

Rivertowne Conviviality Project: living together with limited tools and unlimited imaginations

After many doubts, and against the advice of friends whom I respect, I have chosen “convivial” as a technical term to designate a modern *society of responsibly limited tools*.

Ivan Illich, Tools for Conviviality, 1971

Do you know that Rivertowne is a **Mixed Income** Community? Are you aware of what that means for both condo and Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) residents? This report examines the definition, policy, and implementation of Mixed Income projects as they pertain to the development of Rivertowne. It was produced by residents Reena Katz, Fei Ma and Elsa Blatero. We live in all three types of housing here: condo, market rental unit and rent-geared-to-income. We are currently a research team of three. We are asking ourselves and the community if there has been success in cultivating social inclusion and eliminating barriers within Rivertowne. Through conversation with other residents, and a series of performance events, we hope to build a lasting conviviality in Rivertowne.

M, a resident we interviewed as part of our research expressed it like this:

“When I heard that (Rivertowne) was a mixed-income community, that housing tenants and condo owners are mixed together, I thought you wouldn’t be able to tell who is a condo owner and who is a housing tenant; I thought everyone would truly be mixed together. When someone comes out of a building, you wouldn’t know who is a condo owner and who is a housing tenant; I thought it would be like that; it was only after I had moved in for a while that the buildings are separate so it is very obvious; certain buildings are for housing tenants while others are for condo owners; I feel like this is a fake mix, not really a real mix, because this gives people labels; the moment you walk out you would be labelled. If it’s truly mixed, nobody would have labels on their foreheads.”

Another resident we interviewed described it this way:

“When I came here, I really thought Mixed Income meant it would vary from unit to unit. I guess I was naïve. Or, at least that it would feel like a Mixed Income (community). In fact, it’s more of a negative vibe.”

Our first question was: Who *really* lives here? We found that there are many kinds of residents in Rivertowne. There are residents in TCHC who pay market rent, and others who pay rent-geared-to-income. There are condo residents who live here, others who are renting from owners who live off-site. There are family and friends of condo owners, and subletters who are there temporarily. Some of these residents are also owners who have received assistance in a variety of ways for first-time home buyer programs. Rivertowne is much more complicated than the architecture would have us believe... What do you think? We want to know! We are planning a number of projects, but for now you can reach us through our Artist Animator, Reena Katz at: reena@radiodress.ca

Mixed Income Housing

The History of Mixed Income Housing

'Mixed Income housing' is a loose term that includes many ideas and fields of study. Generally, Mixed Income housing is defined as a development of housing units with varying levels of affordability. A portion of the units are priced at market rates while the other portion is geared towards low-income people with lower-than-market rates. The ratio between the two sections varies from community to community and is often determined by the specific needs of the region itself, such as the local market and standards of living. Mixed Income communities may form naturally, through processes of migration and evolution of community, or they may be planned as a policy for developmental intervention, like in Rivertowne.

Currently, a number of Toronto housing communities which were traditionally segregated such as Don Mount Court, Lawrence Heights and Regent Park are being revitalized as Mixed Income communities. This interest in addressing economic segregation within communities is extremely complex. There are many stakeholders beyond residents like ourselves. City Planners, Housing Developers, Law Enforcement, Community Services, Security and Waste Management companies, all have different stakes in the planning and ideological framework around Mixed Income developments.

Reasons for Mixed Income Housing

Mixed Income housing is developed mainly to reduce the issues found in communities with concentrated poverty. Because there are so many social determinants of poverty, isolating poor and working class people into what is effectively segregated housing communities can result in lower levels of educational achievement; higher rates of crime and violence; and higher unemployment rates in those communities. Often this segregation is blamed on the people in those communities, rather than the economic realities that put them there. The effects of economic segregation in housing are known as 'neighbourhood effects' and generally mean lower levels of social services and geographic isolation from employment opportunities. Theoretically, Mixed Income communities would allow for increased interaction between low-income people and higher-income people, and thus aid in addressing economic and social isolation. Design and architecture play a key role in this equation. Many Mixed Income communities effectively further economic segregation through the layout and infrastructure of the housing units, parks, security and waste management. We have seen this very clearly in Rivertowne.

Historical Context

Canadian Social Planning Policies

The objectives of Canadian housing policies are to ensure that dwellings of a decent standard are available to all Canadians at prices they can afford. Historically, all levels of government were involved in housing programs, though the constitutional authority for housing is currently vested in provincial governments. At the national level, Canadian housing policies have addressed 3 issues: the production of sufficient housing to meet the needs of most Canadians, the provision of mortgage assurance for homeowners; and the offer of assistance to people whose housing needs cannot be adequately met through the private housing market.

The first national housing legislation, the Dominion Housing Act of 1935, provided loans for home buyers. In 1938, the first National Housing Act (NHA) was passed. This included a provision for construction of low-rent housing. In 1949, the NHA was broadened to include federal-provincial programs across the country (sometimes with city participation) to fund publicly owned and provincially managed housing for low-income families, seniors and the disabled.

Prior to 1970, government programs assisted one-third of all housing developments. Most of this assistance was directed to market housing. Less than 5% of all new developments were specifically designed to house lower income Canadians. From 1969 to 1974, public housing programs underwent extensive evaluation. In 1974 the NHA was amended to include rural and First Nations programs as well as new social housing to be built by municipalities, non-profit organizations and co-operatives. The legislation encouraged consumers to be more involved in the design and management of housing and encouraged a mix of modest and lower income households.

Throughout the 1970s provincial and city governments assumed a more active role in housing. By the mid-1970s all 10 provinces had created new or stronger housing departments and assumed more responsibility for policy development and for setting priorities for spending housing funds. Most provinces offered home-ownership grants and funded non-market housing. Some provinces assisted renters by providing tax credits, shelter allowances and rent control.

Social housing programs underwent an extensive review from 1979 to 1984. Coinciding with fiscal restraint both to eliminate the operating deficit and reduce the national debt, governments examined the ongoing cost of housing subsidies. Housing funds were reduced and directly targeted to low-income people. More emphasis was placed upon renovation of existing housing. Most market rental-assistance programs ended by the mid-1980s, but the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (Canada's national housing agency) continued to assist households in improving quality through a variety of rehabilitation programs for homeowners, rental units, rental conversions and rooming houses in both urban and rural areas.

By 1993 the federal government withdrew from funding new social housing. In 1996 the federal government announced that the management and ongoing subsidies of existing social housing would be transferred to the provinces. Provincial contributions to housing varied across the country. For the most part, funding was uncertain and provided minimal support for those least able to afford housing in higher priced markets. Since 1995, British Columbia and Québec have been the only provinces to fund new social housing. British Columbia provides limited funds for building independent living for elderly and disabled residents. With the withdrawal of most senior government funding for assisted housing, cities were faced with a growing need for new affordable housing and few resources to respond.

Within this context, the Canadian government has never does not have a clear, cohesive statement regarding Mixed Income communities. However, the 1973 Amendment to the National Housing Act implied the need for inclusion of a wider range of income levels within housing projects across the country, and thus Mixed Income housing was implemented.

HOPE IV Program

The HOPE IV program was established in a series of communities in the United States in 1992. It represents a dramatic turn in the housing policies by encouraging Mixed Income planning, design and outreach. Part of an emerging philosophy of urban development called *New Urbanism*, the HOPE IV program attempted to de-concentrate poverty in cities with large, dilapidated social housing complexes such as Boston, Los Angeles, Chicago and Atlanta. The revitalization of Don Mount Court into Rivertowne is modeled after this program.

Social History

Communities are made up of people who live through the stories we hear and circulate. Whether we come together by choice or necessity, sharing stories about our homes and the neighbourhood we live in can be a strong foundation for a convivial community. It can also result in gossip, threatening behaviours and a wall of damaging noise. Rivertowne Convival Project honours the histories of Don Mount Court and the challenging process of change that went into the birth of Rivertowne. We see the former residents of Don Mount Court as wisdom-holders in our neighbourhood. Part of this initiative is to collect stories from diverse residents of all ages. We hope to offer each other varied perspectives on how it feels to live here, as a way of starting and recording a bigger social and political conversation about housing in our city. In the same way that our homes are sacred spaces which we invite others to share in, our stories can be vehicles for developing community hospitality. They can be little tools for a big job of building understanding.

Don Mount Court >> Rivertowne – A short history

Don Mount Court was one of the city's oldest downtown housing projects. It was built in 1968, a time when segregating low income households was considered ideal. In 2000, an engineering study revealed extensive concrete deterioration and the need to take action to ensure resident safety and meet provincial housing standards. When TCHC was created and had responsibility for Don Mount Court in 2002, a significant number of units were deemed uninhabitable. TCHC and its partners decided to revitalize Don Mount Court as a Mixed Income community, including both rental and ownership housing. Like some of the HOPE IV projects in the US, the design removed city streets from within the complex, and placed buildings in a self-contained, park-like setting. Demolition began in October 2004. The revitalized Don Mount Court/Rivertowne community is Canada's first public housing development rebuilt as a Mixed Income community.

Though Don Mount Court is often discussed as an isolated community, many Rivertowne residents who grew up there express opposite experiences. D described it like this:

"Don Mount Court was beautiful. They had a pool, teeter totters, they had swings; they had sand. They had their own backyards and their own front yards. Everybody got along so well, there wasn't any arguing."

M expressed it this way:

"Although I was excited to move back (after the revitalization), and it looks pretty on the outside, it's not the same. Rivertowne has definitely changed. It doesn't have that nice community feeling that it (Don Mount Court) used to have. Well, there is still a community feeling, but it doesn't feel as positive."

The goals of the revitalization plan were part of a framework to change the perceived isolation of Don Mount Court. Was it a successful transformation?

Revitalization in Context

Toronto Community Housing has an ongoing commitment to revitalize existing neighbourhoods. What does this mean? According to their website: "Our vision for revitalization goes beyond replacing housing in a poor state of repair. We are transforming communities to build great neighbourhoods for everyone." Was this effective in Rivertowne?

The addition of market units to previously exclusive community housing neighbourhoods is a key piece of revitalization. Under the Mixed Income designation, communities can attract investment in the form of new or improved amenities like schools, parks and improved transit. They can also increase local jobs and training for residents and may create opportunities for

affordable home ownership. The downside of this process is that residents often lose their agency and sense of community. As D explains:

“Rivertowne is not the same. It’s causing conflicts (between residents). People are moving out because of the way it’s built.”

But other residents do not experience such a large split between condo owners and TCHC residents. H describes it like this:

“I feel that we (assisted purchase market-housing) are the same as them (rent geared-to-income residents); we all belong to that 99% of ordinary citizens. Across from our house is a housing unit; I also see them going to work; their child goes to school with my daughter; there is not much difference.”

Though TCHC is committed to engagement processes that put tenants first, and creates space for residents to contribute to housing decisions, many Rivertowne residents have not been consulted in effective ways. Others are disinterested in engaging. Because condo owners have an entirely different management system, there has not been obvious reasons to come together. Is this the best way to move forward with conviviality in mind?

Some residents moved here being very aware of Rivertowne’s designation as Mixed Income. Others were less aware, or not aware at all. How does this impact our community? What does living in a Mixed Income community mean to you? H explained their experience to us:

“We knew when we bought the house; this is also partially what attracted us. I am a strong supporter of social equity; people have different incomes for various reasons, this doesn’t mean the moral character of the people are different; we quite like living in these sorts of mixed communities where people of different income levels can interact together.”

Social Mixing, Design and Architecture

Although physical segregation is not a synonym for social exclusion, the two concepts are closely related. In communities with physical segregation, such as known ‘dangerous’ neighbourhoods and housing that is very separate from home owners, social exclusion is predictable. The elimination of these physical barriers is necessary to promote social inclusion, as it allows for the potential of interaction between people of different income levels. Note that this in itself is not a solution to poverty, but rather provides options and opportunities for low-income people to improve their socioeconomic situation by being less isolated. It also provides opportunities for wealthier residents to understand more deeply the experiences of their neighbours.

Does Rivertowne feel mixed in an equitable way to you? Can you tell who has more and less financial resources, based on where they live? H shared a poignant story about this:

“When we first moved here, there were events run by Ralph Thornton Centre, and I sometimes attended. I felt very enthusiastic about it and I brought our children to attend that as well. Outside the houses was a little yard; everyone was discussing and asking the tenants for their opinions, such as what kind of table to buy, what kind of chairs, where they should put them; of course I also raised ideas; I thought I could use that courtyard as well; but the tenants seemed to be surprised and asked me whether I lived here. When I said that I lived in a condo; they seemed to exclude me a bit; overall I felt a bit uncomfortable. After that I didn’t dare to go to that courtyard.”

Planning and Design Practices to Promote Social Mixing

A large factor in the success of social mixing projects is the transparency and inclusiveness of the design process. Ideally, non-designer experts such as social workers and sociologists are consulted in the development of Mixed Income communities in order to promote marketable and desirable housing units. Furthermore, the design of the housing units themselves are varied in order to appeal to a wide array of residents and to meet specific housing needs. Shared open spaces are vital to the sense of community and self-affirmation of residents, and easy access to services and opportunities are made a priority. The structural strengths of a community, such as how its physical shared spaces are designed and integrated, is a significant factor in promoting social interaction between people of differing income levels. Finally, the ideal design of Mixed Income projects is a uniform and architecturally continuous community, in order to avoid stigmatization of public housing residents. Subsidized housing units are not perceived as a separate component within the community, and instead are embedded into the architectural framework. In other words, it should not be obvious which units are subsidized and which are market-rate.

More than just income-mixing and equitable management is needed to reach the goal of improved socioeconomic mobility for low-income residents in Mixed Income housing. Successful income integration in a neighborhood setting is more difficult in a Mixed Income community than in a housing project context because of prejudice and entrenched class barriers. Mixed Income housing may be more difficult to manage when there is a drastic dichotomy between the subsidized and market-rate renters, rather than moderate income tiers between the two. Mixed Income housing works best when the income mix is not emphasized in marketing and there are no differences in the nature and quality of units being offered. Thoughtful social spaces with mixed access, traffic and parking considerations, street and laneway planning and a diversity of locally owned and operated businesses are all contributors to the success of Mixed Income neighbourhoods.

Is this how Rivertowne looks and feels to you? We think it has a long way to go before Rivertowne is truly a Mixed Income neighbourhood. Art can be a great way to begin a conversation about what we imagine our community to look, sound, smell, taste and feel like. Our next phase of work involves building community strategies for social inclusion.

Best Practices for Social Inclusion

It is clear from the research that mixed-income communities are difficult to unify. They tend to fragment across income and tenancy lines. It is unrealistic to assume that geographic proximity will cause these different groups to connect, develop cohesion and create a socially inclusive community. Other research, however, indicates that there are a variety of measures that can overcome these tendencies and can help to create socially inclusive mixed communities. North American studies that measured the extent to which residents interacted with their neighbours have found that public housing tenants interacted more with other public housing tenants than with the new higher-income residents of the neighbourhood. Higher-income individuals spent most of their days outside of the neighbourhood, participating in work and social activities with their social networks outside of the community.

Design strategies for a convival Rivertowne:

- Small spatial distance between renters' and owners' houses and entranceways.
- Multiple spaces for casual social interaction between diverse residents such as: pathways and bicycle use to permit access to different parts of the neighbourhood; communal facilities that are accessible and used by a wide variety of community members; local outdoor and indoor spaces such as well-equipped parks for activities and casual social interactions; shared interior courtyards and shared open public spaces.
- Street-level mixing through entrances and exits that promote pedestrian traffic past other people's windows and doors, and provide a range of meeting points.
- A connection between different parts of the neighbourhood through walking paths and bicycle routes; entrances and exits that maximize social encounters, and waste management, laundry and mailboxes that are shared by all income levels.
- Mixed Income households should exist in the same building, with a seamless blend of building types and proximity between people of different economic and cultural backgrounds.

Architecture in Rivertowne

Our project is about the importance and impact of architecture and design on Mixed Income housing communities, with Rivertowne as the model. Differences between the condominium areas and the TCHC areas such as garbage disposal, street and laneway access, parking lots and elevation make Rivertowne feel segregated by class. M describes it this way:

“Because I’m very involved in the community, I know that residents are fighting with each other. And, it’s because of the way they built these homes. There’s no privacy...(Rivertowne) is not Mixed Income. Condominiums live on one side, and we live on another. People that own their houses are on Hamilton, we are over here. It’s built totally differently. The condominiums are enclosed and private and (with) chains around. Even the grounds and the grass and everything looks so different. We just got grass two years ago, and this is supposed to be Mixed Income? It’s very clear.”

Within the condo/TCHC divide, we are by no means homogenous communities. Everyone living here has different histories and experiences of housing access and what it means to be in a Mixed Income neighbourhood. Renters also live in the condos, owners live in the TCHC housing, new residents who remember Don Mount Court have a way of understanding Rivertowne that is different than people who moved in recently. Sadly, the many efforts made to unify us as residents have been less than successful. Some community meetings and events have ended in screaming matches. As H describes:

“An area that lacks (in Rivertowne) is the relations between the condo owners and the tenants; the relations between the people are not as close as I had imagined. I thought in a small community like this, everyone would know each other and greet each other, but I don’t see a lot of that, I don’t see a lot of people, everyone seems to live separately and meet very rarely, and there are rarely any events. There are only a few faces around, dog-walkers; when we meet we nod to each other, call out a greeting but that’s all. I feel the relations between the people could be warmer.”

Considering that Rivertowne’s architecture and infrastructure is already in place, we can’t begin to build from scratch. The Rivertowne Convival Project aims instead to make small gestures and proposals that work towards an empathic, multi-generational conversation in our neighbourhood. Our aim is to open up understanding, and extend the hospitality, curiosity and generosity we’ve felt with each other to the entire Rivertowne community. Over the next year, you’ll encounter some ideas and proposals in this regard. If you are interested and curious, or in disagreement about what we’ve got to say, we’d love to talk to you.

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