

Where Planning Meets Multiculturalism

A View of Planning Practice in the Greater Toronto Area

by Marcia Wallace, MCIP

IN THE GREATER TORONTO AREA (GTA), immigration is a source of both municipal economic growth and residential demographic change, although its effect is felt differently in different parts of the GTA. Immigration also poses challenges to urban and suburban planners.

On February 15, 2000, academics, planners and others gathered at York for a one-day conference called "Planning in a Multicultural Region." The choice of the word "region" was deliberate: although newcomers are attracted to Canada's major cities, the impact and benefits of such immigration are felt across entire urban regions.

Two interesting observations emerged from the event. First, ethnicity and culture affect planning practice in a variety of ways. Second, despite planners' recognition that they work within a multicultural region, they continue to struggle to find the appropriate roles for ethnicity and culture in the planning process.

Beyond the monster home and the mosque

Multiculturalism is colliding with established assumptions in the everyday practice of planning in the GTA. Well known conflicts over land use include neighbourhood disputes over large-scale in-fill housing in established residential neighbourhoods (monster homes), or parking requirements for places of worship with a regional catchment area and a capacity that cannot be defined by "pew seats." Some cases have led to Ontario Municipal Board hearings. Although the debates seem to be about technical planning concerns like parking, traffic, and appropriate land uses, some planners feel that these concerns camouflage discriminatory attitudes and fears about demographic change. The planning process can sometimes expose deeper tensions within a community.

Planning in a multicultural region means that, whether or not multiculturalism is at the forefront of an issue, it is part of the context. Beyond conflicts over land use, there is also a range of less recognized connections between planning and multiculturalism. Public participation is a good example. The planning process mandates some public consultation (albeit not necessarily representative). However, many planners are engaged in work that depends on active public participation from diverse groups.

For example, the Toronto Regional Conservation Authority (TRCA) has made an effort to engage multicultural communities in environmental stewardship. Working within the Community Development for Multicultural Environmental Stewardship Project, the TRCA has built partnerships with diverse groups and is raising environmental awareness. Staff develop multilingual, culturally-sensitive communication materials, work to address barriers to participation (such as lack of access to transportation, lack of financial/organizational resources and time, lack of information and opportunity, etc.), and tailor programs to make them relevant to people's well-being.

City of Toronto planners have been working on community economic development efforts in multicultural neighbourhoods, including the Kensington Market area's Revitalization Plan and the Eglinton Avenue West Regeneration Initiative. In both cases the ethnic character of the neighbourhood was integral to plans for neighbourhood regeneration.

Participation was crucial to the Toronto Zoo's collaboration with the local East African community on the East African Savanna Project. Planners recognized that a collaborative approach would help

the zoo to incorporate the interests and values of their visitors. It also allowed the creation of a space that simulates natural geomorphic formations and animal and plant species characteristic of East African landscapes, places and habitats.

Planners in the GTA are also dealing with the challenges of multiculturalism in delivering planning-related municipal services to a diverse population. For example, how can planners meet the immediate and long-term housing needs of homeless immigrants and refugees? How can they design or improve recreation and cultural facilities for a particular neighbourhood: should the city provide bocce courts, basketball hoops, or ice rinks?

The paradoxes of planning in a multicultural context

Immigration affects the physical form and the social character of communities throughout the Greater Toronto Area. These effects are evident in the diversity of public spaces, in the immigration settlement patterns of urban and suburban neighbourhoods, in popular architectural form and landscape design, and in the commercial activity that immigrants support.

Public meeting announcement, Kensington Market Revitalization Plan
Courtesy of the Urban Development Services, City of Toronto



GTA planners are comfortable accommodating multiculturalism on a site-specific basis, whenever necessary. But not all of them see this accommodation as relevant to planning practice, and many who want to be flexible are cautious about addressing ethnic or cultural differences. For example, planners argue that attempts to use zoning (e.g., density, parking, height requirements) to foster uses commonly associated with one ethnic group in a community could be restrictive for another ethnic group as the community changes over time. Thus there is a general reluctance among planners to "plan for multiculturalism."

This points to an interesting contradiction. On one hand, multiculturalism has shaped the GTA, given the high proportion of immigrants in this region. Multiculturalism is integral to the context of planners' daily work. On the other hand, most planners see immigration as standing outside their area of responsibility, and consider their work to be technical, not cultural.

Nevertheless, some planners acknowledge that multiculturalism is changing the urban and suburban environments in which they operate and the tools and assumptions on which their profession has traditionally depended. Evidence of this acknowledgment can be found in the efforts they make to achieve representative participation by the various ethno-cultural groups in a community, or in the personal relationships they develop with residents and business people in the neighbourhoods in which they work.

Incorporating multiculturalism into planning is not easy for planners, who are rooted in a tradition that calls for the universal application of "rational" plans and policies. It will require time and an evolving or flexible sense of desired outcomes for the process to change. It is also important not to make an issue out

of immigration and multiculturalism where none exists. For example, the commercial needs of a community are sometimes similar regardless of the ethnicity of local residents, as a Richmond Hill case heard by the Ontario Municipal Board illustrates. At issue was the negative reaction of a mostly ethnically Chinese community towards the proposal of Asian-catering neighbourhood commercial development. The planning department agreed with the community that the proposed development did not meet the commercial mix planned for that location – a decision that was upheld by the board.

It is equally important, however, that planners recognize the cultural assumptions embedded in traditional planning practice and the way that immigration interacts with planning. This necessity is most obvious in relation to public participation strategies, but is also important when cultural values conflict with land use practice (for example, in the location of funeral homes or the orientation of a building on a site), or when land is used in "nontraditional" ways, thus creating new challenges for planning definitions of use and the associated requirements. Such challenges arise when, for example, residential buildings are used as spiritual centres (as is the case in small or growing Jewish or Buddhist faith communities across the GTA), or when large commercial areas are inhabited by culturally-targeted businesses (e.g., the so-called Asian malls located in Scarborough, Markham and Richmond Hill).

Despite the reluctance of planners to account for ethnicity or culture, and their insistence that they base their decisions solely on the technical merits of a proposal, the challenges of multiculturalism cannot be dissociated from planning.



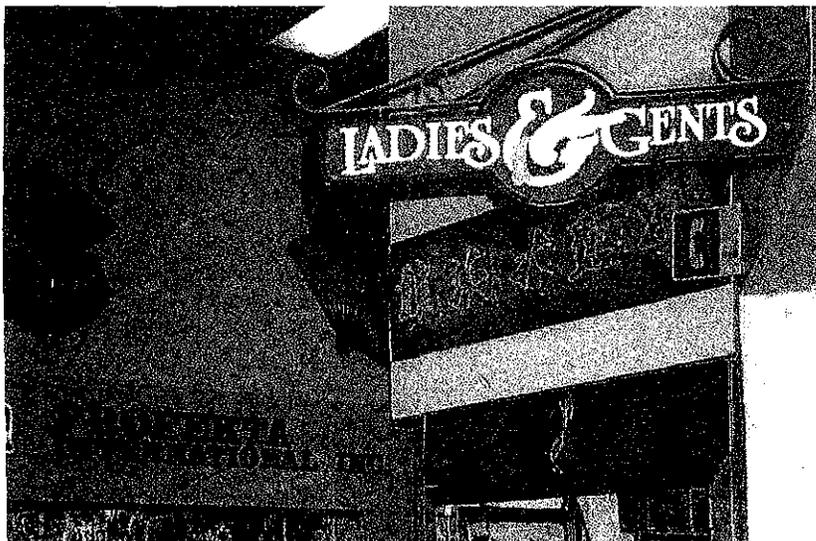
Community Development for Multicultural Environmental Stewardship Project, Toronto Region Conservation Authority (TRCA). Courtesy of the Toronto Regional Conservation Authority

SUMMARY

Planners' experience with ethno-cultural diversity in the Greater Toronto Area was identified at a one-day York University conference called Planning in a Multicultural Region. Examples illustrate how ethnicity and culture affect planning practice in a variety of ways – beyond conflicts over land use and across typical divisions within the profession. Experience suggests that planners continue to struggle with the appropriate role for ethnicity and culture in the planning process. They increasingly recognize it as part of the context of their work, but refuse to "plan for multiculturalism."

Sommaire

Planning in a Multicultural Region, une conférence à l'université York, faisait état de l'expérience des urbanistes du grand Toronto dans le domaine de la diversité ethnoculturelle. Comment l'ethnicité et la culture affectent-elles l'urbanisme, au-delà des conflits d'aménagement du territoire et des divisions typiques au sein de la profession? Les urbanistes arrivent encore difficilement à identifier la place que doivent occuper les facteurs ethniques et culturels dans leur travail: ils en reconnaissent de plus en plus l'importance, mais résistent à les incorporer dans leur planification.



Old meets new: Interior of Market Village Markham mall. Photo: Marcia Wallace

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