

Toronto's South Parkdale Neighbourhood A Brief History of Development, Disinvestment, and Gentrification

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South Parkdale is a unique, beautiful, and troubled neighbourhood, currently riven with conflict between incoming gentrifiers and artists, and a long-standing population of poor and marginalized residents. This brief history describes the changes over time that have led to these conflicts.

1. *The Village*

South Parkdale is the southern section of the Village of Parkdale, annexed by Toronto in 1889, ten years after its official incorporation. The area grew rapidly in the late 19th century as one of Toronto's first commuter suburbs, spurred by the development of the railway and, later, the streetcar. Streets were laid out to allow access south to Lake Ontario and north to Queen Street, the main thoroughfare of commerce and trade.

The character of the neighbourhood in the early 20th century has been captured by a local historian:

In the early days, large homes in spacious grounds overlooking the bay with their owners' boats moored at the jetties characterized the scene.... Comfortable dwellings on large lots then began to fill up the spaces up to Queen Street and within a few years, the lofty arches of healthy trees added beauty and shade to the avenue. Commuters from the new suburb were able to board trains ... for daily travel to the city. It is not surprising that in the early 20th century Parkdale was considered one of Toronto's most desirable residential locations, a

distinction shared only with the district of Rosedale, which was also taking shape at the same time. (Howard Walker, quoted in City of Toronto Planning Board report, "South Parkdale: Trends and Planning Goals," 1976)

With the 1922 opening of the Sunnyside Amusement Park and Bathing Pavilion, Toronto's version of Coney Island, South Parkdale became known informally as the Village by the Lake, with a mixed housing stock consisting of fine Victorian and Edwardian terraces, some substantial mansions, and large (20-or-more-unit) apartment houses, in a neighbourhood that contained one-third of all Toronto's apartment houses by 1915.

2. *Disinvestment, slum rhetoric, and the Gardiner Expressway*

The early 20th century residential construction boom in Toronto ended abruptly with the 1930s Depression. South Parkdale was no exception to a citywide trend that saw the division of large properties into multiple units. By 1941, 62% of houses constructed as single-family dwellings had multiple household occupancy, twice Toronto's average.

Popular belief has it that South Parkdale was an entirely affluent neighbourhood until it was cut off from Lake Ontario by the Gardiner Expressway in the 1960s, but the housing conversions taking place before and after the Second World War led to a significant increase of working-class tenants, and



generated a moral panic about threats to the middle-class, “nuclear-family” way of living. In the 1950s, South Parkdale was labelled a slum by the media and local government, legitimizing the “slum clearance” that would be facilitated by the construction of the Gardiner Expressway. As Pierre Filion has pointed out in “Rupture or Continuity? Modern and Post-modern Planning in Toronto” (*International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 1999), “The spread of slums was indeed an obsession of the time which sanctioned the call for extensive redevelopment and revitalization efforts.”



City of Toronto hoped that those displaced by the Expressway construction would move into the apartments and remain in the neighbourhood.

This hope proved to be unrealistic, however, as the middle classes continued to abandon South Parkdale. Many of the substantial mansions and handsome terraces were demolished to make way for the high-rises, some constructed with financial help from federal housing programs. Some properties remained vacant as the neighbourhood went into economic decline.

Expressways that permitted suburban expansion were seen as signs of economic progress. The Gardiner, built between 1955 and 1964, was an elevated, futuristic construction hugging the lake, an attractive prospect at a time when the city’s waterfront and central port were suffering from deindustrialization, neglect and decay. With the boosterism that surrounded modernist planning, older neighbourhoods like South Parkdale were portrayed as obsolete and in the way of progress.

3. Deinstitutionalization

From the early 1970s onwards, a crucial factor underpinning the changing social geography of South Parkdale was its proximity to the Queen Street Centre for Addictions and Mental Health. For a long time, this was the largest facility of its kind in Canada. Following a trend sweeping North American cities at the time, the provincial government promoted the deinstitutionalization of psychiatric patients in favour of so-called “community-based care.” Thousands of patients were discharged from the Queen Street Centre into South Parkdale in the early 1980s, compounding the effects of the 1979 closure of the nearby Lakeshore Provincial Psychiatric Hospital.

Graham Fraser summed up the attitudes of Toronto’s modernist planners in a book on the struggles to preserve Trefann Court, “They disliked old neighbourhoods simply because they were old.” (*Fighting Back: Urban Renewal in Trefann Court*, Hakkert, 1972)

By 1959, South Parkdale was sliced off from Lake Ontario not just by railroads, but also by the expressway. (It is, and always has been, possible to get to the Lake from the neighbourhood, but with these major transportation arteries it is difficult to describe South Parkdale as a waterfront location.) Sunnyside Amusement Park was bulldozed, more than 170 houses were demolished, and entire streets were erased to make way for the Gardiner. The post-war trend of high-rise apartment construction in South Parkdale gathered steam in the 1950s and 1960s, especially along Jameson and Tyndall Avenues. Officials at the

While care in the community may be a sound policy in principle, South Parkdale suffered disproportionately from a lack of community care policies for discharged patients. As Michael Dear and Jennifer Wolch memorably put it, deinstitutionalization in Ontario was “a policy adopted with great enthusiasm, even though it was never properly articulated, systematically implemented, nor completely thought through.” (*Landscapes of Despair: From Deinstitutionalization to Homelessness*, Princeton University Press, 1987).

Housing was neither plentiful nor adequate for discharged psychiatric patients, but by 1981, between 1,000 and 1,200 patients lived in South



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Parkdale. In 1985, the neighbourhood contained only 39 official “group homes” for former in-patients, so the responsible supervision a group home was supposed to provide was available only to a small number of those discharged. The rest had to find alternative accommodation, usually by themselves, since the provincial government refused to provide housing assistance to former patients. This refusal was presumably to absolve the government of responsibility if the housing turned out to be unsatisfactory, or the ex-patient turned out to be unfit for the dwelling.

Most discharged patients gravitated to unofficial boarding homes, rooming houses, or “bachelorette” apartments created in former single-family dwellings in South Parkdale. (A bachelorette is a self-contained mini-apartment, often converted from a rooming house unit – one room that simultaneously contains sleeping, living, and dining space, with a separate bathroom within the unit.) These houses saw prolific (and usually illegal) conversion during the 1970s, resulting in one of the highest concentrations of such housing in the city.

As it was home to such a large number of deinstitutionalized patients left to their own devices, South Parkdale became what academics call a “service-dependent ghetto.” Newspaper journalists called it a “little ghetto of misery” where “children are afraid to play outside.” Instead of seen as being people in need, the deinstitutionalized were frequently portrayed as crazy, potentially dangerous transients, a blot on Toronto’s reputation for liveability and harmony.

Temple Avenue is pure, distilled Parkdale, a street of big old brick houses that have faded from glory. Some have been carved into rooming houses, others muddled by cheap renovations. All are cast in the shadow of run-down apartment buildings on nearby streets that stand like walls, fracturing the neighbourhood. A neighbourhood rife with poverty, drugs, and prostitution ... no place for a child to grow up. Broken glass and wild screaming on the street at night. Prostitutes strolling down the side-

walk. Drunks splayed on the grass asleep. (Margaret Philp, *Globe and Mail*, 5 August 2000)

4. Gentrification

Given this backdrop, the dominant negative narrative of South Parkdale, it might seem unlikely that gentrification could take place. Indeed, there are still sizable pockets of poverty in the neighbourhood that show few signs of improving. How, then, did a neighbourhood that had been the subject of middle-class derision and fear come to attract gentrifiers? David Ley points out that “low-income areas will be entered [by the middle class] if they hold some specific asset such as affordability, a distinctive housing stock, a particular lifestyle ambience, or proximity to downtown and its varied services.... In the Canadian inner cities, a distinctive period architecture is a common feature of the gentrifying inner neighbourhood.” (*The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City*, Oxford University Press, 1996)

The following excerpts from interviews with gentrifiers in South Parkdale support this assertion:

We moved here [in 1997] because of the location. It is really easy to get into downtown if you work in the city, like twenty minutes on the streetcar, and as my husband often goes to Niagara on business,

he can get right on the Expressway in about two minutes. The houses here are so beautiful, and affordable, which was a big reason for us, because everywhere else was so expensive. Plus, they’re Victorian, and large, and you just can’t find this type of housing any more without paying a fortune for it. You get way more space for the price in this neighbourhood, and our friends who stop by just can’t believe how little we paid for this place. Yes, the crime is a concern, and yes, it is a rougher neighbourhood than many others, but the benefits far outweigh those burdens. (Kathryn, 29 January 2001)

I guess I liked the architecture, the wide, tree-lined streets, the easy access to downtown and the park [High Park, Toronto’s largest public park], and

Deinstitutionalization

If by deinstitutionalization we mean a clearcut policy directed toward reducing the population of provincial psychiatric hospitals and establishing community services to receive discharged patients, then no such policy ever existed in Ontario. However, if by deinstitutionalization we mean a deliberate policy of reducing the long-stay population of the large mental hospitals regardless of what happened to the patients afterward, then deinstitutionalization began in 1965. (Harvey Simmons, *Unbalanced: Mental Health Policy in Ontario, 1930-1989*, Wall and Thompson, 1990)

above all, because people were bothered by what they saw on the streets, it was incredibly cheap. I had always wanted a Victorian home and this was the only neighbourhood left where they were affordable [in 1999]... When you settle here, you wonder what all the fuss is about, really. It's a great place to live and not as pretentious as some other neighbourhoods. (Paul, 17 February 2001)

Other interviewees made a comparison to Cabbagetown, Toronto's most famous gentrified neighbourhood:

I ran into ... a friend of a friend in the hardware store out on Queen Street. I thought she still lived in the Annex, and I said, "Hey, what are you doing in this neighbourhood?" and she said, "Oh, I live here now." I said, "Why did you move?" and she goes, "Didn't you hear? Parkdale's going to be the new Cabbagetown!" (Laurie, 7 April 2001)

First and foremost, we moved here because we couldn't find any other neighbourhoods where you could snap up a solid Victorian house for such a cheap price. It's kind of like how Cabbagetown was in the 1960s – working-class, a kind of "down" feel about it, but loads of really nice houses with great potential. The value of our house has nearly doubled in the seven years we have lived here, for two reasons. First, we put a lot of money into making it look great again, and second, more people are discovering that this might be "Cabbagetown the sequel," so prices have gone up. (Sarah, 16 March 2001)

One can speculate that it was the insalubrious reputation of South Parkdale that kept property values down, and fostered the gradual resettlement of parts of the neighbourhood by the middle classes.

As house prices rose elsewhere in the city during the mid-to-late-1980s real estate boom, growing numbers of professional middle-class homeowners found a handsome, spacious, and affordable Victorian and Edwardian architectural heritage on South Parkdale's broad, tree-lined streets, with easy access to downtown Toronto. They expected that property values would eventually rise as the neighbourhood's profile rose, leading to handsome profits in years to come.

5. *The role of artists*

Another factor behind increasing gentrification has been South Parkdale's growing reputation as a community of artists. Much has been written about the role of artists in initiating or facilitating gentrification. Often portrayed in the media as "pioneers" crossing a "frontier" where a "wild" neighbourhood is "tamed" by a hip,

countercultural new class of resident, artists can prime entire neighbourhoods for the real estate industry. They constitute the first group to set up opportunities for further reinvestment and profit.

South Parkdale is bordered to the north by the vital artery of Queen Street West. The westward movement of gentrification throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s along this street towards South Parkdale can be detected in the mushrooming of artists' studios and galleries, trendy cafes, clothing shops and restaurants, live/work spaces, and, more recently, the explosion of legalized loft conversions of former warehouses.

For many who know the area, the South Parkdale section of Queen Street represents the final frontier of the street's artistic, cultural, and social transformation. While reinvestment has been slower compared to that in areas to the east in earlier decades, in the last few years, signs of gentrification can be observed, such as the appearance of small independent art galleries, a few bohemian cafes with names like "Nine of Cups" and "Rustic Cosmo Café" and particularly the presence of 1313 Queen Street, an old art-deco police station that has become Gallery 1313, the live/work headquarters of the Parkdale Village Arts Collective (PVAC).

The PVAC was formed in 1994 under the auspices of the federally funded Parkdale Village Business Improvement Association (BIA), with the objective of "promoting the arts community" in the neighbourhood – hardly surprising, given the BIA's mission "to revitalize the Village of Parkdale." It regularly houses exhibitions of contemporary art and has become something of a centrepiece for the large community of artists in Toronto's west-end – and, more significantly, it has served to attract their middle-class patrons.

One of the BIA's main strategies has been a re-designation of the neighbourhood as the "Village of Parkdale, 1879" on many of the street signs, undoubtedly an effort to put South Parkdale on the cultural map and encourage the middle classes to buy into the rich architectural, social, and cultural heritage of the neighbourhood.

Artists have congregated in South Parkdale because studio and gallery rents are affordable and because the "edginess" of the neighbourhood serves to amplify the message of their art:

What has been happening in the last few years is that all the other places where artists have their studios have become too expensive for the whole live/work thing ... Parkdale's a blessing for us – not only was it relatively cheap to "set up shop," so to speak, but it also had the kind of social scene that we look for.

You'll never find contemporary, young artists in places like Rosedale or the suburbs because they are monotonous, stuffy, and ... boring. Parkdale was the opposite – it is a *big* reality check for anyone who comes here. People live right on the edge, giving the whole place a kind of edgy feel, which offers ideas and a sort of niche for expression in art. You're never going to find that kind of thing in financial districts or neighbourhoods with loads of families. ... What we have to hope for now is that this area stays cheap, or we're going to have to go to the suburbs! It's the last place left for us! (Sal, 27 June 2001)

It is now casually estimated (by the interviewee above) that more than 600 artists now live in the neighbourhood, chipping away at the grimy reputation of the South Parkdale stretch of Queen Street. Artists have the complete, uncritical support of the city, as the City Councillor for the administrative ward that contains South Parkdale told me:

The Parkdale section of Queen [Street] is a legacy of hard times in the late '80s and early '90s, but it's improving. We've been working hard with the BIA to get little pockets of businesses into Queen Street so that other businesses will follow. Things are improving with the influx of the art galleries. This is the way we need to go; we need to open up the street to that sort of business. I was instrumental in that because I was on the board that helped to legalize live/work spaces for artists who were living in poor conditions. So with Queen Street, what is needed are speciality stores that will serve people in the neighbourhood and attract people from beyond it. It's not great at the moment, but it's getting there. We do need more pride from businesses on Queen Street, like cleaning up windows, storefronts, signs, that kind of thing. (City Councillor, 2 April 2001)

6. Community Conflict

The resettlement of the middle-class homeowners and tenants who have been following the artists has not been welcomed by the neighbourhood's low-income tenants, who are now threatened by displacement resulting from either the closure or deconversion of rooming houses and bachelorette buildings.

The cheapest forms of permanent rental accommodation currently available in Toronto, both rooming houses and bachelorettes are a vital resource for the city's low-income population. Because of gentrification, a lack of profits for landlords, NIMBYism from middle-class residents' associations, new zoning restrictions, and closure due to illegality and poor safety standards, the stock of such dwellings has declined across Toronto since the 1980s, a decline that researchers have linked to the growth of homelessness.

Rooming houses and bachelorettes in South Parkdale have long been a source of community conflict. Tension is rife between low-income tenant advocates and the South Parkdale Residents' Association (SPRA). The SPRA is a small group of middle-class homeowners who joined together to voice their concerns to the municipal government about the continued presence of such housing, viewed as a hindrance to South Parkdale returning to their ideal of "Parkdale Village."

Where the SPRA is primarily concerned with the "effects on the community" and homeowners' property values, tenant advocacy groups in the neighbourhood are concerned with the abysmal and hazardous conditions for many low-income (and often mentally ill or disabled) tenants in these dwellings. They have lobbied the city hard for

recognition of and action on these conditions. By the mid-1990s, the city was under intense pressure from different groups of residents, and realized that it would have to mediate the ongoing conflicts within its borders.

In December 1996, the City of Toronto passed an "interim control by-law" that prohibited any rooming house or bachelorette development or conversion in the administrative Ward that contains South Parkdale, pending the outcome of an area study. The results of the study were released in July 1997, in the form of proposals for discussion (among community groups) titled "Ward 2 Neighbourhood Revitalization."

An examination of this document provides a fascinating insight into what the City of Toronto viewed as the principal social problem of the area – the presence of low-income single-persons in single-person dwell-

Singles vs. families

Metaphors of disease and decay accentuated the somehow inferior status of single tenants relative to family homeowners, and the blame for the neighbourhood's decline was placed on individual fecklessness and deviance (such as drug dealing and prostitution) rather than the complex entanglements of deinstitutionalization and disinvestment that are the principal reasons behind the neighbourhood's troubles.

ings. The objective of the proposals was spelled out clearly: “To stabilize a neighbourhood under stress and restore a healthy demographic balance, without dehousing of vulnerable populations.” The report states:

[T]he area has gone from a stable neighbourhood, with a healthy mix of incomes and household types, to one with a disproportionately large number of single occupancy accommodation. At the request of [the City] Councillor ... [the] Land Use Committee requested the Commissioner of Planning and Development ... to report back on a strategy to encourage families to return to Ward 2. (City of Toronto Urban Development Services, 1997)

It does not take sophisticated decoding of this document to realize that a concentration of singles is viewed as unhealthy, and a concentration of families is viewed as healthy; therefore an influx of families is seen as the remedy for the condition in which South Parkdale currently finds itself. While the objective states that “dehousing” of vulnerable populations would be avoided during revitalization, it is not easy to see how this can be achieved, because South Parkdale’s most vulnerable people are singles – the welfare-dependent, mentally ill, and socially isolated.

A defensible argument can be put forward that these proposals were drawn up not to improve the conditions for singles already in South Parkdale, but to reduce the percentage of singles in the neighbourhood, with middle-class families taking their place. The spatial concentration of low-income single people is consistently portrayed as the neighbourhood’s disease, the introduction of middle-class people, particularly middle-class families, portrayed as the cure.

The understandably negative reaction to these proposals by low-income tenant advocates led to a long “conflict resolution” process, the outcome of which was the City of Toronto’s Parkdale Pilot Project, which aimed to legalize and license rooming houses and bach-

elorettes in South Parkdale through a series of health and safety inspections.

While this appears at first glance as a goal to be applauded, there are in fact few protective measures in place for tenants – no legislation exists to prevent landlords raising rents on their properties to cover the improvements ordered by officials, and little thought appears to have been given to what might happen to tenants if a landlord cannot meet the demands of the Project inspectors and a rooming house or bachelorette building must be closed. With increasing middle-class movement into the neighbourhood, displacement brought about by gentrification is a major issue in a neighbourhood with a long history of social tensions and community conflict.

7. Conclusion

Gentrification in South Parkdale is not an instigator of social interaction but of social tension, leading at the same time to reinvestment and displacement, home improvement and homelessness, renovations and evictions. Meetings between different residents are rarely positive or liberating encounters, because of the tremendous disparities in life chances and living standards.

The result is increasingly divergent views between gentrifiers and non-gentrifiers on the future of South Parkdale’s low-income housing stock. The former are arriving in a neighbourhood that is a vital source of affordable housing for deinstitutionalized psychiatric patients and new immigrants to Canada (the latter a population beyond the scope of this bulletin but nonetheless important to recognize).

While South Parkdale badly needs reinvestment and municipal attention, unbridled gentrification is at the expense of a low-income population that has no say in these “improvements” and for whom a very different kind of improvement is required.

Tom Slater is Lecturer in Urban Studies at the University of Bristol, U.K. His research interests include a range of inner-city topics, especially gentrification and segregation, the politics of neighbourhood change, community organizing, and urban social movements, and his work emphasizes qualitative methods. He has published on gentrification in *Urban Geography*, *Environment and Planning A* (for which he co-edited a special issue on the topic), and *The Canadian Geographer*. He is currently writing (with Elvin Wyly and Loretta Lees) a textbook to be published by Routledge, titled *Gentrification*. He can be contacted at tom.slater@bristol.ac.uk

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INCLUSIVE NEIGHBOURHOODS ■ TORONTO CASE STUDY

Community University Research Alliance | St. Christopher House & University of Toronto

A New Research Alliance

St. Christopher House, a multi-service agency in Toronto, and the Centre for Urban and Community Studies at the University of Toronto, have launched a research alliance to answer the following questions:

- How can we preserve existing lower-income and socially and ethnically mixed, affordable neighbourhoods in the face of forces that are raising costs (particularly housing costs) and displacing or excluding certain people, businesses, and community services?
- How can people in urban neighbourhoods successfully shape the development of their environment to create a community that is socially cohesive and inclusive?
- What can we learn from recent and emerging community practice about effective action against negative forces and support for positive forces to ensure better community outcomes?

The research will involve a case study of a mainly residential area just west of downtown Toronto, consisting of seven neighbourhoods: Dufferin Grove, Little Portugal, Niagara, Palmerston, Roncesvalles, South Parkdale, and Trinity-Bellwoods. The area has a population of 107,000 and a median household income about 13% lower than the city average. It is an immigrant settlement area with significant ethno-cultural diversity.

Why Study Neighbourhoods?

Despite public debate on the need for an “improved urban agenda” in Canada, many questions about that agenda remain unanswered. What role should urban neighbourhoods, particularly lower-income and redeveloping neighbourhoods, play in the emerging urban agenda? What can and should be done about processes that produce displacement and social exclusion? What are appropriate and feasible responses to pressures that threaten the existence of lower-income neighbourhoods?

Research grounded in the lived experience of households and organizations in neighbourhoods undergoing dramatic change is needed to provide the basis for innovative or improved urban policies and programs.

Research Themes

The project consists of four theme areas:

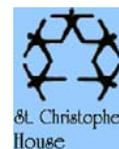
1. local trends (e.g., demographic composition, type and size of households, socio-economic status of the residents) and the relevant policies and programs that affect these trends;
2. housing issues and trends;
3. community infrastructure (social and physical);
4. life transitions and aging.

The research has two goals. The first is to contribute to our understanding of neighbourhood change by documenting, analyzing, monitoring, and forecasting trends. The second is to influence that change by informing, educating, and mobilizing stakeholders.

Given the second goal, the research will use a community development approach. This means that in studying the social, economic, organizational, and physical structures of the community, the researchers will seek to improve both the welfare of community members and the community's ability to control its future. Local residents will be involved in defining problems, developing solutions, and attracting the resources necessary to address those problems.

The Partners

St. Christopher House is a multi-service social agency founded in 1913 as a neighbourhood settlement house. It is run by 80 full-time staff, 120 part-time staff, and 800 volunteers, working out of six sites in west-end Toronto. It has a budget of \$7 million. About 10,000 individuals and families are served each year.



The **Centre for Urban and Community Studies**, established in 1964, promotes and disseminates multidisciplinary research and policy analysis on urban issues. The Centre's Community/University Research Partnership unit promotes the exchange of knowledge between the university and community agencies and associations.

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