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## CREATING SOCIAL SPACE IN THE NEW URBAN LANDSCAPE: EXPERIENCES FROM THE FRONTLINES

Bonnie Greene

I ONCE THOUGHT MONEY WAS THE KEY ELEMENT LIMITING THE EFFECTIVENESS of the community sector across Canada. I have changed my mind.

Money does matter for the sector, but in much of urban Canada social space matters even more, especially in rapidly growing centres. Unfortunately, it gets very little attention from major sector organizations, academics, or urban planners. That is especially true when a community tries to create social space as its population grows.

By social space, I mean the permanent space that we carve out in our communities where citizens and nonprofit groups can come together to do good with and for our neighbours and that is protected in some way from the forces of the market. The private sector can't create social space, although it may occasionally donate commercial or residential land as part of its social responsibility. Nor can government create it, although government policies or neglect profoundly affects its availability.

The issue of social space first caught my attention at a meeting in Toronto of people from private foundations, municipal government, community development, and social service agencies. We were talking about the challenge of getting grant-giving organizations to allow some part of their grants to be used to cover a small percentage of an organization's infrastructure costs. In an aside, someone pointed out that paying for heat and lights might soon become a non-issue because cash-strapped schools, governments, and churches were selling their surplus properties to developers who could recover the costs of retrofitting and converting former institutional spaces into commercial buildings and condominiums. Soon there would be no below-market spaces for community organizations to rent, heat, or light. This incident was just a footnote in the back of my mind until I began working for a church in a town on the edge of the City of Toronto. That's when social space and its consequences for the community sector became an urgent issue for me.

### THE TRADITIONAL MODEL IN THE NEW URBAN LANDSCAPE

These days, land for all purposes is one of the scarcest commodities around. For decades, most of the communities around the City of Toronto developed on a traditional model. A farmer would carve out an acre of land on the edge of the town for a church or a Legion Hall. Housing developments might come along, but basically these towns were bedroom communities. The residents were expected to drive away from home for work, significant health care, entertainment, and the services of the community sector. In the

BONNIE GREENE is a partner in Leap of Faith Associates, a consulting firm that assists congregations in the Greater Toronto Area to adapt their culture and operations to a changing milieu. She also works at North Bramalea United Church in Brampton, Ontario. She worked for 25 years at the General Council of The United Church of Canada in social justice and congregational mission. She represented faith groups on the Voluntary Sector Roundtable and was active on the finance working group of the Voluntary Sector Initiative. Email: [greeneg755@rogers.com](mailto:greeneg755@rogers.com).

1970s and early 1980s, this made sense. These towns had populations that were well under 200,000 and could rely on the rural model of the voluntary sector – churches and a smattering of voluntary associations or government-organized NGOs.

Those days are long gone. In their wake came the visionary developers of the 1970s who built entire towns on traditional urban planning principles and then went bankrupt in the squeeze between their development plans and the municipalities' capacity to service the land. In their wake came developers dedicated to building houses and municipal planners whose priorities were traffic, water mains, and tax revenue. Beyond worship sites, no one had the community sector in mind.

The land squeeze became intense after 2005, when the province of Ontario laid out its plan to create a Green Belt and to manage growth in south central Ontario over the next 30 years. The former small towns and rural villages clustered around the City of Toronto are part of the Smart Growth strategy of the province.<sup>1</sup> These towns have mostly grown up from the consolidation of scores of rural villages. Today they are home to hundreds of thousands of people, including huge numbers of new immigrants. Traditional voluntary sector groups and networks are limited; the organizations that immigrants need and establish tend to work off the ends of kitchen tables, far below the sightlines of the rest of us.

In the provincial plan these towns were designated for “intensification” or population growth to a target set by the province. For example, in the town where I live, that means growing from 175,000 in the mid-1980s to 860,000 people in just a few years from now. The province's goals are worthy and far-reaching: reduce urban sprawl and automobile emissions, preserve farmland, and create a livable space for an additional four million residents. However, the consequences of intensification as a direction became clear overnight. Land prices escalated, as did the need for municipal tax revenues to service housing for the newcomers. Planners were pressed to find more land for industrial, commercial, and residential purposes.

It wasn't clear for some time what the impact would be on social space. However, over the past five years I have given a great deal of attention to this question, as a result of two projects that I have been involved in that came up against the new reality: a rapidly-growing population to be served, a lack of community sector organizations, and a shrinking social space. These projects offer some initial lessons about tackling the social space question that are worth thinking about more seriously than the sector has been able to do in the past.

PROJECT 1:

**FINDING LAND FOR A NONPROFIT IN A NEW URBAN ENVIRONMENT**

About 10 years ago, the Brampton, Ontario, church that I work for was challenged to walk with two families whose 18-month-old boys developed neuroblastoma at the same time. Accompanying those families through 18 months of treatment took the congregation deep into the world of cancer. One of the early lessons was that the long drive to treatment and services in Toronto was undermining the patients' strength for their struggle.

The church members who did the driving decided this situation needed to change, so they set out to bring the broader cancer support community to their town. In 2005, they launched an “Evening of Hope” at the beginning of Cancer Month for patients, families, the oncology unit at the hospital, caregivers, hospice workers, cancer support groups, and patient self-help groups. This Evening of Hope brought people and community sector organizations together in ways that hadn’t been possible in the past. Community sector groups did the driving this time – from their offices outside of town to the home turf of the patients.

In the debriefing after the evening, the organizers realized that cancer patients deserved more than one night a year. They decided to bring a cancer support centre to their town – a place that would support patients around the clock all year long. They settled on Wellspring, a cancer support organization that relies on community-generated support rather than on government grants. Wellspring requires the community to create a well-appointed space where patients and their families can get connected with all the resources that will help. Wellspring also asked that we raise \$3 million for an operating reserve to ensure sustainability.

The church joined a handful of cancer survivors, their relatives, some cancer volunteers, and an oncologist to form the committee that would build a new sector organization. It soon became clear just how big the challenge would be. Wellspring would need space, but the vast majority of land was already designated industrial, commercial, or residential. Institutional land was almost non-existent —certainly not for uses other than schools, municipal recreation centres or worship sites. What little land existed was far beyond the means of a church and a handful of committed volunteers.

The only option was to get a housing developer to donate a small piece of land for a house. One man, whose wife had died of cancer, agreed to donate a house-sized piece of land. Another developer agreed to build a very large home on the land to act as the Wellspring Cancer Support Centre. And so a tiny plot of social space – other than a church – was created in a land-scarce city because a couple of developers stepped up with a social contribution.

Regional government was wary of helping, lest it set a precedent for other nonprofits. It therefore charged development service fees as if this were a for-profit organization rather than a community sector charity. The city government, however, allowed this small piece of land to be rezoned and made a small grant to offset the development service charge.

Today the community agency created by this project is up and running and enjoys enormous support from the community. In part, this is because there were no deep pockets to rely on for operating costs. People of very modest means had to use every contact they had to build community buy-in and raise funds.

The coalition remains intact, including the church. The private sector partners were happy to provide support, but their contribution was as donors to phase one rather than as coalition members.

One factor in making this partnership work was surely that the community was basically “virgin territory” for non-traditional community sector organizations. There were few

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large organizations conducting substantial fundraisers, which meant that donors weren't being hit by many sector organizations simultaneously. Another factor was that cancer touches nearly everyone at some point in their lives. Had the coalition's issue been homelessness or a group home for young offenders, the results might have been far different.

Some people would argue that this partnership only reinforced the old charity model of "financing" the sector. I agree with that critique. However, the coalition used the only social space assets available to it – those of a church – to get people working together for the common good and to establish a non-church community organization in the town.

Others would object to having faith groups at the table alongside other community sector groups. In the past, I might have agreed with that. However, because a traditional planning framework prevails, only the church had the space to convene large groups of people for the common good.

Given the land squeeze, the traditional model of urban development – essentially the charity model with respect to social space – will be with us for a long time to come. (See the description of the second project that follows for a fuller elaboration of this point.) The gulf between the faith groups and the rest of the community sector will need to be overcome or the community sector's growth will be stunted in very large cities around the country.

#### PROJECT 2:

#### **PUBLIC POLICY AND THE SHRINKING OF SOCIAL SPACE**

Even the traditional model of urban planning ensured a certain amount of social space, if only for schools, hospitals, recreation centres, and worship sites. However, the land squeeze has made even that model too generous for urban planners dealing with intensification as a policy goal. Official plans have to maximize industrial, commercial, and residential use and limit the amount of institutional land available. Since the need for hospitals, schools, and municipal buildings grows as population grows, the only land to reduce is the space available for non-governmental organizations. In the traditional urban planning framework, this usually means reducing land set aside for churches.

Already short of institutional land – or of groups that could afford to buy it and build on it – the City of Brampton saw an opportunity to increase industrial land by, in part, reducing worship sites. The assumption of planners was that fewer people went to church. However, as a result of the flow of immigrants in the 1990s, planners began to get pressure for worship sites from new population groups whose needs didn't necessarily fit the European models. For many years, new religious groups had been told they could rent space in industrial buildings or commercial space in strip malls, at much higher cost.

However, after the province adopted its Smart Growth strategy in 2005, that practice came into conflict with the "intensification" directive. The city felt enormous pressure to increase the amount of land that would produce jobs and generate revenue for its services. Faith groups that had been allowed in the industrial sites were asked to give them up within three years. City staff assumed that this would allow the groups enough time to raise the money to buy commercial or residential land in the built-up areas of the city – assuming a developer would give it up. In reality, however, the faith groups that tried to

comply found they were falling farther behind. No one could afford land at the escalating prices, not even long-established groups. Nor were developers willing to release it.

The city decided to deal with the issue by conducting a places-of-worship study.<sup>2</sup> It would use its policy instruments to establish a fair plan within the growth framework. The study would deal with parking and traffic, the locations where “worship sites” could be located, how many would be in the official plan, and financial matters such as taxes and fees.

At first city officials tried to relate to faith groups through an advisory group of religious leaders, picked by city officials themselves. However, it became apparent to that group that the city had lost sight of the need to build a community in which all the residents could meet their needs, including their religious needs. Instead, its major concerns were tax revenues and traffic. This group tried to press the bigger vision but felt that it was being dismissed. As well, a draft report prepared by a consultant had involved only extremely limited consultation with the faith groups. That sparked a revolt in the religious community.

And so a unique coalition was formed – the Brampton Multi-Faith Coalition. It was extremely broad, including traditional churches like United, Anglican, Nazarene, Alliance, and Pentecostal, as well as Hindu, South Asian Christian, Muslim, and independent Afro-Canadian congregations. Formed in a moment of crisis, this coalition could have been adversarial and self-serving. Instead, it became a positive force in policy discussions, for two reasons: 1) religion was far more important to the citizens than today’s city planners realized; and 2) the Coalition had taken the time to allow its member organizations to get to know everything they could about the social services each was providing. Faith groups with roots in Europe got to know faith groups from India, Pakistan, Africa, the Caribbean, and Korea. Instead of arguing for their own narrow interests, they had built a sense of unity out of a commitment to their neighbours, regardless of faith.

The Coalition discovered early on that every group was providing emergency food supplies, transit, and clothing for people whose welfare and disability cheques didn’t stretch for a full month. They also learned about actions that went on with no publicity. The Sikhs, for example, offered a meal to anyone who needed one, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, no questions asked. The Afro-Caribbean communities were doing gang-diversion in ways few others would have the courage to undertake. The public stereotype was that these people were all focused on politics back home or on getting to heaven. In reality, they, like more traditional religious groups, were doing the work the whole city needed to make the community a liveable place.<sup>3</sup>

Some members of the Coalition tried traditional advocacy by approaching politicians with a long list of their social contribution to the city: youth recreation programs, gang diversion, working with addicts and the homeless, support for battered women and their kids, addiction support, prisoner reintegration – every service imaginable.

The Multi-Faith Coalition had to move its members beyond quiet diplomacy at a certain point. It hired both a lawyer and an independent urban planner to help it engage in the planning process. At a public meeting with elected politicians and city staff in June 2009, the changing political map was immediately apparent. Two thirds of the hundreds of citizens who showed up at public meetings were relatively recent arrivals from South Asia and the

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Caribbean. The politicians and officials sitting at the front were all offspring of immigrants who had arrived 60-100 years ago from Northern Europe. The tension in the room and the visuals were apparent to the mayor, who immediately intervened to announce that particularly contentious proposals from city staff would not be passed by politicians. This changed the dynamics in the relationship between the community and government, allowing dialogue to take place, with the Coalition representing the faith groups. The mayor also announced that the community had to succeed with this plan because all municipalities in the Greater Toronto Area were watching to see how they could adapt it to their communities.

The public meetings continue, and a final policy is still pending. The Coalition has been able to make gains in dealing with social space issues within the framework and policy instruments used by the city.

That does not mean that all is well for social space so long as faith groups learn how to work with others in the community sector. The city's official plan has no mandate to provide for community organizations in future, and the study now contains a policy proposal that will profoundly affect social space for everyone by reducing the total amount of space available within the official plan. The formula for designating "worship sites" for citizens will shift from the traditional ratio of one site for every 2500 people to one for every 10,000 people. Because the only designated social space in the community is worship space, this policy directly affects the future of community sector organizations. The space saved in the institutional class will be available for government, schools, and hospitals or will allow for more space for commercial, industrial, and residential purposes. None of us understood what was happening. And it's difficult to see how that bigger issue could have been addressed given the invisibility of the provincial sector in the planning processes of all levels of government.

Meanwhile, regional government was active on another front that also affected the social space issue. In 2007, the Region of Peel passed a bylaw that, among many other things, allowed for the application of development charges to additions or new-builds done by churches and other nonprofits. In the bylaw, these organizations remain on a list of organizations that are potentially exempt from the charges. However, the language used allows assessors to calculate exemptions only on a sanctuary. Rooms for religious education are taxable, as is space for soup kitchens, food banks, etc. This means that churches and other nonprofits are subject to development service charges as if they were commercial developers. The amounts tend to be upwards of 10% of the total cost of the building. The money is redistributed to school boards and of other local government functions.

The impact has already been felt. As a result of the bylaw, even older, bigger churches can scarcely afford to build the space they would most want to share with other community groups. The effect is even greater on groups associated with recent immigrants. In one part of the city, the religious groups that are building on the few remaining worship sites have been required to join the commercial developers' group, at a fee of thousands of dollars per group. At a later stage, the fee for these groups will rise to hundreds of thousands, making it prohibitive for everyone, churches and community sector organizations alike.

No one sat down to plot the demise of older religious groups or to shut the door on newer groups such as Sikhs, Muslims, or Hindus. Instead, a failure to recognize that the

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community sector exists and contributes to cities meant that traditional planning tools and small policy initiatives converged just at the time when there was an urgent need for municipal and regional revenue. Land has become the scarcest commodity – far beyond the means of the community sector. A very high price is already being paid.

#### AN AGENDA ON SOCIAL SPACE FOR THE COMMUNITY SECTOR

In this space, I can only offer a few lessons to get the discussion of social space on our agenda and to highlight the need for coalitions and collaboration in addressing this issue.

1. Social space is a scarcer commodity than money for the community sector. We need a well-articulated rationale and a strategy to convince municipal and regional officials to designate community sector space, not just worship sites, in our city plans.
2. We urgently need new financing models that would allow community sector organizations to be established, even in land-scarce communities.
3. Faith groups that already have space could make an enormous contribution to social peace by finding new ways of using worship sites so that newer faith groups without land have a chance to develop. Existing worship sites will need to look seriously at how their spaces could be adapted physically to accommodate both a congregation and, say, a community sector centre.

It won't be easy, but it needs to be done.

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#### NOTES

1. The towns include Mississauga, Brampton, Woodbridge, Vaughn, Markham, Richmond Hill, Ajax, Pickering, Whitby. Of course, Toronto is also designated for further intensification. Other towns beyond the Green Belt zone are also affected. See “The Greenbelt Act, 2005” and the “Places to Grow Act, 2005,” and *Places to Grow: Better Choices, Brighter Future: Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, 2006*. Ministry of Public Infrastructure Renewal, Province of Ontario. These and related documents are available on the provincial website through the Ontario Growth Secretariat. For earlier philosophical discussions, see also: “Putting the Urban in Suburban: The Modern Art and Business of Placemaking: Proceedings of a One-Day Conference,” Urban Planning Institute, CMHC, Town of Markham, the Institute of Professional Planners, et al. February 2003.
2. Major documents relevant to this process are available at the City of Brampton website under Projects and Studies, in particular: Places of Worship Discussion Paper, 2007, 2008; Staff Information Report, February 20, 2008. Places of Worship Policy Review Staff Report, April 20, 2009.
3. A study of Ontario religious congregations conducted by two American academics found that every congregation contributes an *average* of \$145,000 per year in cash and in-kind funds to the social support of its community. See “Comparing Neighbors: Social Service Provision by Religious Congregations in Ontario and the United States,” Femida Handy and Ram A. Cnaan, *The American Review of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 30, Issue 4, 2000, pp 521-543; also posted at ScholarlyCommons@Penn (University of Pennsylvania)