

Description of Collaborative Research Proposal:

The proposed research by the title *Hard Shells – Soft Services: Mobilizing Knowledge for Affordable Housing and Social Health* is a collaborative project between Ute Lehrer of the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, the *Parkdale Activity and Recreation Centre (PARC)* and a recently formed community-based group called *Abandonment Issues (AI)*. The overall goal is to translate the findings and insights of this pilot study into a broader, regional perspective (York Region) and to inform policies in regards to affordable housing and social health infrastructure.

The research goals are (1) to investigate the relationship between disinvestment (abandonment), reinvestment (the condo-boom) and the role of social health institutions in a specific neighborhood (Parkdale), (2) to discuss the findings of this case study in a broader regional context of York Region and to build partnerships with organizations in the non-governmental and governmental sector, and (3) to influence decision making in regards to housing policies and social programming design on a municipal and provincial level.

We believe that this research proposal has pioneering capacities since it not only brings together knowledge from three very different angles (academic expertise, activism and practical knowledge of service needs) but also has the potential to make a contribution in translating the findings of a specific place into a wider, regional perspective and therefore actively contributes to knowledge transfer. While we will be working with several community-based organizations throughout York Region, the initial partner was specifically selected because of the research design that builds on bringing together already existing research and expertise at one place that is coherent enough in order to inform and enable discussions about the same topics in York Region. Hence, the core of this proposal is knowledge transfer.

Context: The relationship between the city and its outlying region has been studied over several decades now, and has brought problems to the foreground that exist in both places but experienced in different ways, for example social isolation and, as a consequence, mental health. More recently, studies have tried to determine a relationship between the increase of obesity and urban form, but so far are inconclusive. What we propose here is to study the relationship between affordable housing and health, and in particular the relationship between dis- and re-investment into the built environment and social health provision.

Disinvestment in the building stock and the subsequent abandonment of, or reinvestment into, the building stock not only impacts the safety and availability of affordable housing, but also has tremendous implications for the social and physical health of low-income residents. Housing stock that deteriorates (due to a lack of investment) becomes a health risk, while housing stock that is being reinvested in (through upgrades or new construction) turns into housing for higher income groups, with the effect to raise property values and therefore to push people and services that can't afford the rent, out of the neighborhood.

York Region is experiencing much reinvestment, and partial disinvestment, into the housing stock while it is undergoing a steady transition from a low-density, ethnically and socially homogenous suburban region to a diverse, rapidly intensifying region with a growing number of low-income residents. Many of the challenges such growth brings

about – lack of affordable housing and social health infrastructure – have been already experienced and addressed by community organizations, residents, planners and policy makers in Toronto’s Parkdale neighborhood. There is a great need to translate this kind of experience to other places.

Over the past decades, the Parkdale community has acquired a rich understanding of the relationship between disinvestment and reinvestment into the housing stock and its impact on affordable housing and social health services. Sharing these lessons with the wider community would be of great benefit as it not only enriches the discussion about solutions to the lack of affordable housing and social health infrastructure but also provides community-based knowledge for the development of policy documents in regards to housing and health. To facilitate this knowledge mobilization process, we are proposing to organize a Community Forum with a wide variety of community-based organizations as well as governmental representatives of York Region on the topic of the needs for affordable housing and social health services. A Community Forum would provide a platform with potentially the highest impact.

A Fitting Partnership: The partnership between York University, the *Parkdale Activity and Recreation Centre (PARC)* and *Abandonment Issues (AI)* is a unique opportunity to unite academic expertise with deep practical knowledge that exists within communities in a way that allows for equitable and effective participation by all members. *Knowledge transfer* is the driving force behind this partnership.

PARC has linked housing to health from its inception and has gained a wealth of knowledge in over twenty-five years of social health service delivery in Parkdale. More recently, *PARC* became involved in the *Use It or Loose It campaign*, a community-based project initiated by *AI*, aiming to identify and map abandoned housing stock in Toronto that can potentially be transferred into affordable housing or infrastructure for social health service delivery.

Over the past three years, my own research has focused on Toronto’s current condominium boom (SSHRC grant). I have developed a rich data-base on reinvestment objects throughout Toronto as well as a GIS generated map and a website. Additionally I have expertise on suburbanization and economic restructuring, neighborhood transformation under pressures of gentrification as well as on homelessness and health.

The collaboration between *PARC*, *AI* and York University represents a rare opportunity to utilize our respective expertise and knowledge in order to inform and deepen our understanding of the relationship between disinvestment, reinvestment and the role of social health institutions and to prepare the grounds for a larger research project that aims at guiding decision-making for policies on affordable housing and social health. In addition, about 20 students, most of them from York Region, will be partially involved with the project.