FAMILY PLANNING

NEW TRENDS IN URBAN ARCHITECTURE ARE PUTTING SOCIAL PROBLEMS ON THE DRAWING BOARD. CAN WE HELP IMPOVERISHED NEIGHBOURHOODS THROUGH BETTER INFRASTRUCTURE AND DESIGN?

by Peter Jon Mitchell

Regent Park, Toronto

Billed as Ontario's largest environmentally-friendly community, the plans for Seaton in North Pickering embrace a new housing trend. With ample green space and plenty of bike paths, Seaton boasts housing designs that prominently feature gardens and porches where designers traditionally erect garages. The idea is to create an interactive community where neighbours will leisurely converse while enjoying the green spaces and eco-resources of the planned suburb. Seaton will be friendly, green, and giant, accommodating 70 000 people.[1] Construction is supposed to start in five years.

Driving west on Highway 401 into the "Big Smoke," to the core of Toronto you'll find another planned community thought to be innovative in its day. Regent Park is Canada's largest public-housing project with over 7,000 residents. Built in the 1950s, Regent Park is showing its age and reflects the reality that 67 per cent of households live below the low-income cut-off (LICO). With disproportionately more children than the rest of Toronto, 56 per cent of families are headed by a lone parent.[2] Physically worn and socially troubled, Regent Park is undergoing a planned revitalization that began in February 2006, one residents hope will change the face of the community.

The minds behind the Seaton development and the Regent Park revitalization know that the physical space we occupy contributes to our quality of life. High-poverty neighbourhoods, like Regent Park, pose challenges for families: Children are more likely to grow up without two married parents than their middle-income counterparts. The question is: Can the physical revitalization and redesign of a neighbourhood strengthen families?

Families in poor urban neighbourhoods

Cities tend to be separated by income, creating economically- and socially-segregated neighbourhoods. This may place constraints on families and individuals.[3] Poor neighbourhoods contribute to what American sociologists Anne Pebley and Sastry Narayan call the "intergenerational transmission of poverty,"[4] As a result, children in poverty-stricken neighbourhoods stand to inherit greater risk of social and behavioural problems.

Canadian sociologist Don Kerr reported that in the late 1990s, 13.7 per cent of all children lived in single-mom homes but that 41 per cent of all children living below the LICO were in single-mother families.[5] As is the case in Regent Park, higher numbers of single-mother families are located in poorer neighbourhoods. Kerr argues that single-mom homes are increasing among the economically disadvantaged.[6] Conversely, statistics from the United States suggest that children from families with an income over $75,000 are much more likely to live in a home with two parents.[7]

Fatherlessness begets further father absenteeism in low-income neighbourhoods where single-mother families are the norm. American author Kay Hymowitz, scholar at the Manhattan Institute, a New York-based think tank, suggests that young men living in impoverished conditions may desire to be responsible fathers but fail because they are immersed in a culture of fatherlessness.[8] As few models of responsible fatherhood abound, young men in poverty struggle to understand their role. Hymowitz suggests that young women accept this reality, plunging themselves into what she calls the "teen mommy track." She argues that this trend is so entrenched that in some neighbourhoods teens without children fear being pushed to the social margins of their peer group.[9] A 2007 Statistics Canada report confirms that teen motherhood is a poor-neighbourhood trend in Canada. The study found that teen mothers who gave birth to a second or subsequent child were highly concentrated in low-income neighbourhoods.[10]

Children in low-income neighbourhoods face all kinds of challenges – family instability and a lack of parental stability among them. Do bleak surroundings, under-resourced neighbourhoods with few stores, gardens, or pleasant places for children to play exacerbate the problem? Could revitalization improve a child's outlook?

Urban family patterns

Some theorists suggest that physical environments and infrastructures can affect personal development and behaviour, particularly among children.[11] The physically downtrodden neighbourhood may indirectly affect children adversely, serving as a negative backdrop for development.[12]

A study in the *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour* suggests that disadvantaged urban environments are highly stressful for inhabitants. The authors argue that perceptions of bad neighbourhood characteristics predict depressive symptoms.[13]

Academics Gilbert Gee and David Takeuchi argued in a 2004 paper that people living in areas with what they called greater "vehicle burden" had lower health status and greater depressive symptoms.[14] Many urban revitalization projects strive to reduce traffic congestion and increase pedestrian accessibility.

Another study in the *Journal of Environmental Behaviour* reports that increased green spaces, another feature of revitalization, increased social interaction among seniors.[15] With seniors at least, these integral design initiatives seem to support a healthier living environment.

The case for revitalization

The idea of nurturing a healthier living environment for families of all income levels is compelling. Governments and activists are pushing for the revitalization of existing communities, drawing in social

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and economic resources to help low-income families. For the last thirty years planning gurus have theorized about design and quality of life in urban centers. Rejecting sprawling suburbs, these planners have developed neighbourhoods featuring less traffic, increased green space, layouts that contribute to community interaction and of course artistic building design. As post-war public housing flourished and then deteriorated, the trendy new urban principles have been adopted in redesigning poverty-stricken

neighbourhoods.

While revitalization can take many forms, several principles are most commonly applied. These principles include:

- A variety of housing types that accommodate various family sizes and incomes.
- Mixed home ownership and subsidized housing such as rent geared to income units, creating economic diversity in the neighbourhood.
- Consideration for aesthetics in building design.

A CHURCH PARTNERED WITH A PIZZA CHAIN, WHICH EMPLOYED PARTICIPANTS FROM THE CHURCH'S DRUG AND ALCOHOL REHABILITATION PROGRAM

- Abundance of green space and parks as well as building designs that accommodate neighbourly interaction.
- A focus on lower traffic volume, greater pedestrian access and more available public transit.
- Mixed use, meaning residential, institutional (schools) and commercial business sharing the same spaces.

Rather than these neighbourhoods trapping people, the community becomes a source of pride and a resource for better living. Better designed neighbourhoods with mixed income levels are intentionally resourced to help families. These principles for revitalization are encapsulated in the design theory known as New Urbanism. A growing movement over the last several decades, New Urbanism emphasises the above principles with a focus on building more liveable and community-friendly designs. New Urbanism and its growing link to neighbourhood revitalization build on the idea that community environment greatly affects the well-being of residents.

Mixed income and ownership is the key

The foundational principle on which the success of revitalization is built is the encouragement of mixed-income neighbourhoods. From the mid-1970s to the late 1990s, Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program moved more than 7,100 families in the Chicago area out of segregated, poverty-stricken neighbourhoods. Studies showed that within these families parental employment went up and child outcomes improved dramatically.[16] The study demonstrates that neighbourhoods have a profound impact on families.

Frequently the poor urban family's strategy is simply "escape". Philip Oreopoulos, professor of economics at the University of Toronto, reported that households stay in high-poverty neighbourhoods in Canada for an average of 3.8 years before moving to less dense communities. The longer households live in what he calls high poverty, the longer they stay in poverty neighbourhoods.[17] Harvard professor Xavier de Souza Briggs argues that neighbourhoods serve as traps, stepping stones or springboards for families struggling to escape poverty. Families succeed if they can move from low-resource, high-risk neighbourhoods to better resourced communities with fewer risks. He suggests that most often families move laterally, to similarly resourced neighbourhoods, and often fall back into trap neighbourhoods after escaping.[18]

With this in mind, the growing move to renew urban neighbourhoods embraces this understanding with the intent to move beyond helping individual families to helping many families by assisting the neighbourhood as a whole. Relocating to neighbourhoods where ownership was far more common meant relocation to where neighbourhood resources were abundant. While Gautreaux moved families into middle-income neighbourhoods, many proponents of urban renewal hope to attract middle-income families into low-income neighbourhoods if not into public-housing complexes. The benefit of mixed-income neighbourhoods provides pride of ownership, economic growth and improved resources. Several studies conclude that schools with mixed-income students often help boost the academic performance of lower-income students.[19]

Yet even the most zealous revitalization initiatives, done improperly, are doomed to fail. Many have been promoted by housing authorities who have sought to redesign and renew public housing and much money has been spent – the funds for these projects primarily flow from governments. Such is the case with the Hope VI grant project south of the border. The United States federal government has invested $5.7 billion between 1993 and 2006 in revitalizing some of the most devastated public-housing properties across the country through the grant program.[20] The money was been used to redevelop public housing and invested in social programs for residents. Sadly, research by the Urban Institute evaluated several current Hope VI projects and found that employment rates[21] remained unchanged as did the level of health issues.[22]

Neither were the Hope VI initiatives very successful in attracting middle-income families with kids. A study in the *Journal of Urban Affairs* evaluated several types of Hope VI projects and reported that few families with kids moved in of their own volition.[23]

NGOs pointing the way?

Perhaps the most successful organizations in revitalization have been not-for-profit groups who have encouraged neighbourhood transitions or the use of vouchers for lower-income people to move into the private market.

A 2005 study examined residents' attitudes on their economic, neighbourhood and housing situation five years after relocating out of public housing undergoing Hope VI redevelopment. The residents had relocated under the voucher program to homes in the private market. The study concluded that participants felt their relocation, neighbourhood, house and global living situation had improved.[24]

Groups like Habitat for Humanity, who refuse government funding except for land acquisition and municipal administration fees, have been helping low-income families step up into ownership for years. In addition to interest-free mortgages, homeowners receive the pride that comes from physically helping to build their own home. Habitat for Humanity has built over 200 000 homes internationally.[25]

Since opening in the late 1970s, Lawndale Community Church in Chicago has dramatically impacted its neighbourhood. The church established a medical center in 1984 to provide health care to the low-income urban neighbourhood. In 1987, Lawndale Christian Development Corporation (LCDC) was established. The LCDC has helped renovate old buildings and construct new residences providing affordable home ownership and affordable rental housing. The LCDC also runs a homebuyer education program instructing residents on budgeting and managing credit while also providing workshops on home repair and weatherization. The LCDC partnered with a pizza chain to establish a pizzeria serving area families while employing participants from the church's drug and alcohol rehabilitation program. The owners of the pizzeria, the Malnati family, "tithed" their 10th pizzeria, giving the whole thing to the Lawndale Community Church. The profits are reinvested into the community. The LCDC has also encouraged over $14 million in investments through commercial development activities and was instrumental in ensuring Chicago Transit Authority established seven-day-a-week public transit to the area.[26] The church and LCDC have established many other projects that have benefited the community. While work remains, this not-for-profit group has profoundly impacted the neighbourhood, creating partnerships and accessing grants and gifts to revitalize the community.

Healthy communities can help families. Neighbourhoods can serve as the context in which families can receive a hand up. While redesigned neighbourhoods can lower traffic volume and provide more green spaces for healthier living, it will be home ownership that will sustain these communities. These positive effects of urban redesign will ultimately not restore fathers to families or make up for what poverty has inflicted on urban families. The early evaluations of revitalized public housing south of the border have yet to demonstrate large-scale significant change: It takes more than fresh paint to tackle the plight of the urban poor, but the success of places like Lawndale suggests that community partners can rebuild healthier neighbourhoods that can provide an improved context for family living.

endnotes

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