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## **Urban renewal the second time around; Toronto's Regent Park 'was a brave urban renewal project in the 1950s. But it hasn't really worked out.':[Final Edition]**

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### **Abstract (Summary)**

"They're trying to knit it back into the city and make it disappear," says Mr. [Ben Gianni], who places the redesign in the theoretical realm of new urbanism. "We've kind of grown out of an idea that cities are a collection of buildings that stand out and call attention to themselves, we're coming back to the idea that cities should be first and foremost fabric. And fabric is a continuous thing. Like a coat. Certain things deserve to stand out - - museums, libraries, but housing developments don't benefit from standing out, especially if they're of a low-income demographic."

"It's a different strategy," says Mr. [Derek Ballantyne], who for three years in the late 1990s ran Ottawa's social housing agency, City Living. "In a sense, this is new territory. People will buy off plans if you're down on King Street because you can see a whole bunch of buildings like that all around you. When you go to Regent Park you don't really know how it's going to look."

"In many of these buildings, the kitchen, which is used to feed six people per household, is no more than 12 square feet," he said. "You've got a family with four kids and one three-piece bathroom that is another 10 square feet. It's pretty tough by anyone's standard." In many respects, the new neighbourhood is a return to the past, to the old, ramshackle neighbourhood that gave way to Canada's largest and oldest social housing project. Modernist planners saw the mix of people, cars and occasionally dilapidated housing as sloppy. They believed they could engineer a more perfect place for low-income people to live.

### **Full Text (1709 words)**

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In the 50 odd years since it was conceived as a utopian neighbourhood, all the well-intentioned planning for Canada's first and largest social housing project, Regent Park, was turned on its head.

Expansive green spaces became no-man's land. Ample exits and entrances meant drug dealers could easily shake police. The absence of streets meant cops -- and more significantly, ambulances -- had trouble getting in.

In short, Regent Park became a gangster's paradise.

The community, meanwhile, became poorer and poorer -- and now has the lowest mean income in all of Toronto.

Now, for the second time in just over half a century, authorities have decided to start anew at the downtown Toronto housing project, and are demolishing the entire six square city block neighbourhood in a \$1 billion, 15-year endeavour. Authorities in Ottawa, Vancouver and Montreal -- cities with similar social housing sites -- are watching closely and learning some surprising lessons.

Chief among them is a planned neighbourhood shouldn't try to stand out. When Regent Park's modernist design was fleshed out following the Second World War, it called for the destruction of an entire pre-existing community. Streets were banished in the new design, replaced by sweeping green spaces. Buildings were set far apart from each other and identified by letters and numbers.

The garden-in-the-city design was sui generis on the Toronto landscape, a destination, and, as urban scholars tell it, the subject of much self-satisfied back slapping by ivory-towered planners. In reality, however, the design repelled outsiders while simultaneously isolating its own residents.

"If you said come visit me I couldn't tell you exactly where I lived," says Carleton University architecture professor Ben Gianni, explaining the demoralizing effect of the lettering system. "I'd have to say I live in building C, it's actually floating

in the middle of the block."

The new community is reinserting streets and will ensure every resident of the new community has a proper street address. The move is designed to increase community ownership and surveillance.

"When everyone faces street, you know when to act," says Derek Ballantyne, chief executive officer of Toronto Community Housing Corp., the TCHC.

"In Regent Park nobody owns the space between the buildings. There is no real sense of what is and what isn't public. The urban design lent (to its problems)."

Indeed, in addition to its obvious flaws (apartment units with small kitchens and a single bathroom, as well as buildings with no elevators, narrow hallways and no garbage rooms) there were other, unforeseen ones. Some buildings had as many as eight entrances and exits. Criminals could easily run in one way and out another.

"They were especially good for drug dealing," says Mr. Gianni, who has studied the euphemistically-labelled Regent Park "revitalization" plan in depth.

By the 1980s, Regent Park had earned a reputation as among the worst neighbourhoods in Toronto. People within the community (which, in spite of its many downsides, has promoted a strong sense of togetherness among its inhabitants) began thinking "things are not as they should be," says Mr. Ballantyne.

"It was a valid experiment, a brave urban renewal project in the 1950s," he sums up. "But it hasn't really worked out."

The new project features more townhouses and midrises, and will abandon the 22-story highrises that planners now see as unsuitable for families.

The expansive green spaces will be paved over with a new street grid, which will lead to increased surveillance and safety, according to observers. It will come at a cost, however, of higher density.

The new neighbourhood will fit 5,115 units (more than double the current 2,083) into the same 70 hectares. Much of the green space will be consolidated into a large central park and four smaller "parkettes." (Officials could not say how much green space will be lost in total).

While not necessarily green, Regent Park rebuild is aiming at organic.

After years as a terminal destination, the neighbourhood will once again attempt to become unremarkable.

"They're trying to knit it back into the city and make it disappear," says Mr. Gianni, who places the redesign in the theoretical realm of new urbanism. "We've kind of grown out of an idea that cities are a collection of buildings that stand out and call attention to themselves, we're coming back to the idea that cities should be first and foremost fabric. And fabric is a continuous thing. Like a coat. Certain things deserve to stand out - - museums, libraries, but housing developments don't benefit from standing out, especially if they're of a low-income demographic."

Indeed, poverty has become a defining characteristic of Regent Park, which has the lowest mean income in all of Toronto, according to officials. And yet the neighbourhood is located in what should be a valuable swath of downtown land -- a mere six blocks east of the city's financial district and plugged in to the transit network.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the redesign, therefore, is the addition of private-market condo units to the mix, a tacit acknowledgement that the community's uniquely poor demographic -- despite planners best intentions -- wasn't working out.

Toronto denizens haven't had a chance to glimpse the condos, which, unlike other developments, won't go on the market until they are completed. The marketing plan is designed to battle one of the city's most stigmatized quarters.

"It's a different strategy," says Mr. Ballantyne, who for three years in the late 1990s ran Ottawa's social housing agency, City Living. "In a sense, this is new territory. People will buy off plans if you're down on King Street because you can see a whole bunch of buildings like that all around you. When you go to Regent Park you don't really know how it's

going to look."

The city's social housing agency has high hopes for the redevelopment. Mr. Ballantyne expects the first phase (there are six in total) to net \$10 million profit when it is completed in March 2009.

Already, that plan seems to have reaped serious dividends, with a major bank, grocery store and all-Canadian coffee shop having signed leases to move into the project's first phase. That type of commercial presence eluded the community for decades.

The redevelopment plan is not without its critics, however.

Doug Young, a professor at York University's urban studies program, faults the city's decision to raze the entire neighbourhood rather than reworking the existing stock. Ironically, the modernist planners who came up with the original plan in the 1940s began with the same premise.

Those planners looked down on the pre-existing neighbourhood, a sloppy mix of poorly-maintained homes and businesses facing onto busy streets where children played willy-nilly. "The solution was to erase the whole neighbourhood and start from scratch," says Mr. Young. "It's kind of ironic that one of the critiques of the original development was that it erased entirely a pre-existing neighbourhood and the current redevelopment has taken the same position, that the current situation is unsalvageable, so we'll erase it entirely. Only this time, we'll get it right."

Toronto social housing chief Mr. Ballantyne lists a number of factors the agency looked at before deciding to demolish the existing project. Units were poorly maintained and had been lived in hard over the past 45 years. Revamping the current units wouldn't have given them the same opportunity to change the social mix of the community or give the subsidized renters all-important street addresses.

On top of that, there were practical design considerations.

"In many of these buildings, the kitchen, which is used to feed six people per household, is no more than 12 square feet," he said. "You've got a family with four kids and one three-piece bathroom that is another 10 square feet. It's pretty tough by anyone's standard." In many respects, the new neighbourhood is a return to the past, to the old, ramshackle neighbourhood that gave way to Canada's largest and oldest social housing project. Modernist planners saw the mix of people, cars and occasionally dilapidated housing as sloppy. They believed they could engineer a more perfect place for low-income people to live.

Their failure -- and the consequent rethink of Regent Park -- has prompted much soul-searching among planners.

"Maybe it speaks to the inability of planning to create perfect environments," says Mr. Young. "Maybe it's unrealistic of us to expect that they can. Or that we can predict the future. Or maybe it's easier to say oh, it's poorly planned than to confront the reality of poverty and racism."

Whatever the case, Mr. Ballantyne believes the Regent Park rebuild offers some hope to the scores of low-income communities across the country that were similarly isolated from their surroundings.

Mr. Ballantyne says communities in Ottawa such as Foster Farm, Caldwell Heights, and Britannia can learn from the Regent Park rebuild.

"Those are the places that were built as high concentration, subsidized low-income housing. They were built in ways that are insular, closed to the rest of the neighbourhood, different in architecture and urban design. They never thought how do create good place to live. They thought (about) how you inexpensively and rapidly house a large number of people.

"If we're successful here, it means there's a future for many neighbourhoods that were built in the same way across the country.

"They're in Ottawa, in Vancouver, to a lesser degree in Montreal and there are certainly many others in Toronto."

#### **[[Illustration]**

Colour Photo: Joe O'Connell, The National Post / Workers demolish a building at Regent Park, above, the country's first social

housing project as part of a makeover. ; Colour Photo: Joe O'Connell, The National Post / Workers demolish a building at Regent Park, the country's first social housing project, above, as part of a makeover. ; Photo: Tim Fraser, The National Post / Gordon Baird of McCarthy Tetrault, from left to right, Lynn Burns of Pro Bono Law Ontario which matches law firms and projects, Stephen Monty of Royal Bank of Canada, and Catherine Goulet of the Regent Park Neighbourhood Initiative are all involved in the massive revitalization of Regent Park. ; Photo: One Cole, to be built at Dundas and Parliament streets in Toronto, is one of the condo and retail developments planned for the revitalized Regent Park site. ;

Credit: The Ottawa Citizen

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