Key Informant Interview, June 12, 2011).” Another planning stakeholder claimed that he wanted to see fewer Chinese and Indian restaurants and more “meat and potatoes” places; the area has its “community housing,” he argued, but needs to cater in addition to a higher income constituency (Key Informant Interview, June 9, 2011). These stereotypes, in turn, function as sites of accumulation through which to “reinvent” the commercial street with shops that are more amenable to the tastes of creative professionals. In this way, low-income, new immigrant store owners themselves get marked as “lacking” or “disinvested.” But the discourse and stereotypes are also generative in that they function as opportunities to envision “better” commercial uses. While revitalization advocates disparage chain-store coffee shops, they partner with urban development organizations to promote a “better coffee culture” (and no doubt the higher-end chains) attractive to creative professionals with disposable incomes. Similarly, artisanal markets and adaptive “re-use projects” featuring farmer’s markets vested with the aspiration to elevate Mount Dennis’s class position to something resembling more “distinctive” (Zukin, 2010) inner-city neighbourhoods. Needless to say, the familiar “culture of poverty” discourses displace concerns about structural inequalities and racialization processes that systematically disadvantage the working poor.

### **The Social Space of the suburban commercial street**

The Mount Dennis storeowners we interviewed and the community researchers with whom we collaborated predictably told a different story—one that encompassed a more structural analysis of disadvantage, and featured solidaristic modes of sociality proliferating in the neighbourhood’s low-margin, low-profile shops. As Viswanathan (2010) notes of the experiences of low income new immigrants living and working in Toronto’s “priority” neighbourhoods, their stories reveal the extraordinary omissions in prevailing discourses of emptiness and deficiency; our interviews and debrief notes on the contrary reveal the commercial street as occupied by the “heterogeneities and hybridities that people negotiate and express ... in a globalized world with a multiplicity of [shifting] cultures” (ibid, 265). Conceptualizing Mount Dennis commercial spaces as sites of heterogeneous social practices and relations contests the revitalization proponents’ vision for a new and improved “creative” neighbourhood in three ways.

First, our interviews with Mount Dennis's shop owners reveal how Mount Dennis commercial spaces are certainly not *empty* spaces. Instead, the same chain-store coffee shops, variety stores, barbers, and bars disparaged by revitalization proponents appear to be furnishing accessible community space in a neighbourhood lacking adequate, publicly-funded facilities (Interview with Mount Dennis Storeowner, July 3, 2011; observations, May, June and July 2011). According to one proprietor, the bar he operates provides seniors with a cool gathering place in which to escape the hot summer months. His insights were confirmed when we visited his establishment; on that humid July day we witnessed an old man in a wheel chair, hooked up to a dialysis machine and playing cards with his friends. In this case, it was not only the heat, but also the isolation of home from which the bar provided a retreat. The community researcher attending the interview confirmed our observation about the significance of commercial spaces for seniors.

Other constituencies in Mount Dennis are also similarly served by local shops beyond the specific services being sold, and our understanding of that dynamic commonly arose through exchanges with our community-based colleagues. When walking along the Weston Road commercial strip with a community-based researcher to set up interviews, for example, we bumped into friends he had met while participating in all-night domino tournaments in one of the neighbourhood's bars. After this encounter, he described how the bars along the strip are especially important social spaces for new immigrants like himself as they try to build communities and business networks. He also explained that the friends of diverse ethno-cultural origin whom he met relaxing in local bars and coffee shops have helped him through difficult financial and emotional times. He and the other community-based collaborators also noted how, in the absence of local after-school programs, youth rely on local stores and coffee shops as places to pass time on weekday afternoons—safe from the constant threat of random stops by police while hanging out on the street (Interviews with community collaborator, July 19, 2011).

Shopowners we interviewed had not furnished community space in any kind of official or formal manner, and in some cases conveyed a deep suspicion of formal modes of community development. For instance, when we asked the owner of a bustling Internet café and computer repair shop whether or not he supported local community organizations, he responded by stating, "I am not into any community thing. I don't have time for myself, so I don't have time for organizations" (Interview with storeowner, June 11, 2011). He then went on to describe the numerous ways he supports the community with his services: by allowing local residents to use his computers to research jobs, work on their resumés, and even run on-line businesses and services. He also referred to the way customers congregate in his shop. "If there is a Raptor's game, people come together to buy a pizza, some guys ... bring beer." He then joked about how he

does not charge local kids when they use his computers to do their homework, but “kicks them off” if he sees them logging on to Facebook—suggesting a conscious intention to play a mentorship role.

In fact, and second, the mentorship and training activities already occurring in the shops along Weston Road pose a striking contrast to the prevailing expectation that “improvement” requires external sources of investment, or trickle-down benefits from a new cohort of middle-class “creatives.” Many of the new-immigrant business owners we interviewed expressed concern over the lack of opportunities facing youth in the area and actively sought to engage their businesses as a source of support. They acknowledged that they cannot provide reliable employment because of lacking the capacity to negotiate the formal structures of payroll and insurance (relying instead on family labor). But they regarded mentorship and training as a compelling avenue for providing some supports. One barber we interviewed provides off-the-books short-term employment to young men seeking to enter the trade (Interview with storeowner, June 12, 2011). By training them technically and teaching them management skills, he catalyzes the development of new businesses. Similarly, a salon owner described how, after facing significant struggles starting her own business, she now shares her skills with others trying to get into the sector by allowing them to gain some informal (and unpaid) experience in her salon (Interview with storeowner, June 20, 2011). And we interviewed a general merchandise trader who aspires to open a gym for youth in the neighbourhood; he is a former Olympic athlete who seeks to provide a structured, supportive environment for area youth to develop an interest in athletics (Interview with storeowner, May 11, 2011). Although in most cases, these kinds of mentoring practices do not ensure formal employment, the literature on immigrant integration and entrepreneurship confirms that such activities play a crucial role in “overcoming the lack of social and professional networks needed to succeed in the business world” (Wayland, 2011, 15).

Third, our research challenged revitalization proponents’ expectation that Mount Dennis would need to emulate gentrified downtown neighborhoods in order to become a viable destination for consumers. The neighbourhood is currently home to several destination businesses. The one most commonly acknowledged in interviews was the appliance store, whose owner came to Mount Dennis in 1953. This storefront has expanded in terms of sales volume, floor area, and market sector (specializing now in high-end products), taking advantage of the area’s accessibility by major arterials. Challenging the common perception of downtown as centre and suburbs as edge, the proprietor of this business pointed out that Mount Dennis actually lies at the geographical centre of the wider Toronto metropolitan region from which it draws customers. Mount Dennis is also home to a Korean restaurant that buses in Korean tourists weekly from New York, Niagara Falls, and Quebec; a second-hand truck dealer who receives business from all over the province; and a vibrant furniture upholstery sector. The latter derives from the



days when there had been furniture manufacturers in Mount Dennis (key informant interview, June 24, 2011) and clearly depends on a clientele that extends well beyond the boundaries of the neighbourhood.

In many respects, then, Mount Dennis shops are already a destination in their own right —indeed they can be regarded as a global destination in the sense that the neighborhood functions as a major immigrant landing area in Toronto. Residential turnover in the area's low-end, low-rent apartments is high; those who are able to establish a regular income commonly move on to other neighbourhoods in the Greater Toronto Area. At the same time, we learned anecdotally that social ties to local businesses in many cases forge long-term relationships to the neighbourhood. According to business owners and community researchers, Mount Dennis emigrants often return for specific services, like a haircut from a vendor they know personally and in whose storefront they are likely to see old acquaintances. Thus, particularly immigrant-oriented services draw people to the neighbourhood through social networks linking cycles of immigrant populations who “landed” in Mount Dennis and then moved out, but continue to come back and patronize a much-valued business. A majority of the businesses we surveyed—80 percent—indicated that their customers come from both inside and outside the neighbourhood.

### **Social space of research**

In this final section we hope to have conveyed that our glimpse of the social role commercial spaces play in Mount Dennis was produced through the collaboration with community-based colleagues. The social space of research we jointly forged with community members opened up channels of communication that we could not have accessed if we had only worked as university researchers. Storeowners were generally reluctant to discuss their business operations with us. Many showed signs of palpable discomfort at being “studied” in a neighbourhood that is a site of numerous community engagement projects as well as intense police surveillance. Others, including the internet café owner, expressed “community-development fatigue” and a wariness to get involved in another “community thing” (Interview with storeowner June 11, 2011). We were able to broach the fraught politics of native informants and learn something about the storeowners' perspectives in many cases simply because they were longtime friends with ANC staff and community researchers, themselves residents with a keen analysis of how everyday inequality and oppression operate. Of course our understanding of Mount Dennis shops was developed through what Aziz Choudry refers to this as the “incremental, below-the-radar, often incidental and informal forms of learning and knowledge production that can be so important, but hard to recognize, let alone document and theorize” (Choudry, 2010). These moments happened in the formal and informal social spaces we co-habited with the CBRs—on strolls through the neighborhood to reach an interview, over coffee to debrief afterward, or in the

lively bi-weekly discussions of interview data over pizza and noodles at the ANC office. In these gatherings, the community researchers thickened research findings with personal anecdotes. The daily harassment racialized youth experience as local police implement carding programs, the Chinese shop owner who avoids hiring young black men, or the generous restaurant manager who supports residents by letting them run tabs when they are short on cash were some memorable accounts the CBRs contributed. Through these conversations, we developed a clearer sense of racialized and classed conflict on the Mount Dennis commercial strip as well as a sense of the small acts of mentorship, reciprocity, and solidarity that occur. And we reciprocated by bringing our knowledge and resources to bear on these discussions – for example, by sharing our access to academic literature on gentrification and by providing links to anti-gentrification websites.

Of course racialized and classed dynamics also infused our collaboration between university-based and community-based researchers (see also de Leeuw, Cameron and Greenwood, 2011). CBRs were generally older, more precariously employed—holding down a range of temporary part-time jobs whose earnings were needed to support their families both in Toronto and in their “home” countries. They occasionally bristled at the relatively more “casual” behaviour of the university-based research assistants—the practice of wearing tight, belly-revealing shirts and cut-off shorts to interviews and meetings on the part of a young student; or another student’s tendency to publicly and dramatically engage in personal texting on her cell phone; or the young student researcher’s characteristic disorganization—showing up late to interviews, or without the necessary recording device or interview protocol. The lack of professionalism was experienced by community-based colleagues as a sign of class privilege—the university students, even the non-white ones, did not expect to get stopped and harassed by the police, and most did not regard their appointments as RAs to be a particularly significant moment in their professional development or career advancement.

The community-based researchers, by contrast, dressed professionally, in part at least as a sign of respect for the business owners in Mount Dennis as well as a reflection of their genuine dependency on the remuneration from our research project. We discussed those tensions with the ANC staff who shared responsibility with us over the administration and management of the research collaboration—in some cases opting to talk privately with individual research assistants and in others favoring a more open and collective airing of the uneven class positionings in our own research team: those who had the luxury of taking a casual approach to work versus those who had faced serious income insecurity and who sought to use every opportunity to build their networks and experience in order to obtain stable employment.

At the same time we actively also sought to build principles of reciprocity and solidarity into the collaborative process by subjecting our research instruments,

analysis and reports to our community-based colleagues' critical scrutiny—as well as by doing their bidding in terms of supporting organizing and advocacy efforts (Derickson and Routledge, 2014). The final report, for example, was co-published by the University of Toronto Cities Centre and Mount Dennis Action for Neighborhood Change (Rankin, Kamizaki and McLean 2013). The title, photographs, and key sections of the text were the topic of several of the bi-weekly team meetings. Our persistence with naming racialization and gentrification in the report as overarching hegemonic processes within which redevelopment in Mount Dennis had already become embedded was a direct outcome of these deliberations. We had encountered some forceful criticisms from liberal redevelopment advocates who argued that our reporting ran the risk of “splitting the Left” and fueling a fundamentally conservative real estate development agenda if we criticized the progressive creative-suburb agenda too forcefully or too publicly. It was our community-based colleagues who insisted on foregrounding racialization and gentrification as core categories of analysis despite, and against, this forceful criticism.

Indeed the criticism itself reflected one of the project's key contributions from the point of view of our community-based collaborators. In our report we had collectively named “race” and “class” (and “racialized class projects,” Rankin and McLean 2014) as the glaring elephant in the room of redevelopment planning. This intervention interjected not only a palpable discursive shift in official planning processes, but also informed some significant material developments. According to our community-based colleagues, the discursive shifts became evident after several knowledge sharing workshops organized in the neighborhood, through which the team worked together to share research findings and catalyze discussion among Mount Dennis business owners, municipal and provincial politicians, officials, and revitalization proponents. Already we had worked with ANC staff to develop some academic training opportunities for the community based researchers—a walking tour of the downtown Bloordale neighborhood undergoing rapid gentrification led by Kuni Kumazaki and Heather McLean (see McLean, 2014; Rankin and Delaney, 2011) and a workshop on gentrification with urban researcher Martine August who elaborated forms of displacement pressure emerging in the social-mix redevelopment underway in Regent Park, Toronto's oldest public housing community (see August, 2014). The knowledge sharing workshops created an opportunity for CBRs to engage the critical political economy and critical race analytical concepts in their own community, in communication with the stakeholders of creative-suburb redevelopment. They created a formidable impact and, according to ANC staff, managed to place gentrification and race on at least the discursive map of redevelopment planning.

Materially, several key developments arose out of the collaboration. For example, our community collaborators decided to continue the work beyond the life of the research project by constituting a new organization -- West End Local

Economic Development (WE LED). WE-LED is pursuing a double strategy—one of supporting and organizing local new immigrant entrepreneurs, and one of interjecting their perspectives in redevelopment planning processes. To achieve the latter objective, our collaborators aim to mobilize the academic reporting deriving from this project, which documents lived experiences of racism as well as the activities that undermine and prop up white supremacy in the commercial spaces of Mount Dennis. The group has been able to use the ANC office as a base from which to produce a newsletter geared toward local shop owners, that showcases individual life histories, communicates community development events and opportunities, and provides information on municipal services for new immigrants and small businesses.

Of course, carrying on long-term social change processes from marginalized and disadvantaged social positions poses many challenges. The ANC collaborators hosting the WELED activities could not devote staff time or financial resources once the small dissemination budget of our grant was closed. Throughout the project, one of us was negotiating the unpredictable schedule that comes with working on short-term research and adjunct teaching contracts. That precarious positioning hindered our ability to maintain consistent community involvement. Under these conditions, the social spaces formed through collaboration proved critical to creating possibilities for long-term engagement in social change processes. For instance, the relationship forged between ANC and the University of Toronto through the research process catalyzed several student workshops and internships through which the resources and networks of the Department of Geography and Planning could be directed to support WE LED's ongoing work.<sup>3</sup> Overall, evolving partnerships like this signal the dialectical relationship between the social spaces of research and the social space of the commercial street. Community-engaged research not only allows for an analysis about the race and class dimensions of creative city planning, it also consolidates marginalized perspectives and opens up alternative possibilities for supporting underrepresented communities in planning and development processes.

## Conclusion

Redevelopment proponents express a common desire to reinvent suburban commercial strips into “higher” value, “green” and “creative” neighbourhoods that emulate gentrified downtown commercial areas. They hope that regeneration initiatives will attract artists and middle class consumers of culture by combining infrastructure development with neighbourhood-scale efforts to reinvent streets

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<sup>3</sup> See Winifred Curran, Euan Hague and Harpreet Gill's reflection on engaging students in critical action research to contest gentrification in “Practicing Active Learning: Introducing Urban Geography and Engaging Community in Pilsen, Chicago.”

with high-end coffee shops, bicycle repair facilities and farmers' markets. However, such strategies territorialize disinvested neighbourhoods, presenting them as empty and blighted, marking stores frequented by low income residents as lacking and in need of improvement. In turn, these planning trends displace concerns about structural inequalities.

In contrast, working alongside CBR's illuminated the complex social role commercial spaces play in Mount Dennis. As we co-researched the neighbourhood's commercial spaces, it became apparent that Mount Dennis' disparaged aestheticians, chain store coffee shops and variety stores are important sites for community gatherings and informal mentoring. Also, in informal and formal meetings, the CBR's helped us comprehend the role local shops play in a neighbourhood lacking adequate, publicly-funded facilities and employment opportunities for youth. These conversations confirmed Mount Dennis is already a destination drawing from networks of new immigrants living and working across the Greater Toronto Area.

To some extent, uneven class and race dynamics shaped our collaboration with community researchers. These tensions necessitated further reflection on our research intentions and created opportunities to forge reciprocal solidarity. These discussions led to the formation of WELED, an organization that gives voice to underrepresented, immigrant-owned businesses and interjects critical class and race perspectives into local planning discussions.

In conclusion, the University of Toronto and ANC partnership that emerged through this research process not only enriches our understanding of creative city policies in the suburbs, it also exposes the essentially dialectical relationship that exists between the social space of research and the social space of the commercial street. Action research not only creates space to critique the race and class dimensions of the neoliberal creative city regime, it also opens up opportunities for supporting underrepresented communities in exclusionary planning and development processes.

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