From Settlement to Integration: Immigrant Placemaking in Suburban Toronto

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Setting the Context

- Contemporary immigrant settlement pattern: from the inner city to the suburb

[Bar chart showing Toronto CMA Municipalities with Highest Shares of Foreign-born Population, 2011 & 2016]

Source: Statistics Canada  
Setting the Context

- Conventional suburbs are often thought of as ‘placeless’ and at odds with diversity
- Immigrant communities are reshaping suburban spaces with new identities and new meanings
- Space & place: whose voice and whose rights?
Placemaking

1. Not to focus exclusively on the built environment; instead combine descriptions of spatial configuration with the relationships, feelings, and functions embedded within it (Bradley, 2018; Friedmann, 2010);

2. A process that capitalizes on a community’s stories, assets, and collaborative spirit and enhances the environment to meet the needs of the community as defined by its citizens (Harney, 2006; Friedmann, 2010; Schuch & Wang, 2015);

3. A process that fosters respect for diversity, creates opportunities for dialogues including all community member (Toolis, 2017; Thomas et al., 2015) and considers power imbalances (Eckenwiler, 2016; Nejad & Walker, 2018; Shibley, 1998);

4. Hence, placemaking is considered as a social, economic, cultural, political, and physical construct with the aim of creating empowering relationships between people and places (Lombard, 2014; Schlappa, 2015; Nejad & Walker, 2018)
Research Questions:

1. What are the key characteristics of suburban ethnic placemaking? How do immigrant groups negotiate their space and rights?

2. What is municipalities’ role in facilitating/impeding immigrant placemaking practices? What are the effective placemaking strategies that can not only support immigrant communities but also benefit the society at large?

5 Municipalities
81 Intercept surveys

8 Case studies
77 Interviews

112 Clusters
3,800 Businesses
Ethnic Succession & Readaptation

- Readaptation of post-war strip malls in inner suburbs
- Built form impedes placemaking opportunities, but immigrant businesses sustain community life
- Business improvement strategies
New Community Spaces

- Spatial capital
- Social infrastructure
- Institutional completeness
Creating “Third Places”

- Spaces conducive to social interactions
- Ethnic-oriented programming & services
- Intercultural shared spaces for diverse users
Sense of Belonging, Identity, and Place

- Cultural expressions through architectural features and public arts
- Inscribe a place with meaning
- Authenticity vs. commodification of culture
- Place identity is fluid and evolving
Negotiation of Space & Place

01

Incompatible land uses

02

Insufficient recognition and invisibility

03

Lack of proper community outreach & consultation
“This area ... definitely gets missed. And sometimes people don’t know that we have such a concentration of ethnic stores and Caribbean stores and South Asian stores. I definitely think our area should never be forgotten.”

“There’s a discrepancy in terms of what the [community] wants to do ... and what [the city] wants them to do.”

“So it’s been difficult to reach out to them [the Punjabi community] and get them to come [to public consultation].”
Challenges & Opportunities: Implications for Municipalities

- Suburbs are increasingly no longer ‘sub’ urban spaces
- Retrofitting suburbia as municipal priority
- The need to prepare for the continuous demographic shifts caused by global migration
- Contested narratives at the intersection of cultural recognition, commodification, everyday multiculturalism, and intercultural bridging
Challenges & Opportunities: Implications for Municipalities

01 | Revisit municipal policies, engagement processes, programming, & service deliveries
02 | Avoid tokenism in traditional public consultation approaches; adopt a community-powered process
03 | (Re)invest in social infrastructure & public spaces
04 | Transition from co-ethnic bonding to intercultural bridging
05 | Social equity & inclusion in all decision-making
Thank you.