

Double-sided Parkdale: community-based responses to unjust urban transformations in Toronto

Elena Ostanel

Marie Curie Fellow, University Iuav of Venice, University of Toronto, TUDelft
ostanel@iuav.it

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1. Introduction: Parkdale in a context of socio-spatial polarization at City level

In and beyond Europe today we witness strengthened structural spatial divisions within city neighbourhoods, with increased inequality and sharper lines of division (Marcuse; van Kempen, 2000; Balbo, 2014; Tammaru et al, 2016). Neighbourhoods are increasingly hyperdiverse (Tasan-Koc et al, 2014): they are more diverse in socio-economic, social and ethnic terms, but many differences also exist in lifestyles, attitudes and activities. Continuing immigration and increasing socio-economic and ethnic concentration in neighbourhoods question social cohesion in local societies worldwide.

In this context, the City of Toronto is experiencing strong dynamics of socio-spatial polarization. Toronto sees the level of income segregation rise at a more rapid rate than elsewhere in Canada (Walks et al, 2016). Polarization patterns «spread incomes away from the middle and, spatially, polarization involved not only an increase in the income gap between neighbourhoods, but also the erosion of middle income neighbourhoods and their transformation into either a rich or a poor neighbourhood» (Ibidem, 2016, pp. 27).

Parkdale is one of a few remaining downtown neighbourhoods in Toronto that are affordable and accessible to diverse community members: low-income people, marginalized populations with mental health and addiction experience, refugees and recent immigrants, people facing homelessness (PCED, 2016). Parkdale is a socially, culturally, and economically diverse neighbourhood. This diversity attracts a wide range of community members who choose to live, stay and socialize in Parkdale. The second value is affordability, which makes it possible for diverse community members – regardless of different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds – to call Parkdale

their home. This combination of diversity and affordability creates a neighbourhood condition for the third value, inclusion.

But this inclusivity is now at risk. Parkdale is a two-side neighborhood: North Parkdale has seen a growth of higher-income residents and strong gentrification processes occurred. In South Parkdale, where close to 35% of the population lives in poverty, gentrification processes are today strongly affecting the socio and spatial neighbourhoods patterns: lack of housing affordability and a rapid change of the commercial texture are signals of incoming gentrification in the South part of the neighbourhood.

Census data confirm that there is a process of population change occurring in the neighbourhood. From 2005 to 2015 the Low Income Cut-off After-Tax (LICO-AT)¹ decreased by 9.6% (Neighbourhood Change Research Partnership, 2018). In any case compared with 1970, North Parkdale became middle-income areas, while South Parkdale remained as low-income area. Two areas in South Parkdale became very low-income (ibidem, 2015).

As the Parkdale Community Planning Study highlights, Gentrification in Parkdale should be considered in relation to the suburbanization of poverty. By 2012, as compared to 1970, more low-income and very-low income neighbourhoods had emerged in the city's inner-suburbs (e.g. Scarborough and North York). Meanwhile, more high-income areas became concentrated in downtown and along subway lines. Equally important, it is striking that there were far fewer middle-income neighbourhoods. In short, Toronto has increasingly become a divided city (Hulchanski, 2009).

Not only diversity, affordability, and inclusion are increasingly at risk also in South Parkdale, but also equitable outcomes of neighbourhood development and improvement.

We should remember that Parkdale is one of the neighbourhoods included in the Neighbourhood Improvement Areas Strategy led by the City of Toronto with the aims to social sustain investment to address neighbourhood poverty concentration². Despite this, diverse community members raised a concern about losing local democratic control over how neighbourhood change has happened in Parkdale: land use decision-making is particularly market-driven (failure to prioritize community needs), compartmentalized (without coordination with other stakeholders and competing priorities) and privatized (lack of transparency and accountability) (PCED, 2016).

Starting from this assumption, this article aims at discussing the organizational evolution and diverse motivations for the community-based activism in resisting and mitigating the effects of negative neighbourhood change. It has a specific focus on the PCED Planning Project, considered as a key action to define a long term strategy for a

¹ Income threshold below which a family will likely devote a larger share of its income on the necessities of food, shelter and clothing than the average family. The approach is essentially to estimate an income threshold at which families are expected to spend 20 percentage points more than the average family on food, shelter and clothing.

² The TSNS 2020 «supports healthy communities across Toronto by partnering with residents, businesses and agencies to invest in people, services, programs and facilities in 31 specific neighbourhoods. This will strengthen the social, economic and physical conditions and deliver local impact for city-wide change». South Parkdale is considered one of the Neighbourhood Improvement Area within this strategy.

sustainable and community-driven neighbourhood change process. The PCED Planning Project envisages community based solutions, policy options as well as social infrastructures able to promote a more sustainable and democratic control over land use and neighbourhood change.

In Europe and elsewhere urban neighbourhoods have become a privileged unit of policy intervention where community-bases initiatives have been experimented with the aim to produce social cohesion and transforming power relations and socio-spatial inequalities (Oosterlynck et al, 2013); community based initiatives are indicating that the urban regeneration processes/urban development can be realized through a complex set of path-dependent, contextual and multisectoral territorial development strategies, supported by innovative mechanism of multilevel governance. But particularly in disadvantage neighborhoods their inclusivity and efficacy needs to be further assessed in a condition when the State is constantly retreating.



The Paper is based on a preliminary research conducted in Toronto since November 2017 in the framework of the Marie Sklodowska-Curie Fellowship “NEIGHBOURCHANGE-Social innovation and urban revitalization in hyperdiverse local societies”. Field research has started in Parkdale in February 2018 and it has been based on a qualitative approach, informed by action-research. The research focuses on a territorial and policy level by using a multi-method approach: literature and theoretical review of neighborhood change and community development; analysis of background data at city and neighborhood level; in depth interviews with key stakeholders; participant observation to key urban spaces; in depth- interviews with policy officers, policy document analysis; policy inquiry; participant observation to key stakeholders’ meetings and decision-making processes.