Caught in the Eye of the Storm

Urban Revitalization in Toronto's Lawrence Heights

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Fernwood Publishing
Halifax & Winnipeg
Preface

This book provides an analysis of the process by which an entire urban neighbourhood gets torn down and replaced wholesale. Since it opened in 1959, Lawrence Heights has been stigmatized, ignored, and burdened with labels people attach to public housing: dangerous, disordered, and unattractive. These viewpoints relegate Lawrence Heights to a place most people notice only when it appears in a newspaper. It follows that, when the announcement came in 2007 that Lawrence Heights would be getting the equivalent of a full-scale makeover, a “revitalization,” most people may have responded — if they did at all — by affirming it as a welcome undertaking.

Before I began this project, I had never visited Lawrence Heights. I have never lived in public housing. As a white person who grew up in a quaint and well-advantaged suburb called Herring Cove, a former fishing village on the east coast of Canada, I remain far removed from the everyday experiences common to those living in Toronto’s public housing. Since the 1970s, most of the tenant base in Lawrence Heights has shifted from being comprised mainly of people from Europe to being progressively drawn from the Caribbean, West and East Africa, Latin America, and Asia. These demographic changes have helped fuel stereotyping of public housing tenants, who not only are in lower-income brackets but are also racialized, encouraging people to ignore and fear Lawrence Heights. Such stigmatization is wedded into its architectural structure. For people driving along the Allen Road towards Yorkdale Mall, the housing structures that comprise Lawrence Heights are hidden behind an imposing concrete wall that winds around the whole neighbourhood, resembling a cage.

When I first visited Lawrence Heights in 2018, I was welcomed into a community meeting at the Unison Health and Community Services Centre, which sits on picturesque Flemington Road. It started a long running engagement, where I was permitted to witness challenging
work being done by people committed to realizing their own vision for change to the extent it was possible. The conversations I bore witness to involved people solving problems. There were small things, like ensuring that correct labels for recycling are applied to bins in apartment buildings in underserved parts of North York. Bigger problems too. They discussed pressuring Ontario’s provincial government to reverse its austerity-driven agenda. I had the privilege of speaking with local historians, urban planners, and representatives of organizations in Lawrence Heights. True to the objectives of critically reflexive research and in acknowledgement of my responsibilities to the people whom I was engaging with, I reported honestly on these events and supported the mission of those striving for change on their terms.

This book offers a story of the neighbourhood of Lawrence Heights, one that has yet to be given a detailed treatment in the existing scholarship on urban politics, much less that which is focused on “urban revitalization.” Using documentary sources, I draw a chronological narrative to help us see how and why Lawrence Heights was built and how it became a so-called priority neighbourhood and to explain what is happening there now. Municipal policies often function here as barriers to obstruct anything beyond measured and controlled participation and interference by tenants in this major development process. This book will appeal to anyone with a general interest in understanding how persons possessed with limited resources and power effectively organize to realize a better future. Additionally, this text will benefit undergraduate and graduate level students who are interested in learning about urban revitalization in a Canadian context and, in particular, as it relates to policies that affect public housing areas in Toronto.

One truth that this book speaks to is how the governments erect barriers that can stall grassroots-led change. Governments direct resources toward lucrative investment opportunities and simultaneously hold a lid on conflicts that threaten societal hierarchies. For roughly the past four decades, governments in Canada and elsewhere have taken the view that markets and private sector entities can better serve people’s interests than governments can and have supercharged this ideology by replacing public assets and services with market-based ones. This is the philosophy of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism has enjoyed the label of “conventional wisdom” among bureaucrats, city councillors, and planners alike. Their lasting belief in these ideals has underpinned the formation of a
development partnership for phase one of the revitalization where the Toronto Community Housing Corporation, a social housing provider that lists the City of Toronto as its sole shareholder, has formed a contractual arrangement with two developer firms, Context and Metropia, which have joined to form one entity called Heights Development. Together, these organizations are deploying their resources towards reconstructing Lawrence Heights.

When grassroots energies, community-based or otherwise, get involved with the revitalization, they are typically forced to engage with — and even act as one with — the local government. To this point, such grassroots activity can typically involve various non-profit workers, tenants, and other volunteers carrying out work that could otherwise be done by city-employed bureaucracies, such as informing tenants about revitalization news, performing surveys, and public engagement work that helps affirm the government’s agenda and bring it to completion. Grassroots work, though, can also involve compelling the same government to provide community members with access to and control over public resources that can be put towards fulfilling the goals and needs of tenants themselves. Ideally, grassroots entities are enabled to exert maximal democratic oversight over those public officials and the processes involved in the allocation and distribution of these resources. They do so under a shared belief that social problems are best resolved using collectivist solutions rather than market-driven ones, where there is a greater emphasis on democratic decision making and public oversight. Despite the power the government and capital wield, this book reveals that, in the case of the Lawrence Heights “revitalization,” tenants and their supportive representatives have worked tirelessly to realize collectivist-driven solutions to issues facing their community. There is hope that what they are achieving will continue gaining strength as the project goes forward.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4Q</td>
<td>Bathurst-Lawrence Four Quadrants Neighbourhood Alliance</td>
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<td>CMHA</td>
<td>Canadian Mental Health Association</td>
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<td>CMHC</td>
<td>Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation</td>
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<td>Community Resources Consultants</td>
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<td>GMM</td>
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<td>HCZ</td>
<td>Harlem Children’s Zone</td>
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<td>HOPE VI</td>
<td>Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere</td>
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<td>HUD</td>
<td>US Department of Housing and Urban Development</td>
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<td>LHION</td>
<td>Lawrence Heights Inter-Organizational Network</td>
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<td>LHTA</td>
<td>Lawrence Heights Tenants Association</td>
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<td>Metropolitan Toronto Housing Authority</td>
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<td>OHC</td>
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<td>Social Housing Reform Act, 2000</td>
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<td>Toronto Community Housing Corporation</td>
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<td>Toronto Employment and Social Services</td>
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<td>TTC</td>
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Investigating Lawrence Heights

In May 2007, former City of Toronto councillor Howard Moscoe announced what is popularly termed an “urban revitalization project” in the public housing district of Lawrence Heights, the largest such project in Canada in terms of scale, comprising a 100 acre site (40.5 hectares) south of the Yorkdale Shopping Centre in North York. Lawrence Heights is double the size of Regent Park, another major public housing site, which sits farther south in inner-city Toronto. It so happens that Regent Park, too, is in the process of revitalization, one of the most talked about in the country, through the of the work of Toronto’s largest social housing provider, the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC), with private sector partners.

The term “revitalization” communicates a message that political power and capital are being deployed to “liberate” a community in need of assistance. To this end, Lawrence Heights was labelled a “priority neighbourhood,” along with twelve others defined by the City of Toronto in negative terms as having a high concentration of outdated public housing structures in disrepair. The tenants who live in Lawrence Heights, many of whom are Black and Brown, are stigmatized and isolated from the rest of the city. The area also lacks suitable roadways and social infrastructure and has an insufficient presence of commercial businesses. There are only four non-residential buildings on the entire site: the Flemington Road Public School, Unison Health and Community Services, the Lawrence Heights Community Centre, and the CH2 Maintenance Office.

In April of 2013, the TCHC formally announced its development partnership for phase one of the revitalization with Heights Development, a much publicized joint association between Context and Metropia. The revitalization is to culminate in the demolition of the 1,208 public housing units in Lawrence Heights. In their place will be newly built publicly subsidized units placed alongside an additional new 4,092
condominium and townhouse units to be privately owned. The publicly subsidized and privately owned units are to be indistinguishable from one another. As in Regent Park, a argument for situating the public and private housing units alongside one another is to encourage a greater melding of people from different income classes, which urban planners call “social mixing.”

The original tenants in Lawrence Heights are moved into nicer homes while continuing to pay rent geared to their incomes, and they are expected to benefit from being brought into closer contact with new neighbours paying for similar looking housing at prevailing market rates. Here you have the TCHC, a local government agency, leveraging its publicly owned assets by selling or leasing portions of the land that comprises Lawrence Heights to private developers. The developers then help finance the reconstruction of what are considered dilapidated public housing structures, stimulating an influx of newly affluent residents and the building of new commercial businesses and public amenities in the area. Fundamentally, the objective is urbanization. They are using capital and political will to turn a district of inner-suburban modernist public housing into a space that better resembles contemporary urban centres in Toronto like the Distillery District or the St. Lawrence neighbourhood.

Beneath these liberatory-sounding intentions, such urban revitalization schemes can generate contradictory effects. Most prominently, the government may ignite gentrification, leading to the displacement of tenants who live in neighbourhoods characterized by having high proportions of social housing. The term social housing, in the context of this Toronto-centric case study, refers to rental housing units that are owned either by the TCHC “or on their behalf by a non-profit corporation, or a non-profit housing cooperative,” and operated to provide accommodations to low-income individuals and families (Tong 2021, 131). Apart from facing a threat of physical displacement, the public housing tenants in Lawrence Heights may also experience the eradication of their social bonds and culture via gentrification. This can happen when upward pressure gets applied to rental costs for housing and commercial properties in and around these areas over time. Social mixing, too, can involve a form of moral supervision being imposed on public housing tenants by their newer affluent neighbours and would be done so under the veneer of creating a friendlier, diverse, and prosperous community. As Ute Lehrer, Roger Keil, and Stefan Kipfer (2010, 88) put it, “social mixing” is
a code phrase of sorts, used to immerse racialized public housing tenants under a controlling form of normalcy that is rooted in marketization, self-reliance, and (generally) white, middle-class sensibilities.

The spectre of these contradictory effects has cast a pall over the existing tenants in Lawrence Heights. As a case study of change in Lawrence Heights, this book reveals new insights into how these people are confronting the re-shaping of their lives within the larger machinery of capitalism, namely the unceasing need to exploit new avenues for the accumulation of capital and the exploitative effects this search has on people affected by it. Doing so involves delving into the history and ongoing revitalization of Lawrence Heights, which has to this point been a neglected area for critical analysis. A historical narrative of Lawrence Heights documents how these tenants have long been afflicted by systemic oppression, racist and classist stigmatization, and the fallout from what has been governmental mismanagement and a withdrawal of public resources that could otherwise have been devoted to improving and maintaining their housing structures — rather than destroying and rebuilding them.

From there, the book looks at the ways in which tenants themselves have gotten involved in the Lawrence Heights revitalization. Such participation has tended to take two forms; tenants have either opposed the plan outright or have worked with and supported the government and developers towards convincing other residents to support the project. The perspective being offered in this book about tenant involvement in a public housing revitalization is that it is not a purely negative and hopeless endeavour, despite that being the impression one might get when reviewing existing debates on this issue.

What is crucial to understand is that the tenants involved in the revitalization, including their representatives in various community-affiliated organizations and networks, are doing this work to improve the quality of life in Lawrence Heights to the extent that they are permitted to do so. Within the scope of their involvement in the revitalization, Lawrence Heights tenants, community linked workers, and other volunteers are compelled to operate as part of the local government and abide by the rules and limits it sets for them. The imposition of these strictures helps ensure that the Lawrence Heights revitalization fulfills the official vision for change that the government, its developer partners, and the business class deem acceptable. That vision is to conform with
the dictates of the pro-market philosophy of neoliberalism and to hold
the predominately racialized tenant base fastened within existing social
hierarchies.

Nevertheless, tenant involvement has sought to wrest important
benefits out of the revitalization planning process, including priority job
placements, assistance with moving costs, and funding for community
programs, which fulfill demands expressed by tenants in the course of
being surveyed by TCHC planners and other officials. Tenant involve-
ment is not merely a procedural facet of revitalization planning. In the
course of their work, tenants are pushing back against systemic forces
that have long coloured the history of their neighbourhood and that are
inextricably wound into the revitalization planning, namely colonialism,
white supremacy, and the market-empowering logic of neoliberalism.

Trends in Existing Research

Substantial academic research has been devoted to excavating the
experiences of tenants living in public housing districts undergoing
revitalization. These accounts, broadly speaking, tend to conclude that
revitalization does not remedy the despair experienced by such tenants.
Rather, it serves to perpetuate it, keeping existing hierarchies of race and
class intact while supporting the evolving operation of capitalism. Some
authors zero in on the withdrawal of both senior level government sup-
port and public money for social housing construction, maintenance,
and oversight over the last few decades. Such moves have precipitated
the rise of entrepreneurial government strategies at the local level to
redevelop social housing communities suffering from austerity meas-
ures by actioning redevelopments that rely on a questionable faith in
social mixing (August and Walks 2018; Beswick and Penny 2018; Lavee
and Cohen 2019).

An important concept lying at the centre of these events is the lasting
predominance of neoliberalism, a guiding philosophy for governance
and policy that sees the government empower market forces wherever it
can. Marxist geographer David Harvey says that neoliberalism is about
dominant classes re-establishing their position over lower ones, an
effort to counteract and undermine the social equity that was wrought
through the tumultuous post–World War II period in North America
and elsewhere, including the civil rights movement, second wave fem-
inism, stronger labour movements, and a relatively robust welfare state.
The social forces and institutions of this time were themselves undermined by capitalism’s contradictions, fueling socioeconomic crises, political corruption, and widespread alienation. These developments got entwined with globalization, post-industrialism, and the rising power of finance capital, out of which then radical ideas like neoliberalism gained popularity in its eschewing of collectivism in favour of extreme individualism, self-reliance, and marketization.

Neoliberalism complemented the simultaneous rise in popularity of postmodern architecture and new urbanist planning doctrines during the late twentieth century. At the time, these movements were bolstered by a growing resistance to “ghettoizing” public housing and a recognition that the relocation of once robust blue-collar employment opportunities, postwar expressway construction and suburbanization were as much joint contributors to the hollowing out of inner cities as were lasting racist and classist prejudices. In this milieu, governments that formerly adhered to technocratic managerialism, where expertise and public resources were funnelled more generously into large-scale public works programs for the benefit of cities, began changing stances (Harvey 1989). These agents started shifting more towards entrepreneurial-style governance that would better empower markets by prioritizing civic boosterism, fostering development through public-private partnerships, and commercializing the inner city. More attention was to be paid to attracting tourists and interest from investors around the globe. These motives got accompanied by rising government commitments to multiculturalism, diversity, cosmopolitanism, and democratic urban planning strategies. Relatedly, this period saw urban planners wanting to create more walkable socioeconomically diverse communities with copious green space and residents performing informal surveillance on one another for everyone’s collective benefit.

Novel schematics for urban revitalization also arose that were melded to the philosophy of neoliberalism. At the centre of such revitalization schemes is a motivation to “deconcentrate poverty,” with public

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1 Neoliberalism, according to David Harvey (2007, 2), refers to a set of political economic ideas and practices that suggests that human prosperity “can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade.” To fulfill these ends, the government secures “the quality and integrity of money,” establishes “military, defence, police and legal structures,” and helps create markets in whatever avenues where they don’t already exist (i.e., water, health care, etc.).
housing districts being a principal target. Between 1993 and 2010, the Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE VI) program was deployed in the United States. HOPE VI was intended in to “transform public housing by demolishing large spatially concentrated developments and replacing them with mixed-income housing,” where higher-income homeowners get encouraged to move into these same spaces (Fraser, Burns, Bazuin, and Oakley 2013, 525). Using the vernacular of neoliberalism, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) lists the key elements of the HOPE VI program in a series of bullet points:

- Changing the physical shape of public housing
- Establishing positive incentives for resident self-sufficiency and comprehensive services that empower residents
- Lessening concentrations of poverty by placing public housing in nonpoverty neighborhoods and promoting mixed-income communities
- Forging partnerships with other agencies, local governments, non-profit organizations, and private businesses to leverage support and resources. (HUD n.d., emphasis mine)

Proponents of HOPE VI insisted the program would replace highly concentrated poverty and high crime rates with private investment, higher property values, and jobs, with the thinking being that public housing tenants would be compelled to become self-reliant and be higher wage earners.

Underpinning the HOPE VI agenda was the social science thesis known as “neighbourhood effects.” Drawing from influential texts like William Julius Wilson’s The Truly Disadvantaged, first published in 1987, the neighbourhood effects perspective diagnoses concentrated poverty as a social ill that can be remedied by empowering the community itself through urban planning techniques. Robert Chaskin and Mark Joseph (2010, 301) summarize the neighbourhood-effects thesis:

Both compositional factors (e.g., concentrated poverty, housing quality, crime, residential stability) and aspects of social organization (e.g., collective efficacy, social networks, and organizational participation) have an impact on the well-being and developmental trajectories of neighborhood residents, especially children and youth. Second, community
is invoked as a unit of belonging and action that can be mobilized to effect change, in which the resources, skills, priorities, and participation of community members can be drawn on to inform, shape, and contribute to solutions to social problems and efforts to improve neighborhood life as it is affected by both material circumstances and social dynamics.

By the 1980s, governments had begun aggressively cutting back on social spending, weakening formerly strong Keynesian welfare states. In Canada, reductions were made to transfer payments from the federal to provincial governments. Cities, in turn, were forced to operate with less government assistance. Substantial bureaucratic resources at the local level got poured into “community building” measures to help fill the gap, including “supporting resident participation, promoting collaboration among community-serving organizations, and fostering social interaction and networks of support among community members” (Chaskin and Joseph 2010, 301). This wording mimics the language of neoliberalism, new urbanism, and entrepreneurial governance that is part and parcel of efforts to de-concentrate poverty, including the revitalization of public housing communities, where emphasis is placed on self-reliance, democratic urban planning decision making, and displacing the responsibilities of government into the hands of non-profits, individual volunteers, church groups, and other networks. Indeed, the fingerprints of new urbanism, which came into vogue in the 1980s, are entrenched in urban planning doctrines today with their emphasis on creating walkable neighbourly communities with mixed land uses whose sectors, including housing, schools, shops, parks, and cultural centres, are all highly integrated with one another.

Exploratory studies of hope vi sites, however, found little interaction between different income classes (Lucio, Hand, and Marsiglia 2014, 893). More pointed critics assailed the program for further marginalizing public housing tenants, alleging that the government was effectively colonizing public housing sites for takeover by the middle class (Fraser, Burns, Bazuin, and Oakley, 2013). As Martine August (2014, 1318) says, hope vi was designed to fund mixed-income on-site redevelopment while using a voucher program to disperse lower-income residents away from these same sites. In this regard, community members are encouraged to participate in the revitalization of their own disadvantaged
neighbourhoods and risk becoming alienated to the extent that they cannot conform with the middle-class standards held by their neighbours in these newly mixed-income areas.

**Urban Revitalization in Regent Park**

In Toronto, the urban revitalization project unfolding in Regent Park has been the most publicized. Built over the 1940s and 1950s, Regent Park underwent a demographic shift beginning in the late 1960s, when immigration restrictions in Canada were gradually relaxed. Its demographic profile shifted from being mostly white, working-class Europeans in the mid-century period to becoming much more ethnically and culturally diverse, including Black, South Asian, Latin American, and Chinese to name a few. These public housing dwellers in Regent Park would find themselves subjected to now commonplace class- and race-based prejudices. Over time, as the city’s public housing supply continued deteriorating, pressure was mounted on Toronto City Council to make changes, with a good deal of the pressure coming from Regent Park tenants themselves. The supposed remedy to these issues came in the form of an urban revitalization plan. Over multiple phases, the existing housing was to be torn down and replaced with expensive new units occupied by existing Regent Park tenants who continued paying rent geared to their incomes and who would live alongside indistinguishable units occupied by more affluent newcomers paying market rates. Urban revitalization sees the government joining forces with capital to alter Regent Park under the idea that public housing tenants living in a newly marketized environment will adopt the ethics of self-reliance and the middle-class sensibilities of those living in the new adjacent housing.

This strategy is put forward in lieu of alternatives that might avoid destroying and rebuilding the existing community while also addressing the systemic problems that afflict it. These problems include the substandard housing conditions brought on by welfare state retrenchment, safety issues, and drug use. August (2014, 1318) challenges policymakers “to look beyond the ‘false choice’ which presents gentrification and displacement as the only alternative to ongoing disinvestment and decay.” In putting such false choices forward, local policymakers do what is common by colonial authorities throughout settler societies. Typically, we think of colonial power as something exerted outward by invading authorities against Indigenous Peoples, where the intent of the former is to steal and settle.
on the lands possessed by the latter, who in turn are coercively fitted into social hierarchies. Such authorities also turn inward and apply these same practices on marginalized groups within these settled societies, recolonizing spaces to make more money and hold existing hierarchies in place. To see public housing redevelopments as forms of recolonization requires us to understand colonization not as a past event but rather as an enduring structure meant to continually erase Indigenous Peoples and their cultures while maintaining a racial hierarchy (Wolfe 2006).

Regent Park tenants have striven to overcome their oppressive living conditions by getting involved in the revitalization as a conduit for change. A much-hyped feature of the revitalization planning, for instance, was the creation of the Social Development Plan (SDP), an initiative designed in lockstep with the neighbourhood-effects thesis, entrepreneurial governance strategies, and neoliberal philosophy. The Regent Park Resident Council, formed in 2002, was designated by the TCHC to lead the SDP, garnering them the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association Tenant Achievement Award in 2003. Described by the TCHC as a “guide to building a successful, cohesive and inclusive community in Regent Park,” the SDP “set the stage for community engagement and efforts to build an inclusive environment in Regent Park” (Brail and Kumar 2017, 3779). Endorsed by City Council in 2007, the SDP was intended to procure tenant-led actions on three fronts: public safety, employment and economic development, and community building. It put forward seventy-five recommendations to devote resources towards things like community gardens, maintaining newly built streetscapes, and broad-based interests like education, art programs, and tenant empowerment.

The scope of permissible tenant involvement in the SDP, and the Regent Park revitalization more broadly, has been to do what the government and its developer partner requires of them. Tenants have helped legitimize and ratify the plan, formed cooperative working relationships with the government, the TCHC, and assorted staff, and have worked as hired mediators, otherwise called community animators, between the plan’s official decision makers and the multi-ethnic tenant base. The government has instrumentalized the energies of the tenants they hire who possess the desirable cultural cachet and neighbourhood connections to convince the wider neighbourhood to commit to the socially mixed redevelopment. These hard-working tenants, meanwhile, are striving to realize a better life while confronting the forces of neoliberalism,
systemic racism, the prominence of the neighbourhood-effects thesis, and entrepreneurial-minded governments and related institutions that are intent on gentrifying and recolonizing the area for the middle class.

**Objective of the Case Study**

The objective of the case study is to analyze the unfolding urban revitalization in Lawrence Heights, a much lesser-known area than Regent Park, that is similarly inhabited by a diverse mix of multi-racial public housing tenants. We appraise the factor of tenant involvement in the planning for the revitalization on its own terms in order to present a more holistic picture of the case study, as opposed to folding such activity into a conclusion that the government and capital are coordinating every facet of the revitalization in a strictly top-down fashion. An intent of the book, then, is to draw a full-fledged dossier of Lawrence Heights, taking into account its origins, the historical context in which it arose, and identifying precursors that led tenants living there to energetically engage in the government-led revitalization program. Doing so helps us grasp what changes they are trying to produce and how they are being alternately supported, limited, and forced to conform with the dictates of those with more power.

During the early twentieth century, Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci conceptualized political struggle as being wrought between competing hegemonic and counter-hegemonic social forces. Dani Filc (2021, 26) offers the following helpful distillation of this idea:

A certain model of society becomes hegemonic when its worldview pervades all spheres of society: its institutions, its private life, its morality, its customs, its religion, and the different aspects of its culture. Or, to put it in Gramsci’s words, hegemony “propagate[s] throughout the whole social sphere, causing, in addition to singleness of economic and political purpose, an intellectual and moral unity as well … creating in this way the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a number of subordinate groups.”

We can identify the revitalization model being applied to Lawrence Heights as a hegemonic construct, as something that most people are inclined to see as a necessary venture, as assisting people in need, and which is “common-sense,” as Gramsci might put it.
Putting the revitalization into motion is, nevertheless, a political process that gets invariably contested and altered as much as it gets celebrated and affirmed. Filc (2021, 24) also cites the adage from French philosopher Michel Foucault that resistance always “emerges ‘where there is power,’ adding that ‘points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network,’ and consequently ‘there is a plurality of resistances.’” Tenants, in various respects, were energetic pursuers of revitalization. Others accepted that it was happening, perhaps with some reservations. Some people resisted it outright as a destructive plan. Persons living in Lawrence Heights who have worked with the city and other staff on the planning side of the revitalization have demonstrated a commitment to helping bring about change, which the government absorbed into its own operations, allowing it to eliminate any resistances and pressures for change that it deems impractical and unproductive. And yet, discussions have happened between public officials and tenant participants where the latter have committed to holding the former accountable to them and negotiating the terms of changes associated with the revitalization where possible. There is, in a sense, a plurality of resistances in action.

Outline of the Case Study

I once asked Roger Keil, professor of global sub/urban studies at York University, where new insights could be drawn that concern the application of urban revitalization models to different marginalized communities in Toronto, a subject Professor Keil has written about extensively. The answer he gave was Lawrence Heights. Like Regent Park, Lawrence Heights was built in the same postwar context but was stationed in what was then a remote section of North York, one of the six administrative boroughs of the City of Toronto. Parallels between the two cases are numerous, but they are also marked by important differences.

Prior to the construction of Lawrence Heights, the lands were possessed with numerous swamps and a rural community of devotedly Methodist farmers, following a long line of European settlers who originally captured the lands (including those on which Regent Park sits) from Indigenous Peoples, principally the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. After it was colonized, the area eventually became known for the Henry Farm, owned by George S. Henry, who served as premier of Ontario from 1930 to 1934. North York, furthermore, was then an inner-suburban outpost that could employ significant amounts of labour...
and capital towards infrastructure and real estate development. By the mid 1940s, the then-named Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC, later Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation) purchased the requisite lands, setting the process in motion by which Lawrence Heights would get built between 1955 and 1959 with federal and provincial support.

Despite having significant government backing, Lawrence Heights was met with significant public opposition from nearby Lawrence Manor, whose residents felt the added density would upset their cloistered rural lifestyle and threaten their property values. Those in charge of developing Lawrence Heights were put in the position of negotiating terms with Lawrence Manor residents, who saw the matter only in terms of how it was to affect them, never as something intended to give housing assistance to low-income families. The first issue of the *Lawrence Manor Gazette*, in February 1956, remarked, “Despite our best efforts, the low-rental project to the west of us was passed” (Lawrence Manor Ratepayers’ Association 1956, 2). Once Lawrence Heights was finally developed and opened for occupation in 1959, homeowners in Lawrence Manor tended to shun the new tenants, even erecting a physical fence to keep distance between them and the public housing units.

Resting northwest of central Toronto, Lawrence Heights is bounded by four major streets: Yorkdale Road (northbound), Varna Drive (eastbound), Dufferin Street (westbound), and Lawrence Avenue (southbound). The neighbourhood consists of two areas bisected by the Allen Road expressway. If you walk east of Flemington Road, you encounter public housing complexes comprised of low- to mid-rise buildings broadly similar in design. Housing in the neighbourhood includes single houses, semi-detached houses, townhouses, and small walk-up apartment structures ranging from one to four stories in height.

Much of this housing is located in courts that are accessed from the ring road. Flemington Park is a 3.5 hectare park, distributed unevenly through the neighbourhood. Flemington Public School sits in the middle of the neighbourhood, and the Bathurst Heights Secondary School is on the southeast edge, on Lawrence Avenue West. Allen Road bisects Lawrence Heights; aside from Lawrence Avenue West, the neighbourhood has just two crossings — a bridge at Flemington Road and an underpass at Ranee Avenue (City of Toronto 2010a, 14).

For the first decades of its existence, Lawrence Heights was populated mainly by low-income families from Europe, with a predominant
share coming from the British Isles. The 1970s saw fluctuating immigration and labour patterns, increasingly restrictive choices for affordable housing, and manufacturing jobs shifting out of inner-city Toronto into North York and to other locales, with capital simultaneously getting invested in the burgeoning and precarious service sector in the inner city. These changes, in turn, helped stimulate similar demographic shifts in Lawrence Heights. By the early 2010s, much higher percentages of Lawrence Heights tenants were Indigenous or from Latin America or Southeast Asia, as well as elsewhere. Many of these tenants commute to and from their jobs within North York, inner-city Toronto, and the Greater Toronto Area.

Apart from being physically walled off for decades from homeowners in Lawrence Manor, Lawrence Heights tenants have faced similarly intensive stigmatization by a range of outsiders, as has been common for people living in Regent Park and other public housing districts in the city. As this book shows, condemnation against Lawrence Heights tenants has come repeatedly from the news media and government officials, and much less from other Torontonians. Such stigma has come in various forms, including large numbers of news articles that focus overwhelmingly on incidents of crime in the area and portrayals of Lawrence Heights tenants as criminals, suspects, persons of interest, and generally dangerous and abnormal.

These aspersions have become twinned with public statements from city officials who denigrate Lawrence Heights as a failing experiment and proposed urban revitalization as the antidote. Former city councillor Howard Moscoe declared in 2007 that “we’re going to eliminate
the (public housing stigma)” attached to Lawrence Heights (Vincent 2007a, E6). During a community meeting at a local school in Lawrence Heights, former TCHC chief executive officer Derek Ballantyne said to the audience that the “housing stock is in bad shape and needs to be replaced,” adding that “by selling some of the land, the money can be used to reinvest in the revitalization” (Vincent 2007a, E6). Christopher Hume (2018) of the Toronto Star described the plan for Lawrence Heights as intending to weave this area “back into the city.” New and sleek will replace outdatedness, isolation, and crime. The stigma itself, then, is a selling tactic for the revitalization, convincing people that it is the rational and common-sensical path forward.

On the public financing end of things, the executive director of Toronto’s Housing Secretariat (formerly the Affordable Housing Office) spells out the strategy by which redevelopment projects in Lawrence Heights and in other TCHC-managed housing sites get built:

> TCHC revitalization projects are typically structured in a manner where the cost to replace the aged TCHC units is offset by the profits from the market development and the sale of TCHC land. To ensure the financial feasibility of a revitalization project, the right balance of new TCHC replacement and market homes is needed. (City of Toronto 2020, 4)

In other words, the TCHC sells a portion of lands it controls to fund replacing the housing units it manages in lieu of accessing public money to do so. When the Housing Secretariat refers to determining the correct balance between constructing new TCHC controlled rent-geared-to-income (RGI) housing with those to be sold or leased at market rates, the idea is to refrain from building too much of the former, which would render the revitalization into a poor investment choice for private partners. Regent Park is made feasibly revitalized through the collaboration between the TCHC and its private partners, just as Lawrence Heights is being re-moulded through similar arrangements.

> Reconfiguring Lawrence Heights into a specifically socially mixed development is of paramount importance for the government. It is the subsidized renters who get wrung through a newly intensified surveillance system, monitored not only by the police but by the moralizing guidance of new middle-class residents, who must be drawn “into these developments to capture enough ground rent to offset the costs
associated with a devolved public housing program” (Fraser et al. 2013, 529). In this scenario, urban revitalization becomes the officially stated purpose, with colonization being the real and unstated one. As noted above, earlier case studies of socially mixed HOPE VI redevelopments suggest that cross-class ties are challenging to construct between public housing tenants and new residents, with limited interaction being the norm (Chaskin and Joseph 2011; Graves 2011). Further, say Fraser et al. (2013, 527), officials behind HOPE VI projects decline to even specify how such cross alliances and social networks would arise between the two groups, which these authors claim is evidence that the widening call for socially mixed redevelopments are nakedly purposed to “colonize former public housing residents to prepare neighborhoods for market reinvestment.” Such areas can eventually become further gentrified, threatening the ability for existing residents to continue living there.

Like with Regent Park, the same concerns around gentrification and recolonization by the middle-class apply to what is underway in Lawrence Heights. Such anxieties swirl in tandem with other forces at work, including tenant involvement in the revitalization. Here too, tenants have conveyed a mix of resistance and support. Many of them spoke to city councillors, revealing a desire to live in homes that are more conventional and to have a chance to own rather than simply rent. Tenants and organizers have had intimate involvement in composing a social development plan rooted in creating, among other things, job opportunities for tenants, community arts and recreational programs, and enhanced public safety measures. Organizing of this kind does become absorbed into the local government, which sets the limits around what is politically possible and controls how money and other resources are amassed and distributed.

There is a storied history of mistreatment inflicted upon Lawrence Heights tenants by the public authorities that have managed the area, starting with the Ontario Housing Authority and its successor as of 2002, the TCHC. The inward facing design of Lawrence Heights, which lacks through streets, has worsened the isolation and stigma felt by its residents, people who are struggling to make ends meet while living in a highly expensive city. When the Toronto police force ratcheted up its assault on the illegal drug trade in the 1980s and 1990s, a disproportionate share of brutality was met upon Black and Brown Lawrence Heights tenants, as was the case in Regent Park and in other disadvantaged
communities. Robyn Maynard (2017, 83) notes that “the economic sub-
ordination and abandonment of Black communities has acted in parallel
with expanding the scope of racialized surveillance and punishment
across the criminal justice system.”

Lawrence Heights tenants and organizers have long taken care of
their neighbours. They have also wrestled with paternalistic government
management, which in recent decades has been eroded and made more
ineffectual through the withdrawal of money and provincial support.
The element of paternalism is deeply entrenched in the way governments
manage public housing tenants, with a pretence of government-run
housing being that the people living there are incapable of self-reliance.

In a paper from 1968, Albert Rose referred to a duality of moral
environmentalism, where the belief among social reformers of that time
was that slum conditions produce slum dwellers. Reformers thus opted
to build public housing as proper machines for modern living under
the belief that better housing would produce “better people.” But these
beliefs conflicted with the government’s intensive surveillance of families
that occupied public housing, revealing doubts among reformers as to
whether it is the environment or individual morality that is responsible
for producing slums and slum dwellers (Brushett 2001, 185).

As neoliberalism came into vogue, social reformers adapted to
governments’ preference for leveraging the private sector to deliver
public goods, with the enablement of public-private partnerships as
mechanisms to generate capital accumulation through the dispossession
of public assets. Urban revitalization put a new twist on the old
moral environmentalism strategy without resolving the contradictory
attitudes lurking beneath it. To wit, public housing complexes get rebuilt
into more profitable spaces with higher circulations of exchange value,
and their occupiers’ new middle-class neighbours become a new source
of moral instruction and surveillance. From the standpoint of public
officials, developers, urban planners, and other associated professionals,
resolving the shortage of affordable housing in Toronto is not simply a
matter of building a lot of cheap housing, whether it be social housing
or otherwise, to shelter people in need. Housing developments, by and
large, must be sound investment strategies, which leads those with the
power to build to draw strict limits around what is allowable in terms of
a development’s design and the amount of money people have to pay to
live in the units.
Such are the characteristic outcomes of what governments frame as “partnerships” with private sector entities. Politicians often describe such alliances as being an efficient means to fix costly problems, using capital from collaborative and wealthy companies and saving taxpayers the bill. It is not so much that these partnerships enable the government to contribute more to enhancing public goods in an environment where cost-cutting and budget balancing are of paramount concern. Rather, when governments and private sector entities team up, they must prioritize creating profitable investments above all else, superseding any altruistic motives that might benefit the common good. If such investments fail to generate profits for the capitalists involved and insufficiently contribute to economic growth, then they will be considered underperforming ventures. What can be surmised, then, is that when it comes to the objectives of public-private partnerships, regardless of whatever democratic aims are being pursued, they are first and foremost about making money and are not about doing what the public necessarily wants or needs.

Collectively, these statements attest to the social relevance of Lawrence Heights as a subject of investigation. Yet, as a case study of urban revitalization in Canada, Lawrence Heights has yet to receive any substantial attention. Some might say that the project is still being completed, making it challenging to draw firm conclusions. Assessments of Lawrence Heights which occur only after the entire district has been transformed will naturally make conclusions based on the totality of events. This approach can colour how one evaluates available data concerning these early stages, potentially underappreciating their significant impacts for the people experiencing the events up close. The rapidity and fragmentary nature of contemporary urban life sees political work happening in a multitude of societal creases. Research should not be limited to evaluating events that create lasting changes or that persist over a long enough expanse of time that they can be given a traditionally full retrospective account.

One could also say Lawrence Heights is simply less well known than the public housing areas that are in the inner city. People driving, walking, biking, or taking transit through the east end of Toronto are more likely to move past Regent Park, which sits not too far east from Bloor and Yonge Streets, comprising a cluster of arts and cultural organizations that is a tourist hub, a thoroughfare for workers and home to several University of Toronto buildings.
In contrast, Lawrence Heights is further up Toronto’s grid-based transportation system. It sits buried on a slope near the Lawrence West subway station and Lawrence Allen Centre, a smaller and less traversed space compared to nearby Yorkdale Mall, another tourist locale. Compared to Toronto, North York is also comparatively bereft of cultural cachet and is largely ignored in existing scholarship on urbanization compared to the larger City of Toronto. Derided by many as a hovel, this lesser-known administrative district within the larger City of Toronto is peppered with strip malls, nondescript suburban housing, car dealerships, vacant lots, aged high-rise apartment buildings, and bland industrial warehouses.

There are also many working-class migrant families populating North York, many of whom live in the relatively lower-cost housing. Inner-suburban North York, much like Scarborough, also possesses many TCHC controlled housing complexes, whose residents struggle against similar stigmas. Indeed, areas dense with social housing, like “Jamestown, Jane-Finch, Rexdale, and Malvern now conjure images of racialized poverty and gang violence” (August 2014, 1321). Jane and Finch, a widely diverse and majority Black and Brown community found near York University in North York, is perhaps the most stigmatized area in the city, with approximately 3,531 publicly subsidized housing units under TCHC management. Countless stories concerning neighbourhoods like these remain untold.

Before we delve into the case study chapters, we conclude this introduction by presenting a chronological picture of Lawrence Heights, lending us a coherent narrative of change that culminates with the present revitalization.

**Timeline of Change in Lawrence Heights (1959–2020)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Construction of housing complexes in Lawrence Heights is completed and opened to the public.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Thirty-eight extra units added to Lawrence Heights but fall well short of what Metropolitan Toronto Council promised.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Ontario Housing Corporation (OHC) discusses building more public housing but encounters resistance from suburbs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>North York Welfare Department publishes report about Lawrence Heights. Tenants alternately describe feeling</td>
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satisfied with the physical housing quality and feeling alienated and isolated.

1967 Passage of Immigration Act, stimulating inflows of people from wider numbers of countries and regions and solidifying a hierarchy of migrants.

1969 Former minister of transportation Paul Hellyer organizes Hellyer Task Force, which releases report critiquing Canada's public housing program.

1970 Ontario Federation of Citizens' Associations presses the OHC to turn over day-to-day management of public housing to tenant groups but are stonewalled.

1970–2004 Pre-“revitalization” news coverage of Lawrence Heights tends to play up stigmatizing view of the neighbourhood as being disordered.

1971 In response to protests, the Ontario government suspends construction of Spadina Expressway, which would have cut into affluent Toronto neighbourhoods. The Allen Road is permitted to split Lawrence Heights down the middle without public opposition.

1971 Multiculturalism Act passes, intended to stimulate inflow of high- and low-skilled workers in rising service sector and heighten immigration levels in areas outside Europe. Policy changes coincide with the reconfiguration of Toronto into a “global city,” characterized by heightened services sector requiring inflows of workers from elsewhere.

1971–1986 Black households gradually become over-represented in Ontario-administered public housing neighbourhoods, including Lawrence Heights, compared to the rest of the Census Metropolitan Area.

1972–1974 Federal liberal government steers funding away from public housing towards other social housing forms. Provincial government maintains control over public housing administration.

1976 OHC follows federal government’s example and winds down public housing construction due to negative public perceptions of it.

1995–2003 Mike Harris–led Ontario government institutes so-called Common Sense Revolution which helps intensify
government’s commitment to public sector austerity, low taxation, privatization, and public-private partnerships as strategies to enhance growth.

1997 Ontario passes City of Toronto Act (Bill 103) to facilitate Metropolitan Toronto amalgamation, dissolving the city’s six constituent municipalities into a megacity version of Toronto.

1999 Toronto City Council report documents city’s struggles to finance social housing expenses without necessary provincial support. Harris-led Conservatives institute cuts to Ontario cities for social housing, public transit, etc.

2001 Ontario Municipal Act is passed, creating new sphere of municipal responsibilities downloaded onto them by the province. Social Housing Reform Act passed same year, placing jurisdiction over social housing administration to cities.

2002 Approval given to Regent Park revitalization, commencing public-private partnership to raze and construct new housing, amenities, and infrastructure in this Toronto-based public housing neighbourhood.

2004–2020 News coverage describing the “revitalization” in generally positive terms. Other articles describe concerns over lacking infrastructure to support enhanced density.

2005 The Lawrence Heights Inter-Organizational Network forms as grassroots oriented collective of tenants and local organizations which becomes instrumental presence in revitalization planning.

2007 Lawrence Heights revitalization formally announced. The “new” Regent Park serves as blueprint. Planning discussions commence between city officials and tenants.


2011 Lawrence Heights revitalization secondary plan completed.

2015 Construction of revitalization phase one begins in tandem with ongoing “community engagement” between planners and tenants.

2020 COVID-19 pandemic slows construction as lockdowns take effect.