

Transit-led Development and Gentrification: A Case Study on the Eglinton Crosstown

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This essay examines a Toronto neighbourhood along Eglinton Avenue West, known locally as 'Little Jamaica,' where a light rail transit (LRT) project called the Eglinton Crosstown is currently being constructed. Drawing on personal observations and secondary sources, the paper examines negative effects of this transit development on the low income immigrant community, as the process of gentrification has quietly begun to 'improve' their neighbourhood. Residents and small businesses of the area face displacement pressures as developers, Business Improvement Areas, city government, and other stakeholders race to take advantage of urban renewal opportunities which come with new transit infrastructure. This paper examines three redevelopment models: Creative City, Ethnic Packaging, and Green Economy, and how they work together to design a gentrified future of Eglinton West. In the final sections, I critique these visions as racialized class projects, consider the ethnic community's absence from redevelopment plans, and suggest possible planning tools which could promote revitalization without displacement.

Introduction

My daily commute entails an observation of the streetscape, people and shopfronts on Eglinton Avenue West from the windows of the 32 bus route. Over the past two years I have seen considerable change as countless small businesses have vacated, leaving nothing but yellowing newspaper and 'for lease' signs in their windows. Slow movement of the bus is attributed to Eglinton being reduced to two lanes of traffic where the Metrolinx Crosstown is being constructed. Projected to open in 2021, the Eglinton Crosstown is a large-scale transportation project which will bring desperately needed improvements in service and efficiency¹. The light rail transit line will extend along a 19 kilometre corridor of Eglinton Avenue between Mount Dennis and Kennedy Station (Metrolinx, 2014). In this study, I will be looking at the Crosstown in the western end of Toronto between Keele Street and Allen Road. This strip has a predominantly low-income, working class population with high

levels of immigrants and visible minorities (City of Toronto, 2011).

With rapid increases in population, high demand for housing and a burgeoning real estate market, Toronto's center of gravity is steadily moving northwards into inner suburbs such as Eglinton West. The area is expected to face redevelopment pressures as different stakeholders race to take advantage of new transit infrastructure while attracting urban renewal opportunities. This study examines the Crosstown's potential long term effects on Eglinton West's residents and small businesses, including the threat of gentrification and displacement. Although multiple stakeholders have advanced different models for the redevelopment of Eglinton, none can be defined as mutually exclusive. The Creative City, Ethnic Packaging, and Green Economy visions overlap, working together in designing a gentrified future of Eglinton West. In the final sections, I critique these visions as racialized class projects and explore possible planning tools that could promote revitalization without displacement.

¹ The \$5.3 billion (CAD 2010) investment is projected to be 60% faster than existing bus service (Metrolinx, 2015).



Figure 1: “Due to unforeseen circumstances.” An example of one of the many small businesses along Eglinton Avenue West that have been forced to shut down or relocate since construction of the Crosstown began in 2013 (Source: Aayesha Patel, 2015).

Voices of Vulnerability

The area of study, known colloquially as Little Jamaica, has historically been an Afro-Caribbean ethnic enclave. According to Jacobs (1985), commercial streets which appear to have high visible minority populations, multiple vacancies, and low levels of maintenance are increasingly vulnerable to gentrification, especially if adjacent to new public developments (p. 104). Since construction of the LRT began, small businesses along the strip, largely owned by black immigrants, have faced pressures of slow turnover and concerns of increased rent, some having lost 20-30% of customers (Aziz & Bachour, 2014).

Gentrification itself is most succinctly described as “the production of space for progressively more affluent users” (Hackworth & Rekers, 2005, p. 3). An independent coffee shop, specialty bike store, and the sales office for a new high-rise condominium development punctuate the pattern of Little Jamaica’s old, weathered shop-

fronts. A small business owner who had been forced to relocate from Eglinton West told a local newspaper that “most people living in this community don’t want this condo here... the community should stay how it is” (Aziz & Bachour, 2014). Prices for a unit start at \$250,000, a sum far beyond affordability levels of the neighbourhood’s current residents who work low skill wage jobs. Residents have expressed a consciousness of the Crosstown’s negative potential and a common notion that Afro-Caribbean businesses and residents “may not survive the neighbourhood make-over” (Armstrong, 2014). The community’s well-deserved transit infrastructure remains overshadowed by a fear of displacement and an opposition to commercial gentrification². This incites debate on urban socio-spatial inequality and the disadvantage of low-income communities in the distribution of and access to public services across the city.

Creative City Vision

The community’s deep roots on Eglinton West date to the 1950s when the first Jamaican immigrants landed in the area, bringing with them their culture and traditions (Armstrong, 2014). To honour this, in 2014 a local politician initiated a project to name a laneway behind Eglinton ‘Reggae Lane’ in light of the changing neighbourhood. The name and an additional mural was to commemorate the history and legacy of Little Jamaica in the 1970s and ‘80s, as a vibrant epicenter of reggae music. Record shops, recording studios, and concert venues once lined Eglinton West where the immigrant community settled down. The initiative, led in part by BIAs, is evocative of tokenism as a practice of gentrification in which cultural and historical landmarks are ‘preserved’ to give an area commercial appeal (Relph, 1987, p. 219). As young professionals search for creative ambience in the places they live, Jamaican culture is deliberately constructed in an effort to “recreate a townscape not as it once was but as the gentrifiers wished it

² As one resident succinctly put it, “This whole neighbourhood ain’t gonna be Little Jamaica anymore” (Aziz & Bachour, 2014).

might have been” (Relph, 1987, p. 223).

Local residents of Little Jamaica felt the initiative was a token gesture which would not do much to help with pressing issues in the community such as economic development. They questioned whether the city would help to “keep the mom and pop shops open, given the LRT construction and gentrification creeping in” (Armstrong, 2014). The population was well aware that the initiative was “someone’s political move,” given to the black community as a justification for the unmentioned gentrification. Residents felt the larger issue was how Caribbean presence and subsequent displacement in the neighbourhood was being neglected (Armstrong, 2014). The Creative City vision of Eglinton West as a gentrified artistic hub is advanced by local politicians to sell Little Jamaica in a process of ethnic branding. The neighbourhood’s rich cultural identity is being packaged and sold to attract affluent professionals, intersecting the two visions as they employ similar practices.

Ethnic Packaging Vision

Business Improvement Areas (BIAs) often work to actively manufacture a marketable form of ethnicity that targets tourists and prospective residents. The two BIAs included in the study area promote Eglinton West as a business and shopping destination, “offering shoppers and visitors a vibrant international market with

shops and restaurants catering to the community’s diverse heritage” (Fairbank BIA, 2015). An annual street festival on Eglinton West showcases the neighbourhood’s multicultural food and arts, working to develop “a larger tourism pull” (York BIA, 2015). Packaged ethnicity often facilitates gentrification as efforts to beautify and market the neighbourhood as a niche to wealthy prospective resident has been shown to cause a decline of the original ethnic population (Hackworth & Rekers, 2005, p. iii). The York and Fairbank BIAs have collaborated with local politicians to deliberately construct a multicultural urbanity using art and culture in order to advance the Ethnic-Creative City vision of gentrification. Such processes are not novel to Toronto’s ethnic enclaves. Hackworth & Rekers (2005) have documented similar forms of BIA-led gentrification occurring in Corso Italia, Greektown on the Danforth, and Little India.

Green Economy Vision

The marketing of Eglinton West as an ethnic enclave parallels aspects of the Green Economy vision, whose main proponent is the municipal government. The comprehensive planning study called ‘Eglinton Connects’ offers an extensively detailed vision and planning recommendations in anticipation of Eglinton’s rapid growth following the Crosstown’s arrival (Eglinton Connects, 2014). The plan proposes construction of mid-rise buildings along the corridor and a complete



Figure 2a, 2b: “It may be in the decades to come that one of the few remaining reminders of the Caribbean presence in that neighbourhood is the street name: Reggae Lane” – Local Resident (Armstrong, 2014). (Source: Hector Vasquez, 2015).



Figures 3a, 3b and 3c: Eglinton Connects' Green Economy vision sets the stage for long term intensification as more than 100,000 new people and jobs are projected to enter the Avenue, and justifies midrise development for yielding a private sector profit. (Source: Eglinton Connects, City of Toronto, 2014).

revitalisation of Eglinton's streetscape to include bicycle lanes, wider sidewalks, patios, benches and other street furniture. Emphasis is placed on the beautification and 'greening' of Eglinton with a continuous canopy of large trees, green roofs, community gardens, connections to the city's trails and ravines including the Humber and Don River Valleys, and green transit infrastructure (Eglinton Connects, 2014: 9).

Through transit investment providing an opportunity to rebuild Eglinton's streetscape, the vision aims to "attract new populations looking for a high quality of life" (Eglinton Connects, 2014, p. 7). This New Urbanist Creative City model, led by City of Toronto Planning, has collaborated with Metrolinx to create 'green jobs' in a Community Benefits Agreement. Jobs generat-

ed by transit allow local residents to participate in inclusive employment and apprenticeship programs, resulting in blue-collar living wages for the community (Metrolinx, 2014, p. 15).

The Green Economy plan suggests neighbourhood revitalization will foster local identity and support economic development, claiming Eglinton's "unique heritage and character of a vibrant culture" will be strengthened with a new streetscape design (Eglinton Connects, 2014, p. 7). The rhetoric assumes current residents and businesses will not be displaced, avoiding debate on gentrification by styling it as 'revitalization.' The vision employs elements of Ethnic Packaging, demonstrating how the models intersect in their collective goal of gentrification³.

³ York-Eglinton BIA held its first farmers market in the summer of 2015 with expensive organic produce,

Racialized Class Projects

The process of gentrification is known to be “predicated on and reproduced by existing racial inequalities” (Rankin & McLean, 2015, p. 221). The visions explored can be defined as ‘racialized class projects,’ planning visions and practices that naturalize ideologies of race and class as unequal distributions of opportunity. This can be seen through the “erasure of racialized people from redevelopment plans” and “the mobilization of white privilege” in non-inclusive consultations (Rankin & McLean, 2015, p. 221). The visions are advanced by privileged white homeowners with the time and financial resources to support redevelopment projects and the remaking of their neighbourhoods to suit Anglo-Canadian lifestyles (Rankin & McLean, 2015, p. 237).

Attendants of Metrolinx Public Consultation meetings provided overwhelming support to the Crosstown for its positive commercial and social impact on the neighbourhood and its direct connection to increased property values (Metrolinx, 2012, p. 16). Attendants called for the promotion of Eglinton West as a “destination,” and shared a desire to revitalize Eglinton West as a trendy, gentrified neighbourhood. One person however, criticised the demographic and motives of attendants, writing “there was no discussion on gentrification and displacement. There was one black woman at the consultation, why? Better outreach is needed” (Metrolinx, 2013, p. 25). Furthermore, diversity in the Creative City model “commodifies difference and normalizes processes of racialization through practices such as Ethnic Packaging” (Rankin & McLean, 2015, p. 221).

Proponents of racialized class projects “mobilize an elite sense of entitlement to speak for the neighbourhood” and “generate existing commercial space as empty and deficient” despite the existence of thriving community bonds

artisan and handcrafted goods, clearly meant to attract a different clientele from the existing population. Only 3 of more than 15 vendors at the farmer’s market were businesses from Eglinton West (York BIA, 2015).

(Rankin & McLean, 2015, p. 221). Survey comments described the commercial street as dead space that needed to be “enlivened” by new businesses and people (Metrolinx, 2012, p. 19). When asked whether new station design should integrate into the local community, one attendant wrote: “Do not make it fit with existing shoddy neighbourhood, should be modern and contemporary to raise the quality of the neighbourhood” (Metrolinx, 2012:18). This statement and many others convey how attitudinal racism is present within redevelopment visions as commercial space oriented towards the needs of the black community is stigmatized as lacklustre and uneventful.

Despite these efforts of erasure, a deeply connected ethnic community lives and works on Eglinton West, strengthening ties in support of small businesses and entrepreneurs. Community members frequent Eglinton’s Caribbean restaurants and churches to socialize while local barbershops offer informal apprenticeships to young entrepreneurs as well as space for black fatherhood workshops (Armstrong, 2014). Before relocating due to loss of business, an Afro-Caribbean bookstore hosted workshops, poetry readings, and oral history events connecting residents and youth to their heritage (Casas, 2014). This strong black identity within the community currently stands in a vulnerable position, a possibility entirely overlooked by proponents of gentrification.

Racialized class projects promote only a sanitised consumption of ethnicity that is acceptable to middle class tastes (Rankin, 2015, p. 229). Although attendants supported ‘diverse’ neighbourhood branding, they also criticised black businesses as unattractive and in need of replacement. The Creative City process of selective historical preservation in Reggae Lane is wrapped up in ideologies and biases as gentrifiers’ preferred image of history is preserved (Relph, 1987, p. 224). This appropriation of Jamaican culture is an exploitation of multiculturalism in which creative, artistic elements are desired while small businesses with little aes-

thetic appeal are rejected. Racist implications are clearly shown to be embedded in the visions and practices of gentrification, advanced by planners, BIAs and homeowners.

Revitalisation without Displacement

Although redevelopment of Toronto's inner suburbs will soon become inevitable, it is possible for incomers to be integrated into existing communities. To prevent the act of gentrification itself, the provincial and municipal governments should implement various policies promoting revitalisation without displacement. Inclusionary zoning can be employed in new mixed tenure residential developments meaning 15-20% of units would be affordable rental housing. Dwellings of different sizes and costs in a single mid-rise building can relieve the middle class' demand for housing while allowing the existing low income community to afford to remain in their neighbourhood. Furthermore, the provincial government can enforce rent control, under which landlords would no longer have the right to increase rent prices at will. Consistency of rent would prevent the displacement of low-income residents in a gentrifying area, promoting a broader socio-economic mix of households (Hulchanski, 2010, p. 21).

Residential and commercial gentrification work in tandem as preventing one inhibits the other. As small businesses lining commercial strips of low-income neighbourhoods provide affordable goods to the ethnic community, displaced residents and a subsequent lack of consumer base would eventually lead to their closure or relocation. Therefore, small businesses must be provided with various supports against gentrification through policy change. Business owners should be encouraged to own their properties in order to prevent being priced out by their landlords. This can be achieved by income or property tax incentives and low-interest loans offered to owner occupied businesses. Alternately, retail space could be owned by the city or community and leased to small businesses at a stable rent or no profit (Rankin, 2008, p. 41).

The City of Toronto Economic Development Office could provide marketing support to businesses in adapting to the changing demographics of their customers. Often, ethnically oriented businesses can market well to the immigrant community, but fall behind when competing with new middle class businesses. Small adjustments in stock, décor, and service style could make a significant difference in appealing to newcomers as well as the existing community. Retaining ethnically oriented and immigrant-owned businesses also promotes an inclusive diversity which may have attracted new residents to the area initially (Rankin, 2008, p. 42).

Implementation of local knowledge in redevelopment plans remains a highly essential tool in promoting revitalisation without displacement (Rankin, 2008, p. 46). Community based research initiatives not only benefit the collaborative planning process with their lived experiences of the neighbourhood, but also work to empower local residents. Furthermore, the City should educate residents and small businesses on the social costs of gentrification. This could mean better access to information sessions, providing child care, and hosting flexible evening sessions to accommodate the working population (Rankin, 2008, pg. IV). The fundamental act of spreading awareness can allow a neighbourhood to unite against displacement and socio-spatial inequality. Thus, it is imperative for local residents to have a greater influence on city planning in order to build more equitable communities of the future.

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