

# Cracks in the Creative City: The Contradictions of Community Arts Practice

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## Abstract

*The recent flurry of research about arts-led regeneration initiatives illuminates how contemporary arts festivals can become complicit in the production of urban inequality. But researchers rarely engage with detailed empirical examples that shed light on the contradictory role that artists sometimes play within these spectacularized events. Similar research in performance studies connects the political limits and potential of social practice arts — interventions that encourage artists and non-artists to co-produce work — as civic boosters strive to stage cities in order to attract investment. In this article, I explore the case study of Streetscape: Living Space at Regent Park, a participatory artistic intervention programmed in a public housing neighbourhood that is undergoing redevelopment in Toronto, Canada. Streetscape was part of the Luminato festival, an elite booster coalition-led festival of ‘creativity’. I refer to these arts interventions to demonstrate how artists engaging in social practice arts can become complicit in naturalizing colonial gentrification processes at multiple scales. But I also reveal how artists can leverage heterogeneous arts-led regeneration strategies to make space for ‘radical social praxis’ (Kwon, 2004), interventions that challenge hegemonic regimes. I conclude by interrogating the effectiveness of place-based efforts in unsettling the ‘creative city’.*

## Introduction

In 2008, Toronto’s Luminato festival featured participatory arts interventions in Regent Park, Canada’s oldest public housing neighbourhood, then in the midst of massive redevelopment. Luminato is an international festival of ‘creativity’ that burst onto the Toronto arts scene in 2007. As part of the festival in 2009, Manifesto, a well-connected Toronto urban arts collective, curated *Streetscape: Living Space at Regent Park* (*Streetscape*, 2008). The *Streetscape* programming featured participatory arts practices that encouraged artists and non-artists to co-produce creative work. It also promoted civic engagement in a public housing community that Toronto media, planners and policymakers tend to characterize in sensationalist, racialized and classed language, depicting it as a neighbourhood of degeneracy and violence.

In blog posts, newspaper articles and interviews, journalist and participating artists, community workers and youth expressed divergent opinions about Luminato’s foray into community-engaged art. Luminato promoted *Streetscape* as an important opportunity to spark social inclusion among Regent Park residents and festivalgoers (Luminato, 2008).

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*Streetscape* animators insisted that this programming was a chance to insert mentoring and community engagement into the blockbuster festival; however, community workers already working in Regent Park complained that *Streetscape* all but erased local grassroots arts and culture organizations struggling to get by in the now rapidly gentrifying neighbourhood (interview with community advocates, June 2009). A few expressed their frustrations towards Luminato for enlisting racialized youth to participate in a festival that entrenched inequality and promoted the displacement of poor people from the city. However, the *Streetscape* artists insisted that they were opening up space for artists and for Regent Park youth to critique urban development politics from within the festival.<sup>1</sup>

This article digs into these tensions, specifically exploring the contradictory politics of arts practices that foster social inclusion programming within spectacularized creative city initiatives. Researchers in both critical urban and performance studies trace the racialized and classed inequalities that elite creative city programming entrenches (Peck, 2005; Grundy and Boudreau, 2008; Parker, 2008; Catungal and Leslie, 2009a; Peck, 2011). In some cases, artists and arts organizations are complicit in staging culture-led regeneration initiatives that promote third-wave gentrification. Smith (2002: 443) defined this wave as 'retaking the city for the middle classes', not only for housing but 'into a vehicle for transforming whole areas into landscaped complexes that pioneer a comprehensive class-inflected urban re-make . . . based on recreation, consumption, production and pleasure as well as residence' (*ibid.*; see also Cameron and Coaffee, 2005; Cameron, 2006). These developments also consolidate culture-industry strategies and 'roll out' (Peck and Tickell, 2002) social inclusion agendas that eclipse critical dialogue that could potentially address structural inequalities (Richter, 2010).

Parallel cultural policy research reveals how artists and arts organizations seek out funding within an increasingly neoliberalized cultural policy regime (Jenkins, 2005; Chong and Bogdan, 2010). Funding for grassroots arts organizations is cut back while increasingly entrepreneurial-oriented granting schemes pressure artists to form boosterist partnerships with businesses and community groups (Robertson, 2006). Within this context, artists access grants by programming social practice arts interventions, participatory work that brings together artists and non-artists in place-based work (Harvie, 2011). Such practices can feed into exclusionary neoliberal policies, but also present interesting opportunities for contestation.

This article adds to these divergent and intersecting lines of inquiry by troubling the often one-sided portrayal of artists as either conscious agents of gentrification policies or helpless victims. Public-private partnership-driven initiatives promote de-politicized social inclusion agendas that naturalize raced and classed displacement, but such a heavy-handed critical stance renders invisible some artists' efforts to carve out spaces for critique within these events. Sometimes artists leverage culture-led regeneration initiatives to engage communities with what Kwon (2004) refers to as 'radical social praxis' — interventions that address conflict and critique hegemonic politics. These acts signal the potential for novel community engagement formations to take shape within neoliberal initiatives, not the absolute demise of critical discourse and praxis (Gibson-Graham *et al.*, 2013).

The *Streetscape* case study is part of a larger action research project exploring the gendered and racialized politics of neoliberal creative city policies (McLean, 2014; Rankin and McLean, 2014). The specific events and opinions documented in this article are based on an analysis of (1) popular media reports between 2009 and 2011; (2) 12 formal and informal interviews conducted in 2010 with Toronto community arts workers, culture policy workers, curators and *Streetscape* participants; and (3) participant

1 The hotly contested urban planning concept promoted by urbanists Charles Landry (2000) and Richard Florida (2002) suggests that planners and policymakers, struggling to attract and retain investment, should invest in initiatives that work to harness their city's 'creativity' to attract highly skilled, flexible and dynamic creative thinkers.

observation at *Streetscape* events. Overall, I designed the research methods to investigate key issues emerging from programming within Toronto-based creative city strategies, namely the politics of culture-led regeneration strategies, the contradictory practices of community-based arts, and this planning regime's impact on grassroots arts organizations working with underrepresented communities.

The popular media reports I examined were a random selection of Toronto newspapers and entertainment magazines, including the daily newspapers *The Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail*, as well as *Now Magazine* (a weekly free publication) and *Toronto Life* (a monthly magazine). I also scanned various activists' and artists' blogs, including Praxis Theatre, Un-edit My Heart and the website of *Spacing* magazine. I conducted a content and discourse analysis to trace how normative visions of creative city policies and culture-led regeneration are encoded and promoted in official festival documentation and journalists' accounts. I also sought out examples of artists and activists challenging or critiquing the Luminato festival and the broader political-economic context that ushered it in.

The interviews focused on the views and experiences of stakeholders participating in creative city programming. I selected interviewees to reflect a range of engagement in the festival, including Regent Park arts animators, curators, visual and performance artists and culture policy researchers. I identified these participants through a snowball technique involving arts organizations and participants in arts-based activist projects.<sup>2</sup>

Overall, my approach is best described as a partial and situated positionality (Haraway, 1990). I do not claim to be an objective observer of social phenomena so much as an embodied and embedded scholar, interested in uncovering the dynamics of complex social and spatial relationships in order to open up the possibilities for creating more equitable and just cities.<sup>3</sup>

## Blockbuster events and the spectacle of participation

Over the past few decades in cities around the world, growth coalitions composed of state and corporate actors have staged spectacularized arts festivals as part of broader 'creative city' or culture-led urban regeneration strategies (Levin and Solga, 2009; Quinn, 2009). City boosters with global city aspirations collaborate with banks and other large corporations to plan blockbuster arts events featuring a select few 'world-class' artists. These networks plan such events to attract cultural tourists, a growing sector in the tourism economy (Hollands, 2010). Boosters also favour these 'symbolically resonant' (Peck, 2011: 463) events because they attract investors, while consolidating and extending the power of growth coalition actors, creative industry stakeholders and elite cultural institutions (Gibson and Klocker, 2005; Peck, 2005; Catungal and Leslie, 2009b; Peck, 2011).

The staging of blockbuster festivals also signals the neoliberalization of cultural policies. In the Canadian context, this means that since the mid-1990s a key public arts

2 I structured interviews around a protocol that asked a consistent set of questions and allowed for open-ended discussion. The questions I asked included: What is your overall impression of the role of Luminato in Toronto? What are the relationships between curators, artists and event organizers in this festival? Do you think the installations and performances you are involved in shape broader urban dialogue about the arts and culture in this city? Can you recall any tensions between arts interventions and residents or businesses in the area? I recorded interviews digitally and classified responses into a set of commonly encountered categories (Creswell, 1998).

3 I acknowledge that my research process and analysis are informed by my multiple subject positions in relation to arts-based activism in Toronto: white settler, consumer of the arts within a neoliberal context, activist and precarious researcher and university instructor. None of these positions place me as an objective observer, but rather as a situated participant with ongoing connections to and care for urban politics.

funding strategy has been to invest in mega-events that promise economic development, especially through increased tourism. Arts funding bodies that provide arms-length peer-reviewed grants, such as the Ontario Arts Council (OAC) and the Canada Council of the Arts (CCA), increasingly support select, high-profile artists and arts organizations to participate in blockbuster festivals (Robertson, 2006). At the same time, public funders encourage small arts organizations to partner with businesses and corporate donors (Robertson, 2006; Chong and Bogdan, 2010). As a result, arts funding models 'normalize market discipline and corporate priorities in policies that encourage artists and arts organizations to engage in entrepreneurial partnerships' (Bain and McLean, 2012: 95). Smaller not-for-profit arts organizations lacking business contacts, administrative staff and access to elite networks simply cannot compete in this race (Godard, 2001; Bain, 2009; McRobbie, 2011).

Within this context, creative city strategies mobilize community-engaged and participatory arts practices as a way to spark 'social inclusion' and entrepreneurial partnerships (McLean, 2009). In some cases, festival programmers collaborate with Business Improvement Associations (BIAs), art schools and arts organizations to program community-engaged work (Harvie, 2005; Evans, 2009; McRobbie, 2011). Some culture policy researchers favour partnerships for offering artists and volunteers opportunities to participate in experiences that spark social interaction and democratize access to creative resources (Anderson, 2009). Others value them for offering 'niche experiences', valuable currency in the 'experience economy', a growing trend in cultural tourism (Richards, 2001; Mowforth and Munt, 2003).

Critics claim that the discourse of participation that is used to include low-income residents in urban regeneration strategies can exacerbate inequality (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Jones, 2003). Some charge that collaborative arts programming within a neoliberal context results in projects in which boosters and BIAs script artists as social workers to fill the vacuum left by funding cuts to community centres and school art programs (Grundy and Boudreau, 2008; McRobbie, 2011). The *Time Out/Game Out* arts intervention that took place in Toronto in 2008 demonstrates these tensions (McLean, 2009). BIAs, boutique hotels and artists collaborated in a weekend of participatory arts interventions encouraging artists, festivalgoers and residents to play a 'catalytic role in the revitalization' (Artscape, 2012) of the Parkdale neighbourhood. Projects included programming games of hide-and-seek and tag in local thrift stores and coffee shops. Anti-gentrification activists raised concerns that these activities — promoted by businesses driving up property prices — encouraged residents and shop owners to transform a neighbourhood housing psychiatric survivors and low-income new immigrants into a playground (see also Mazer and Rankin, 2011). Critics were particularly frustrated that the interventions emphasized fun and exploration while avoiding critical discussion about displacement and poverty. Exclusionary community engagement practices such as this one echo Richter (2010: 186), who suggests that it is important to critically examine the 'underpinning motivation and actual politics of social inclusion agendas' in arts programming that is meant to catalyze regeneration. She and others remind us that collaborative, community-based initiatives can feed into the rise of 'post-politics' in which technologies of government privilege partnerships, consensus and agreement while displacing debate, disagreement and dissensus (Swyngedouw, 2011).

Others contribute to this discussion by pointing out how the discourse of social inclusion often fetishizes the engagement of ethnoracialized communities in what Goonewardena and Kipfer (2005: 672) refer to as the 'spectacular commodification of difference'. Creative city events often privilege performances of diversity that appeal to the tastes of middle-class professionals and align with planning efforts to securitize neighbourhoods (Catungal and Leslie, 2009b; Luckman *et al.*, 2009). Within this context, urban artistic interventions work to hide racialized exclusions and hierarchies inscribed in urban space. For example, curators programmed a fake red-light district in the 2009 dusk-until-dawn *Nuit Blanche* festival of contemporary art in Toronto, another large-scale creative city festival. The district featured actors and dancers pretending to be

sex workers in bondage gear and ‘glibly patriarchal’ (Levin and Solga, 2009) dresses, bikinis and lingerie. Meanwhile, police patrolling the event harassed and ushered away the transgender and First Nations sex workers who rely on the neighbourhood to make a living (Tigchelaar, 2014).

Recent research in performance studies also examines the ways in which artists become complicit in promoting exclusionary creative city strategies. Specifically, research on the potential and pitfalls of social practice arts interventions illuminates how participatory arts activities are imbricated in the production of ‘creative class’ subjectivities and spaces. The term *social practice* refers to artwork that inspires community involvement, debate and exchange. Jackson (2011) contends that this artwork does social work because these practices spark negotiation between artists, non-artists and participants as they participate in producing the work. Walking tours are one of many popular practices within this genre. These include performative tours in which artists work with communities to explore everyday and unexpected urban spaces such as alleyways, loading docks or abandoned buildings (Pinder, 2008).

Harvie (2011) demonstrates how the pedagogical and political potential of social practice interventions are shaped by broader material and cultural contexts. For instance, city boosters enlist artists to animate neighbourhoods with social practice arts, but often in interventions stripped of critical content. Social practice interventions can also reinforce exclusive hierarchies among artists and arts organizations. Arts festivals and Biennales ask artists to perform the role of what Yúdice (2003: 337) describes as the ‘outsourcers and suppliers of processes that enhance the value of cities’. Artists, in turn, download the responsibility of animating neighbourhoods on to unpaid community members and volunteers, echoing insights of art critic Kester, who has argued that in contemporary urban politics, community-based art is a kind of ‘aesthetic evangelism’:

the prevailing logic of community-based art reproduces a reformist ideology that, like Victorian-era evangelism, envisions personal inner transformation and growth as the key to the amelioration of social problems such as poverty, crime, hopelessness, unemployment and violence (Kester, 1995: 29).

Additionally, artists engaging in social practice interventions within creative city initiatives can naturalize racialized inequalities (Kwon, 2004). For example, artists risk reproducing colonial discovery narratives when they invite festivalgoers to ‘discover’ and interact with low-income communities. Kwon and others claim that these practices encourage artists and participants to perform a missionary-like role to assist ‘at-risk’ youth and other populations that policymakers and planners frame as vulnerable (Hirschman, 2002; Kwon, 2004). In a similar vein, performance artist Gómez-Peña claims that these partnerships exoticize racialized communities in ‘an eternal art safari . . . to explore beyond art, ineffable fringes and sordid realities to discover, document and bring back to the gallery, the Biennale or the film festival’ (Gómez-Peña, 2001: 18).<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, Kwon (2004: 154) also points to the potential of community-based work that challenges power inequity through what she terms ‘radical social praxis’. This mode of intervention creatively responds to and works with conflict and collision rather than avoiding difficult discussions. Alvis Choi’s China Town Think Tank project exemplifies such principles. Frustrated with the Anglo-centrism and labour inequities often reproduced within Toronto-based community-based arts practices, in the summer of 2013 Choi organized public chat rooms for Chinese-owned businesses and artists throughout the downtown China Town neighbourhood. These performance-based activities sparked dialogue about community economic development strategies and arts programming while also spurring generative discussions about ‘home, migration, race, families, language barriers, and survival’ (Choi, 2013).

4 For an excellent overview of artists and their differing views about their practices and their role in gentrification dynamics, see Mathews (2010).

Sometimes artists working within corporate-led creative city initiatives generate critical dialogue. For example, in his animated book *Social Acupuncture: A Guide to Suicide, Performance and Utopia* (2006), Toronto-based performance artist Darren O'Donnell offers insights into the potential for artists to craft spaces of critique within public-private partnership-supported events. He describes interventions that entail arts collectives partnering with philanthropists in 'social-work'-like community-based projects. However, rather than engage in de-politicized activities, artists leveraged these interventions to give voice to underrepresented residents.

The interventions that O'Donnell refers to echo feminist scholars who challenge 'all or nothing' (Larner, 2011) accounts of neoliberalism's reach and durability. Politicized projects remind us of the always-present potential to respond to and intervene in situated and contingent market-oriented initiatives (see Rankin and Delaney, 2011; Kern, 2013). Larner and Craig (2005) have made similar claims about the potential for community-based organizations to forefront critical dialogue and diversity in neoliberal policymaking and partnership building. Collaborative formations can create space for reflexive actors to disrupt hierarchies and support democratic participation even as state and non-state actors push market-friendly values, thereby illuminating not only the demise of politics, but also the emergence of novel political assemblages co-evolving within neoliberal strategies (Larner, 2011; Gibson-Graham *et al.*, 2013). Katz (2004) points out that such interventions are not necessarily acts of resistance capable of challenging or changing deep structural inequalities; however, they can generate a sense of active and engaged citizenship, and spark contestation in unpredictable ways. Such important world-shaping social practices should not be overlooked in our critique of neoliberal creative city initiatives (Gibson-Graham, 2006).

In the sections that follow, I add nuance to critical perspectives on community-engaged arts practice in the creative city. Through my focus on *Streetscape* in Regent Park, I describe how participatory culture can become entwined in the production of exclusionary space, but also offer space for collective artistic praxis.

## Making over Toronto with participatory arts and culture

Luminato, the city's blockbuster festival of urban creativity, was the brainchild of David Pecaut, Boston Consulting Chair and Chair of the Toronto City Summit Alliance (TCSA). This coalition, predominantly made up of private-sector growth-machine actors, was formed in 2002 to boost the city's economic competitiveness (Boudreau, 2007). Worried that the city's tourist economy lagged after the 2003 SARS crisis (Harris and Keil, 2008), Pecaut joined forces with Tony Gagliano, CEO of St. Joseph's Communications, to create a new festival. The well-connected businessmen immediately linked with a roster of private-sector partners, banks and philanthropic organizations. Together they developed partnerships that connected creative industries, urban development boosters and the three levels of government already engaged in Toronto-based culture-led regeneration projects. In 2003, the federal and provincial governments had jointly invested 226 million Canadian dollars in what are called the 'magnificent seven' (Robertson, 2006: 204) — the building or rebuilding of seven downtown Toronto cultural institutions (Jenkins, 2005).<sup>5</sup> The Luminato founders and

5 The seven major projects are part of what the City of Toronto refers to as the city's 'cultural renaissance'. Between 2002 and 2004, corporate and state partners funnelled CAD \$257 million in provincial and federal funding and \$488.5 million in corporate funding to support major design projects for The Royal Ontario Museum, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Canadian Opera Company, the Royal Conservatory of Music, the National Ballet of Canada, the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art and Roy Thompson Hall.

planners added hype to this architectural 'renaissance' by programming arts interventions featuring 'world-class' and visual artists in and around these cultural institutions.<sup>6</sup>

After its first year, Toronto artists and journalists both celebrated and criticized Luminato. Some lauded the festival for placing Toronto into the international arts festival and Biennale circuit. This new event, proponents thought, offered exciting new opportunities for local artists and arts organizations to cross-pollinate with international artists and to enliven the streets with interactive cultural offerings (Sandals, 2008). Meanwhile, the Luminato founders' ability to access enormous amounts of funding without undergoing any peer review process angered critics (Wheeler, 2008). To the amazement of grassroots arts organizations, in only 3 years, the provincial and federal government directed CAD \$20 million in provincial and federal funding to the new festival (Wheeler, 2008). This especially infuriated underfunded artists and arts organizations struggling to survive on scarce operating funds in an increasingly unaffordable city.<sup>7</sup> Other critics disparaged the festival's emphasis on marketing and spectacle. According to a local journalist, Luminato's hurried programming featuring fashion, film, performance art, music and theatre gave the impression of 'an ill-defined grab bag of splashy public spectacles and pricey international performances' (Taylor, 2008).

In 2008, the big-budget festival made efforts to respond to criticism by offering more accessible programming, including partnering with the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) to program artistic work in Regent Park, Canada's oldest public housing neighbourhood. During this time, Regent Park was in the midst of a high-profile 15-year-long redevelopment process. In 2002, TCHC had hired the Regent Park Collaborative Team (RPCT) to devise a plan for replacing the de-invested housing stock built in the late 1940s (Kipfer and Petrunia, 2009).

When Regent Park was first built, planners and policymakers considered it a model community for eradicating the pathologies of 'slum' housing, encouraging workers, mostly of European backgrounds, to live more productive and efficient lives. Urbanists also celebrated the development for protecting the rest of the central city as an attractive site for investment (*ibid.*). By 2000, the neighbourhood's character had changed considerably. Around 80% of residents were people of colour, a large percentage of whom were welfare-dependent, single female-headed families. Also, many Regent Park residents bore the brunt of the massive loss of manufacturing jobs in the 1990s and now worked in low-paying and precarious service jobs (*ibid.*). However, the Toronto media

6 Luminato sought international cachet by importing Chief Executive Officer Janice Price and artistic director Chris Lorway from high-profile Philadelphia arts organizations. Both had established reputations, leading the Lincoln Centre and collaborating on various culture-oriented development projects, including the Bring New Orleans Back Commission, an initiative exploring ways to catalyze 'culture-led revitalization' in the post-Hurricane-Katrina era. Richard Florida himself took part in the festival's inaugural celebrations; he was profiled in an edition of the *Atlantic Monthly* dedicated to celebrating the new festival and Toronto, the 'creative city' (McLean, 2011).

7 During the 1990s, Canadian federal and provincial governments cut arms-length peer-reviewed operating funding for public arts organizations such as the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA) and the Ontario Arts Council (OAC), both originally established to promote policies of decentralization and democratization (Godard, 2001). Federal funding to the CCA, for example, fell from CAD \$105.5 million in 1991-92 to \$88.8 million in 1997-98 (Godard, 2001), while provincial funding to the OAC dropped from \$42.6 million to \$25.3 million in the 18 months between 1995-96 and 1996-97 (DiCenzo, 1998: 253). Since the mid-1990s, CCA arts grants have just kept pace with inflation, increasing by 15% from CAD \$123.8 million in 2001 to \$142.3 million in 2011 (CCA, 2011), and provincial funding for the OAC has increased by 142.6%. Culture policies research shows that OAC funders roll out this increased funding in programs that encourage arts organizations to engage in private-sector partnerships and develop capacities to achieve self-sufficiency (DiCenzo, 1998; Wu, 2002); see also Bain and McLean, 2012, for a chart outlining public-arts funding trends since the mid-1990s).



**Figure 1** Modernist Regent Park Towers in the midst of reconstruction (photo by Chris Rahim, 2012, reproduced with permission)

and city planners continually demonized Regent Park residents while the government neglected to sufficiently invest in the neighbourhood.

In 2002, the RPCT adopted the American HOPE VI public housing redevelopment model of deconcentrating poverty, privatizing units and introducing a social mix to the neighbourhood where 12,000 residents formerly lived in rent-geared-to-income (RGI) units (see Figure 1).<sup>8</sup> A new high-profile centre for the arts was added as the final element of this plan (Artscape, 2012) (see Figure 2). By the time TCHC began collaborating with Luminato, Toronto journalists, architects and planners were already celebrating the redevelopment for ushering in a new, ‘innovative’ and ‘creative’ downtown neighbourhood.

The discourse of ‘mixity’ and ‘creativity’ the Regent Park revitalization planners reiterated resonated with urban policymakers and the Toronto media, which consistently promoted culture-led revitalization (August and Walks, 2012). For example, the Master Plan won the 2003 Canadian Institute of Planning Award of Excellence (Canadian Institute of Planners, 2003). In addition, community planners involved in the project have received numerous accolades for what they tout as an exemplary model of community engagement (Micallef, 2013). But others — journalists, academics and activists — questioned the implications of razing an entire neighbourhood of low-income, predominantly racialized residents to make way for condominiums and new cultural facilities (see Kipfer, 2005; Orr, 2012). As the redevelopment progressed, TCHC relocated residents to other TCHC buildings; in many cases, families were moved to

8 HOPE VI is an initiative led by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development. Based on New Urbanism, its aim is to redevelop de-invested public housing projects into deconcentrated, ‘socially mixed’ developments. Jason Hackworth (2007) contends that this strategy, a conscious expression of neoliberal values, works in favour of banks, real-estate firms and consultants while displacing low-income, racialized communities.





**Figure 2** New Regent Park Towers and the Bell Light Box arts hub (photo by Chris Rahim, 2012, reproduced with permission)

neighbourhoods over one-and-a-half hours away by public transport (interview with Regent Park community development workers, June 2009). Critics also pointed out that TCHC had promised that RGI residents could return; however, no more than 65% of the displaced residents will be accommodated in the redeveloped Regent Park. Moreover, a majority of the new units are condominiums targeted at middle-class residents who make over \$60,000 a year (August and Walks, 2012).

August and Walks (*ibid.*) contend that the TCHC and Toronto media have made considerable efforts to quell critical debate about the redevelopment. They refer to one instance where the housing organization threatened to evict the Regent Park Film Festival after the grassroots organization hosted a lively on-site panel about race, gentrification and displacement. They also point out how, as the TCHC has worked to stifle critical debate, it has supported the formation of the Regent Park Neighbourhood Initiative (RPNI), an organization led by new condominium owners. Often the Toronto media portrays the RPNI members as 'brave' residents catalyzing the 'rebirth' of the neighbourhood. Meanwhile, the same newspapers frame residents who express frustrations as negative, unreasonable and unable to cope with progressive change (*ibid.*).

In an effort to incorporate the Regent Park redevelopment into the Luminato festival, programmers set out to enlist high-profile graffiti, mural and performance artists from New York and Philadelphia. Festival planners hoped that this edgy combination of murals and performance-based programming would enliven the neighbourhood and draw attention to the redevelopment (interview with Toronto-based visual artist, 2012). They also thought that this programming would fulfil Luminato's social-inclusion mandate to promote collaboration as well as economic development. Some of the international artists, however, contacted local Toronto graffiti and mural artists to learn more about Regent Park and Luminato. Soon news about Luminato's plans circulated within Toronto arts networks and piqued the interests of Manifesto, a local collective that promotes hip-hop and graffiti culture. Manifesto's website states that the collective works to support projects that 'unite, energize, support and celebrate Toronto's vibrant and diverse music and arts community, and find innovative ways of working together towards common goals' (Manifesto, 2012). Over the past decade, this well-connected collective

has acted as intermediary, bringing various arts organizations together with city government, philanthropists, planners and arts-led regeneration consulting firms. Manifesto members have participated in cultural mapping projects for the Martin Prosperity Institute, the business-school home of Richard Florida. Also, in 2011, the collective worked alongside Florida and the heads of elite Toronto arts institutions to co-chair the development of Toronto's *Creative Capital Gains*, a planning framework reiterating the Floridian creative city script (City of Toronto, 2012).

Manifesto developed the *Streetscape* programming as part of its mandate to promote grassroots neighbourhood-based arts projects alongside high-profile programming (*Streetscape*, 2008). The collective claimed that these activities would present opportunities for festivalgoers, Regent Park residents and youth to learn about the area's revitalization. The participatory programming included an 8-week-long series of workshops during which high-profile graffiti, photography and performance artists mentored Regent Park youth (interview with *Streetscape* artists, 2009). In the workshops, youths designed their own walking tours to lead during the festival; their interactive, conversational tours were meant to illuminate the youths' stories about life in a neighbourhood undergoing tremendous change. In an effort to engage local organizations, *Streetscape* also partnered with Regent Park Focus, a local media-arts initiative that has been engaging Regent Park youth in community-based arts programming for over 20 years (Regent Park Focus, 2014). The partnership involved transforming Regent Park Focus's main space into a temporary hub where Luminato festivalgoers could purchase the youths' artwork and learn about the grassroots organization, among other things.

During and after the 2009 festival, animators and participants, along with Toronto journalists and arts bloggers, praised the *Streetscape* interventions. Many appreciated the unique opportunities provided for the roughly 3,000 festivalgoers who descended on the neighbourhood to learn directly from local youths about their everyday life (interview with *Streetscape* animator, 2009). According to one:

in the walks, the kids said things like, 'This is the spot a shady character hangs out in', or 'This is where my sister broke her leg roller skating'. People liked these stories; they felt invited, like they were part of something (interview with *Streetscape* animator, 2009).

Journalists valued the tours for illuminating the neighbourhood's positive stories. The youths' tales of life in the neighbourhood, a few journalists explained, shed light on a 'healthier' Regent Park often ignored in sensationalist accounts of drugs, poverty and violence. (*Streetscape*, 2008). Similarly, some of the youths I interviewed appreciated the walks for creating an opportunity to share the neighbourhood's more uplifting stories with the world. One youth participant explained that the *Streetscape* walks allowed festivalgoers to feel more comfortable venturing into a 'neighbourhood that they were uncomfortable walking into before' (interview with *Streetscape* participant, 2009).

However, some Regent Park community arts practitioners expressed frustration with Manifesto's attempts to spark civic engagement with *Streetscape* (interview with community arts worker, 2009). Critics charged that the participatory practices the media adored were superficial. For example, one critic claimed that the bulk of *Streetscape*'s partnerships offered minimal learning opportunities or skills development; the youth mentorships appeared to involve little more than mundane tasks such as holding ladders or milling around at openings without any clear purpose. For him, the journalists' and festivalgoers' attention in these interactions was clearly centred on the famous artists, not the youth and not the committed Regent Park Focus arts organization hosting them. Similarly, another critic explained that, in the flurry of *Streetscape* activities, journalists, Luminato staff and corporate sponsors were excited to hobnob with big-name graffiti and mural artists. He laughed when he described the awkward interactions that took place, 'when the journalists approached us and the youths we worked with, they were like, "And who are you?"' (interview with community arts planner, 2009).

Another critique was that *Streetscape* is an example of ‘flash-in-the-pan’, short-term programming that glorifies elite philanthropists while undermining grassroots arts organizations (interview with a community worker, June 2009). As one critic noted, wealthy philanthropists and corporate donors — especially white philanthropists — find programming cultural activities in Regent Park appealing because they are interactions that spur convivial civic engagement, but veer away from uncomfortable conversations about structural inequality (interview with a Toronto theatre director, June 2009). As a result, artists and philanthropists strengthen their reputations as activists engaged in ‘saving’ the poor, but undermine under-funded grassroots organizations. For one critic, activities such as *Streetscape* send out the message ‘that nothing is going on in Regent Park the rest of the year’ (interview with a community arts worker, June 2009).

Luminato’s critics also contend that funders favour festivals with short-term bursts of community engagement because they require minimal long-term investment (interview with a Toronto-based theatre director, June 2009). He explained that the Toronto dynamics are particularly frustrating because so many grassroots organizations struggle to survive with minimal resources. Public arts organizations and corporate donors appear happy to fund blockbuster festivals while no longer investing in the small operating grants that used to cover the day-to-day costs of building maintenance, equipment and staff for smaller grassroots groups (Wheeler, 2008).

## Productive contradictions

Interestingly, the artists and curators Manifesto mobilized to work with the youth in the *Streetscape* programming were keenly aware of their ambivalent role within the festival. For instance, one *Streetscape* animator demonstrated a critical awareness of competitive creative city initiatives driven by a group of elites he referred to as ‘blowhards’ (interview with a *Streetscape* participant, June 2009). Another explained that this policy trend exacerbates unhealthy competition among artists and arts organizations, or what he described as a ‘crabs in the bucket mentality’ (interview with a *Streetscape* participant, June 2009). He also added that artists and arts organizations should continuously seek out ways to intervene in creative city events such as Luminato. For him, blockbuster arts events open up opportunities to direct resources towards underfunded artists and arts organizations (interview with a *Streetscape* animator, June 2009).

The *Streetscape* animators were also openly ambivalent about the Regent Park redevelopment. One referred to the redevelopment as ‘blatant gentrification’ (interview with *Streetscape* participant, 2009). He went on to describe how Luminato’s efforts to ‘revitalize’ downtown Toronto were part of larger gentrification processes that are polarizing the city spatially and socially. He even referred to Hulchanski’s (2010) analysis of the emergence of ‘three cities’ in Toronto — a gentrifying core of middle-class professionals flanked by racialized, low-income suburban communities — demonstrating a strong awareness of poverty and inequality in Toronto.<sup>9</sup>

The *Streetscape* animators did not shy away from difficult topics in the workshops leading up to and during the festival. Instead, they sought ways to address and incorporate neighbourhood tensions into the arts-based activities. For example, in one popular education-style game, the animators critiqued their role as outsiders hired by Luminato to teach Regent Park youth about the arts. They self-deprecatingly poked fun

9 Hulchanski’s (2010) study tracked demographic shifts between 1971 and 2005, revealing how Toronto has become polarized into three distinct cities: (1) an increasingly high-income and predominantly white city clustered mostly in downtown south; (2) a relatively middle-income and ethnically mixed city wedged between the other two; and (3) a city comprised of low-income, predominantly immigrant and racialized families located primarily in the ageing inner suburbs, far from the core (see also Parlette and Cowen, 2011).

at themselves playing the familiar Hollywood role of teacher or social worker dropped into a low-income neighbourhood to 'save' the youth (interview with *Streetscape* participant, 2009). The *Streetscape* animators, a collective predominantly made up of artists of colour also sought ways to foster critical, praxis-oriented engagement that included underrepresented Regent Park residents and community organizations. For example, as they planned the walking tours in the workshops, they encouraged the youth to interview Regent Park community workers, activists and residents. In some cases, they invited community workers to attend their gatherings. Guest participants included a community worker, an important support for families struggling with the confusion and trauma of relocation, to share his stories with workshop participants.

As a result, discussions with the community workers opened up space to reflect critically on the redevelopment. While some of the youths expressed excitement about the prospect of moving out of their disinvested buildings, others shared their fears about being relocated far away to unfamiliar neighbourhoods. Others were openly skeptical about the 'social-mix' aspect of the redevelopment plan that would bring middle-class professionals into the 'revamped' neighbourhood. Angered by the subtle and not-so-subtle racism and classism they were already experiencing on a daily basis, a few of the youths questioned how comfortable they would feel sharing commercial and community spaces with more affluent residents moving into the new condominiums (interview with *Streetscape* animator, June 2009).

Committed to working with contradictions, the *Streetscape* animators encouraged the youths to incorporate their opinions about the redevelopment into the walking tours. As a result, some of the tours burst into lively spaces of critique and debate, not the positive sound bites about the redevelopment circulating in the Toronto media and reproduced in festival promotional materials. For instance, some developers working with the Daniel's Corporation, TCHC's primary private-sector condominium development partner, participated in a walking tour, which resulted in a rather charged exchange:

A senior Daniel's developer came to participate in a tour and was led by a girl who was probably the most uncomfortable with the redevelopment of all the youth in the program. When they were walking around the neighbourhood, she asked the walkers, 'Have you been to Regent before?'. The Daniel's developer spoke up, 'Why, yes, I have been working here.' She then tested him. 'What? I haven't seen you around.' He replied, 'I am one of the people in charge of the redevelopment.' Then she responded, 'What? You are the people tearing down my home! We were not consulted!' Then he spoke back, acting quite pompous. 'We put up posters; residents were invited to community meetings.' This girl would not back down. She responded, 'I never heard about it. My mom never heard about it.' I think he learned something. It lasted about half an hour. It was amazing to watch this girl in grade ten speak up to a developer (interview with *Streetscape* programmer, 2009).

*Streetscape's* critics pointed out the highly uneven politics reproduced when a big-budget creative city initiative seeks to program community-engaged arts in the midst of a stigmatized and racialized low-income public housing redevelopment. At the same time, the *Streetscape* animators demonstrated reflexivity and critical awareness as they critiqued competitive 'creative city' policies and the gentrification dynamics this planning trend naturalizes. In an effort to foster critical civic engagement, the animators carved out space for the Regent Park youth to express their fear and anger about the redevelopment, giving voice to critical perspectives that TCHC and others attempted to suppress.

## Staging, performing and contesting exclusion

Luminato's efforts in Regent Park replicated a business-as-usual model of downtown redevelopment for inter-urban competition. This entrepreneurial creative city strategy merely grafted festival programming onto the local public housing redevelopment that

was reconfiguring the area into a 'socially mixed' arts hub (August and Walks, 2012). By programming artists in the public housing neighbourhood, only a few blocks from the downtown cultural renaissance projects already under way, festival planners expanded their strategic web of culture-led regeneration projects.

The Regent Park redevelopment was an excellent fit for the festival's globally mobile elite of private-sector consultants and arts administrators already implementing culture-led redevelopment strategies around the world. The festival's plan to pilot 'world class' graffiti and mural artists from Philadelphia and New York into Regent Park for 10 days resonated with the growth coalition's predilection for spectacularized, buzz-generating culture. Within this context, Manifesto's efforts to program collaborative projects involving residents, artists and festivalgoers within *Streetscape* supplemented this excitement with grassroots interventions. These projects shifted Luminato's emphasis away from red-carpet openings and elite arts institutions to what appeared to be community engagement. Furthermore, the social practice interventions aligned well with entrepreneurialized arts policies that favour place making, civic engagement and business partnerships (Richter, 2010).

However, this civic engagement strategy exacerbated already existing power inequities. First, even though journalists' accounts celebrated the community building taking place within *Streetscape*, the programming worked in the favour of powerful corporate actors. As critics pointed out, the well-funded festival marketed the walking tours and youth-engaged workshops as a sign of the commitment of the partnering banks, boosters and philanthropists to local artists and communities. Echoing Gómez-Peña (2005: 289), *Streetscape*'s 'illusion of interactivity and civic participation' bolstered powerful urban development stakeholders reinventing Regent Park.

The *Streetscape* programming also established hierarchies among community arts organizations. As savvy networkers with established ties with think tanks and corporate sponsors, Manifesto leveraged this programming to strengthen the collective's reputation as a champion of participatory arts. But the Regent Park arts organizations that collaborated in *Streetscape* in order to strengthen their networks found that the activities offered minimal opportunities for meaningful mentoring and skills development. Instead, most of the media attention and event networking elevated the artists working in Regent Park for 10 days. The arts interventions worked to erase the long history of the local organizations' work in the neighbourhood, signalling the social, emotional and symbolic dimensions of displacement (Marcuse, 1985).

Exclusionary relationships also emerged as the social practice arts activities mobilized low-income Regent Park youth to cultivate a neighbourhood amenable to the redevelopment's 'social mix'. In these activities, *Streetscape* essentially scripted Regent Park youth to invite festivalgoers to 'discover' the neighbourhood they were being displaced from by sharing 'positive' stories. These shared stories, what Kwon refers to as 'counter memories' (2004: 32) celebrated in community-based arts practices, suited TCHC and the redevelopment planners. Meanwhile, the interactions also glossed over difficult narratives about racialized and classed poverty in the area, the structural causes of this inequality, and the displacement of residents that is its result.

Furthermore, the missionary-like arts interventions naturalized colonial relationships because they staged the festival and festivalgoers as saviours healing the neighbourhood with civically engaged culture. The walking tours created opportunities for festivalgoers to venture into Regent Park, learn from the locals, and then depart unscathed — middle-class consumers of art 'brave' enough to venture into the public housing neighbourhood (see Razack, 2002; Rankin and McLean, 2014). Also, programmed within a festival reiterating spatial metaphors about 'enlightening' and 're-discovering' Toronto's 'underutilized spaces, the *Streetscape* intervention normalized what Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Wood describe as racialized narratives that reproduce 'geographic desires bound up in conquest' (McKittrick and Woods, 2007: 7). Luminato's bank and corporate-sector partners become saviours healing the city with the 'light' of culture, a narrative that relegates 'dark' and 'uncultured' places and people to the city's 'shadowy' margins (*ibid.*).

However, the case of *Streetscape* also demonstrates that, even though exclusionary neoliberal imperatives drove Luminato, moments of contestation also emerged within the arts activities. These interventions illustrate that neoliberal creative city initiatives are still heterogeneous and made up of diverse actors who, like anyone, are driven by multiple, often contradictory motives (Larner and Craig, 2005). In the case of *Streetscape*, the participating artists sought opportunities to access funds and networks. But some of the artists and community organizers who came together in this initiative expressed frustration with what they perceived as competitive cultural policies and exclusive neoliberal urban development politics.

The *Streetscape* artists were used to navigating these tensions, having long worked in participatory theatre and community organizing. Rather than shy away from discomfort, they engaged in acts of 'radical social praxis' (Kwon, 2004: 154). This included encouraging the youth to voice their divergent positive and negative experiences with the redevelopment. It also involved asking difficult questions about Luminato's short-term engagement in the neighbourhood. However briefly, these interactions carved out a 'counter-space' (Dolan 2001: 456), a space for the youth and community workers on the front lines of change to disrupt prevailing ideologies. Although not directly contesting the elite actors promoting Luminato or the broader exclusivity of creative city policies, they did make space for the youth to challenge what everyone else seemed to celebrate: the 'revitalization' of their neighbourhood into a space for middle-class consumption.

Critical scholars often dismiss artists as reformist or unable to generate meaningful change, a stance that overlooks radical social praxis. Empirical research troubles this narrow perspective by providing grounded accounts of the ways in which policy regimes articulate classed and racialized inequalities while also uncovering moments of contestation. The *Streetscape* case study demonstrates how a well-funded creative city strategy mobilized community-engaged practices to territorialize downtown Toronto neighbourhoods for real estate development. However, it also demonstrates how artists found ways to work within these strategies to critique hegemonic urban politics. Elites most likely dismissed these disruptive moments and the spectacle proceeded according to plan. But the coalitions that Manifesto made over a short period point to the ongoing work of contesting cultural initiatives planned explicitly to stage cities for investment — interventions that can shift, morph and multiply into spaces of engaged citizenship.

## Conclusion

Since 2007, the Luminato festival has strived to market Toronto as an international hub of 'world class' creativity. In an effort to stage downtown neighbourhoods for investment, the festival has collaborated with high-profile gallery and museum redesign strategies, as well as the Regent Park public housing redevelopment. Luminato's programming has also embraced calls for participation as a means of attracting middle-class professionals to live, work and play in the city's central core. This combination of inclusive culture and urban development aligns perfectly with public-sector cultural policies that direct funding towards place-based partnerships promoting a combination of economic development and civic engagement.

*Streetscape* in Regent Park offers insight into how artists become complicit in naturalizing exclusion when participating in entrepreneurial regeneration schemes. Artist groups need access to funds as well as to the exposure that participation in spectacularized events such as Luminato can provide. At the same time, community-engaged arts can provide elites with 'soft technologies' (McRobbie, 2011) of creative city governance that normalize racialized poverty and displacement. In the case of *Streetscape*, the use of interactive arts gave the impression that Regent Park redevelopers embraced resident engagement when, in fact, TCHC had earlier attempted to silence residents' critique.

Despite all this, many artists are keenly aware of the insidious impacts of neoliberal cultural policies and their own dependence on urban redevelopment schemes for funding and support. Nonetheless, they see social practice arts interventions as one of the few opportunities for artists to work with residents and local groups to challenge exclusionary politics. Furthermore, some artists approach their work as acts of radical social praxis, a mode that embraces conflict and discomfort as part of artistic civic engagement. In the case of *Streetscape*, animators sought to provide that critical space for Regent Park youths and community workers. These acts made small cracks within this particular creative city event for artists and participants to collectively ask difficult questions and re-imagine more inclusive urban spaces.

The value of these small acts of consciousness raising should not be dismissed. Critics of creative city policies would do well to acknowledge and explore such avenues as a means for organizing and challenging neoliberal regeneration planning. However, within the current context in which elite city boosters with access to capital and networks are setting planning agendas in multiple spheres, these cracks are easily patched over. Piecemeal, one-off critical discussions have little impact on ongoing cycles of colonization and privatization. Therefore, artists, activists and critical scholars need to craft much broader coalitions — with organized labour, indigenous artists and activists, organizations working with underrepresented racialized communities and undocumented workers, with queer youth, to name a few — to more effectively debunk the creative city hype.

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