

# VILLAGE GHETTO LAND

## Myth, Social Conditions, and Housing Policy in Parkdale, Toronto, 1879–2000

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The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how historical narratives such as wealthy “suburb,” declining “slum,” and resurgent “village” can have little basis in the social conditions of the time they purport to represent, yet be used to justify urban policy and planning decisions. In a case study of Parkdale, Toronto, we show how a history of the neighborhood was constructed in the 1970s by using a selective reading of the historic record, and then show how this mythical narrative has recently been used to legitimize the gentrification of the neighborhood. We also construct an alternative narrative of persistent housing diversity in the face of opposition over 125 years, which might justify a different set of local government policies that recognizes the continuity of inexpensive rental housing options and seeks to preserve and enhance these options.

*Keywords:* Parkdale; Toronto; gentrification; housing; discourse; historiography

**Both private sector marketing** and government policy processes of gentrification require justificatory historical narratives of past harmony, present decline, and future regeneration. Like an earlier generation that “invented blight” to justify urban renewal (Fogelson 2001), gentrification requires a “lost golden age,” followed by a “threat to the community” (such as urban renewal), requiring action by both the state and individuals to ensure a return to past glories. In order to produce these narratives, inconvenient facts and

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AUTHORS' NOTE: *Carolyn Whitzman wishes to acknowledge the assistance of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, who funded her research with Doctoral Fellowship #752-2001-1056. Tom Slater wishes to thank the Leverhulme Trust, who funded his research in Toronto. Both authors thank Professor Richard Harris, Dr. William Jenkins, and three anonymous reviewers for comments on earlier drafts.*

URBAN AFFAIRS REVIEW, Vol. 41, No. 5, May 2006 673-696

DOI: 10.1177/1078087405284673

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differing opinions must be lost or left behind. In his lavishly detailed chronicle of the “discourse of urban decline” in the United States, Beauregard (2003) argues that it is *ambivalence* that best characterizes American attitudes toward cities, something produced and sustained by narratives of growth and decline, reward and sacrifice, celebration and disappointment; for Beauregard, these are “*the* dialectics of urban change” (p. 241). It is through close attention to ambivalent attitudes and contradictory accounts of urban places that one can understand the remarkable power of subsequent discourses, the competing, overlapping narratives of progress and regress that constitute its subtexts, and the destructive consequences of discourses materialized in the urban landscape.

In the era immediately following World War II, the belief that residential neighborhoods inevitably declined led to government policies of slum clearance and urban renewal that destroyed viable communities (Berman 1982; Jackson 1985). As private and public reinvestment in central residential neighborhoods increased in the 1970s and 1980s, a new group of myths arose. Neil Smith (1996) demonstrates how the Lower East Side of New York City was described by marketers, the media, and government agencies as a space devoid of meaning and identity, its working-class history and geography almost completely erased, to make way for an advancing frontier of new settlement. More commonly, neighborhoods undergoing gentrification have been described by marketers as places with a special history that is in the process of being “rediscovered” by new residents (Peel 1995; Mills 1993; Miller 2001). Some of the most recent scholarship on gentrification has shown the remarkable power of myth-making in paving the way for capital reinvestment, and ultimately residential displacement (Taylor 2003; Curran 2004; Blomley 2004).

The question of how and to what extent marketing, media, academic, and resident narratives feed into government policy is highly controversial. John Metzger’s study of the impact of the neighborhood life cycle theory on U.S. midcentury housing policy was fiercely disputed by one of the authors of that housing policy, Anthony Downs, as well as other commentators in *Housing Policy Debate* (Metzger 2000; Downs 2000; Galster 2000; Temkin 2000; Lang 2000). Kenneth Temkin, in particular, contests the claim that policy has been the product of prevalent discourses, or that theories of neighborhood change have legitimated or directed policy (Temkin 2000, 55–56). Temkin, along with Metzger’s other critics, contends that urban policy responded to independently verifiable realities, not ideas or prejudices. The debate is reminiscent of the reaction to Alan Mayne’s dissection of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century slum literature in Australia, the United States, and England, which he analyzed as “myths . . . constructs of the imagination” and

an excuse for “inner city redevelopment schemes” (Mayne 1993: 1, 8). David Englander was one reviewer who contended that Mayne was merely exhibiting postmodern trendiness in dismissing the historical reality of slums. According to Englander, urban reform movements were responding to actual conditions, not stereotypes gleaned from the imagination (Englander 1994).

But, in our opinion, it is not enough to uncover and describe shifting discourses of neighborhood character and change. This article uses sources such as assessment and land registry records, newspaper articles, and local government council minutes and reports, to construct an alternative narrative—a “noir planning history” in the words of Sandercock (1998)—of persistent housing diversity in the face of opposition over 125 years. This narrative suggests that one neighborhood’s labels over time of well-to-do “suburb,” declining “slum,” and resurgent “village” had little basis in social conditions. We will show how the existing narrative of stability, sudden negative change, and reclamation (or investment, disinvestment, and reinvestment, to give it an economic rather than a cultural turn) was constructed in the 1970s, using a selective reading of the historic record. The overall purpose of this article is to demonstrate how the alternative narrative of a neighborhood’s history might justify a different set of policies, one that recognizes the continuity of inexpensive rental housing options and seeks to preserve and enhance these options.

### **THE HIDDEN HOUSING HISTORY OF PARKDALE**

In order to illustrate how narratives of decline and regeneration are constructed, often in contradiction to historical data, and how narratives influence housing and planning policy, we have chosen to describe a neighborhood whose history exemplifies a common stereotype of a gentrifying area: middle class in origin, declining to poverty and decay in the mid-twentieth century, and now at the brink of possible revival. Parkdale is a neighborhood in west central Toronto, about six kilometers west of downtown. The neighborhood is often further broken down into North and South Parkdale, with the dividing line being the main commercial thoroughfare of Queen Street. South of Queen Street, 93% of households rent their accommodation, while North Parkdale’s proportion of renters is 64%, still well above the Toronto census metropolitan area average of 37%. According to the 2001 census, Parkdale’s population of 35,016 is among the poorest in Toronto, with a median household income of \$34,491, well below the census metropolitan area’s average of \$59,502.

The current historical narrative of Parkdale is that it was an affluent and untroubled community of large Victorian houses for the first half of the twentieth century. Then it was beset by the catastrophes of urban renewal: an expressway cutting off the neighborhood's lakeside access and widespread demolition of older houses for concrete corridors of midrise apartment buildings in the 1950s and 1960s. Its new problems were exacerbated by deinstitutionalization of thousands of psychiatric patients from nearby hospitals in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the exploitation of these mostly low-income and single people by unscrupulous landlords who attempted to illegally carve up these large houses into single-room occupancy units, known as "bachelorettes."

Parkdale's historical trajectory is undisputed by both critics of gentrification (Dear and Wolch 1987) and researchers with a more equivocal response to the process (Caulfield 1994), although their explanations vary. According to Michael Dear and Jennifer Wolch (1987, 14), Parkdale's remarkable concentration of single-room occupancy dwellings, almost half of Toronto's total by the early 1980s, was due to its location in the "zone of transition," close to the center of the city and near psychiatric services. Jon Caulfield (1994, 33), in his book on gentrification in Toronto, contends that Parkdale was a "less fortunate middle class area," somehow "unluckier" than other neighborhoods that were able to resist urban renewal. Their explanations of the neighborhood's apparent decline thus run the gamut from the inexorable structures of invasion and succession to the pure agency of luck.

According to business and residents' associations and Toronto's planning department, a new generation of homeowners began to fight to preserve the historical character of Parkdale Village in the early 1970s and prevent the community from being transformed into a "social service ghetto." After a long and hard community struggle, Parkdale is on the way to becoming a trendy yet diverse urban village of the twenty-first century (Parkdale Liberty Economic Development Committee 2000). Since the mid-1980s, newspapers, magazines, and Web sites have regularly proclaimed that Parkdale is the "next Hot Area for middle class renovators" (Toronto Life, November 1984); that "the bachelorettes and grubby rooming houses are being . . . brought back to life by proud homeowners" (*The Parkdale Gazette*, September 1994); that its "colourful" and "funky" spaces with "incredible access" to central Toronto and the waterfront have "cleaned up a lot" (*Real Estate News*, September 6, 1991); and ultimately that "Parkdale is a small town in the heart of the city" (<http://Toronto-underground.com>, accessed September 6, 2002). According to tenants' associations, advocates for low-income people, and more left-wing writers, Parkdale began a "social cleansing" project in the 1970s that continues to this day (*Eye Magazine*, October 29, 1998) and that

its “‘revitalization’ is a code word for gentrification” (*Toronto Star*, November 16, 1998). What neither side disputes is that Parkdale “began its life as a moderately wealthy suburb for refined Anglo-Saxons” and remained stable and middle class until the middle of the twentieth century (*Globe and Mail*, September 13, 1980).

As in most other North American and Australian cities, nineteenth-century suburbs in Toronto were a diverse group of settlements, in terms of land use and socioeconomic diversity (Harris and Lewis 1998). However, and again like many other suburbs, promoters in Parkdale preferred to emphasize its wealth and exclusivity. From the time of its first settlement, Parkdale was described by newspapers (there were daily columns written by journalists resident to the suburb in at least two local newspapers), early real estate advertising, and books promoting the city as “a village of very aristocratic pretensions, suburban to Toronto” (*The Globe*, May 17, 1879). Its proximity to Lake Ontario was advertised as healthful and pleasant in an early directory of well-to-do residents, while the “attractive homes” and streets “kept in good repair, and ornamented with young trees” testified to good municipal management (Scott 1881, 1–5). An 1884 book, *Toronto Past and Present*, published by a local newspaper, described it as “one of the pleasantest of our suburbs . . . rapidly being filled up with handsome private residences and villas” (Mulaney 1884, 257). Four of five railway lines that bisected downtown Toronto’s waterfront curved northward at Parkdale’s eastern boundary, providing easy transportation access while preserving its waterfront for residential development. The area was subdivided in the early 1870s and developed rapidly between its incorporation as a separate village in 1879 and its annexation by the City of Toronto in 1889. The construction of the Toronto Industrial Exhibition (later the Canadian National Exhibition) at Parkdale’s southeastern edge in 1879, followed by a flurry of apartment building along Parkdale’s commercial thoroughfares in the 1910s and the development of a lakeshore drive and amusement park at Sunnyside along Parkdale’s southwestern border in 1922, heralded a new identity for Parkdale as a lively activity center for young people.

But was Parkdale a stable, affluent village by the lake throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Tax assessment rolls, street directories, fire insurance atlases, censuses, land registry records, and other historical documents suggest otherwise. While the majority of newspaper articles and books published in the 1880s were exemplars of boosterism, praising Parkdale’s socioeconomic and moral status as the “Flowery Suburb,” the 1881 tax assessment rolls indicate that the most common occupation of 216 household heads in the new village was “railwayman.” In all, a little over one-third of household heads could be classified as skilled laborers. Another third

were self-employed small businessmen, including “agents” for manufacturers, owners of dry-goods stores, and saloon and boarding house keepers. Street directories, which give the work places of most male heads of household, suggest that only one-sixth of residents, clerical and business/professional workers, commuted downtown to work. The number of skilled “mechanics” is hardly surprising, considering Parkdale’s location adjacent to five railway lines, as well as its proximity to the major industrial conglomeration of the former “Garrison Reserve” and Toronto’s three largest institutions (Central Prison, a woman’s reformatory, and the Ontario Lunatic Asylum). By the 1891 assessment, the proportion of skilled laborers had increased to over 40% of household heads, which was slightly higher than the average in the central city. There was tension between the two main political “parties” in the developing suburb, one advocating planning controls and “slow growth,” the other supporting rapid development of affordable housing and industry. While the independent municipality of Parkdale initially rejected applications for industries, by 1883, they were offering tax inducements to the Gutta Percha Rubber Company, the Toronto Stove Manufacturing Company, and other industries to locate within its borders (Parkdale Council minutes, 1883).

Many of Parkdale’s landowners were the widows and other female inheritors of the original estates, and there were regular complaints at Council meetings about low-end housing options offered by female developers anxious for quick revenue, such as the “tenements” (rowhouses) being constructed by the widow Virtue in January 1881. Regular Parkdale Council attempts to control low-cost housing were ignored by local developers, such as a bylaw banning rough-cast housing that resulted in no charges being laid. In the annexation debate with Toronto throughout 1888, both sides appealed to working-class freeholders. *The World* newspaper, a supporter of union with Toronto, published two suspiciously similar letters from “A Workman” and “A Carpenter,” both arguing that they were worried about tax increases should the municipality remain separate, and contending that annexation would result in “more [building] work to be done by men like me, and instead of having to pay streetcar fare to our work as we have to now, we will have plenty of work at home” (September 27 and October 13, 1888). J. J. Ward, a Parkdale councillor and leader in the labor movement, claimed at several meetings that Parkdale provided good cheap accommodation, whereas in Toronto, “you can’t show me a house . . . with a \$6 [monthly] rent” (*The Mail*, October 18, 1888).

After annexation, the 1890s recession led to a slowdown in working-class home construction in Parkdale, and by 1901, business and professional people made up 40% of total household heads. Yet a sampling of land registry records suggests that institutional investment had precipitously declined.

While over 60% of properties along six streets had loans from banks and mortgage companies in 1881, only a little over 20% of properties were covered by institutional mortgages 20 years later. Many of the wealthy homes in the 1890s may have been paid for in cash or in short-term loans, but the growing number of privately organized vendor loans, a common Toronto phenomenon throughout much of the twentieth century (Murdie 1991), offers another explanation, as does the growth in institutional investment at the new urban periphery (Paterson 1991). In other words, institutional disinvestment occurred at the time that Parkdale was at its wealthiest, a phenomenon surely not unique to Parkdale, yet an issue that urban historians or gentrification theorists have not necessarily addressed.

Housing construction began to heat up again by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, with modest semidetached residences springing up on the streets of North Parkdale. But many large undeveloped sites in South Parkdale were being used for apartment house construction, while numerous villas constructed in the 1890s were already being divided into two or three flats. Richard Dennis, who has written about Toronto's first apartment boom, points out that developers were keen to locate their apartments in perceived high-status areas, such as Parkdale. By 1915, Parkdale contained 10 large (20 or more unit) apartment buildings, one third of Toronto's total, mostly on the commercial streets of Queen and King. Another 22 smaller apartment buildings, three- or six-suite purpose-built flats or villa conversions, had been built on side streets (Dennis 1989, 1998).

In retrospect, it is hard to comprehend the moral panic occasioned by these apartment buildings. The apartments were well designed, built with good materials and up-to-date plumbing, housed mostly clerical and sales staff, according to the 1913 and 1921 tax assessment rolls, and either filled in vacant lots or preserved the facades of existing villas. Yet newspapers and government reports reacted with horror and indignation to these "tenements," even though they had virtually nothing in common with the standard housing in New York or London. Throughout the spring of 1912, *The Globe* ran a series of strongly worded editorials condemning the "plague of disease-breeding tenements" disguised under the name of "apartment houses," threats to "morals as well as health" that would result in "a city of stunted children and unhappy adults" (March 5, April 4, May 3, 1914). In May 1912, after a public health report on "slum housing" focused on the dual threat of "foreign lodging houses" and "tenement buildings," a motion to ban apartment houses from all but a few commercial streets was unanimously adopted by Toronto City Council. Politicians pronounced that apartment houses were "breeders of slums," "chicken coops," and more damaging to property values "than any institution in the city" (Dennis 1989, 36–37). Yet in

the two years following the bylaw's enactment, apartment house construction in Parkdale increased, with site exemptions being granted in approximately half of the cases brought forth by developers (Dennis 1989). Slum rhetoric had thus already been applied to Parkdale when over half of household heads were businessmen, professionals, and clerical workers, and when property transactions recorded in land registry rolls suggest that real estate prices were finally beginning to recover from the 1890s slump. Parkdale was not being singled out as a slum neighborhood at this point, but concerns about central-city decline in Toronto were already starting to permeate its borders.

World War I accelerated a trend already noticeable in Parkdale, the neighborhood's attraction for single women and widows. By 1921, Parkdale had a higher proportion than the rest of Toronto of household heads listed as "unwaged," mostly widows and spinsters (the tax assessment rolls did not provide the paid employment, if any, of female household heads). Parkdale residents were overwhelmingly British in origin, as was the case in the rest of Toronto. However, by the 1920s, several Queen Street commercial properties were owned by resident shopkeepers of Jewish and Italian origin. Perhaps in reaction to these perceived social changes, Parkdale became the central meeting spot during the brief life of the Ku Klux Klan of Canada in the mid-1920s, with a public rally and "parade" at Parkdale Assembly Hall timed to coincide with a march on Washington in August 1925 (*Toronto Star*, August 8 and 10, 1925).

The 1930s depression and World War II exacerbated a growing trend to divide Parkdale's houses into multiple units, a conversion simplified by the large size of many of the original houses, as well as what was by then a 30-year history of being a good place to find a cheap room. By 1941, 62% of houses constructed as single-family dwellings had multiple-household occupancy, almost twice Toronto's average rate of 34%. As a function of the increase in tenants, Parkdale's homeownership plummeted, from 51% in 1931 to 14% in 1941, considerably below the Toronto average of 33%. Once again, there was an unsuccessful attempt by some residents to regulate multiple-dwelling properties, with the City of Toronto banning signs along Parkdale's residential streets. The bylaw soon failed because of the number of doctor's offices forced to remove their signs, and in the meantime, the resident who had made the initial complaint had placed a "room to rent" sign of his own in his front window (*The Globe*, April 19, 1932). By 1934, the Lieutenant-Governor's Report on Housing Conditions, a typical response to Depression-era conditions in cities (Beauregard 2003), inveighed against "the 'bad areas' of Toronto," including Parkdale. According to the report,

Parkdale's housing problem is the result of the economic deterioration of what was formerly a prosperous district of quite large, substantial houses. Into these houses are now crowded a vastly greater number of families than the architects ever foresaw. Many of these families are of foreign origin. . . . While it is the least undesirable of the three districts we are describing, it is fast becoming a serious slum. (Bruce 1934, 23)

This brief review of Parkdale's late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century housing history demonstrates a far more complex picture than the stable, affluent suburb depicted in popular and policy understandings and recent representations. From the first, Parkdale's residents were diverse, as were the variety of housing types built to accommodate these residents. The majority of Parkdale's houses were subdivided into flats or rooming houses by the late 1930s, there was a high proportion of female heads of households, and the neighborhood had a concentration of small apartment buildings. Rhetoric presented by local government, newspapers, and pressure groups such as the Ku Klux Klan of Canada railed against the social impacts of multiple unit housing, which included "invasion by foreigners" and threat to the nuclear family. Regular attempts to regulate this housing diversity—bylaws regulating housing materials, banning apartment buildings, and removing "for rent" signs—proved unsuccessful. Far from being a sudden intrusion into Parkdale's leafy streets of harmony and stability, urban renewal had been legitimized through 40 years of slum rhetoric.

### RENOVATING HISTORY IN PARKDALE: THE 1970s

In the 1950s and 1960s, Toronto became a prime site for modernist urban planning experimentation, and was subject to physical and social restructuring on a scale comparable to the huge upheavals being experienced in many large American cities at the same time (Kipfer and Keil 2002). A content analysis of articles in the *Toronto Star* and the *Globe and Mail* from 1959–1962 allowed Pierre Filion (1999, 428) to put forward this precise summary of what happened to a central city labeled by slum rhetoric:

Consistent with modernism's antitraditionalism, planning visions of the period turned their back on the prewar urban form, depicted as ill-suited to the prevailing preferences and needs because of traffic congestion, inadequate parking, deteriorating housing conditions and insufficient green space. The spread of slums was indeed an obsession with the time which sanctioned the call for extensive redevelopment and revitalization efforts. Urban renewal advocates went so far as to recommend elimination of 18,000 units—virtually all existing housing—from central Toronto.

In Parkdale, urban renewal took the form of Toronto's first urban expressway bisecting the neighborhood, resulting in the destruction of 180 houses and the displacement of more than 700 lakeside residents (*Toronto Star*, May 4, 1954; Reeves 1993). From the late 1950s onward, dozens of older houses were being torn down for apartment buildings, with financial help from federal housing programs (Kaplan 1982, Bacher 1993). Two large public housing projects were also developed in the neighborhood. By 1967, a draft neighborhood plan suggested the demolition of most of the remaining housing in southeast Parkdale, which would complete the transition to a high-rise apartment district.

But an equal and opposite force was also building in the neighborhood. As in other parts of Toronto's central city, "a discordant voice came from ratepayer organizations objecting to the high cost of expressway construction as well as to its adverse impacts on neighborhoods—noise, expropriation and falling property values" (Filion 1999, 431). After a hiatus of 50 years, the South Parkdale Ratepayer's Association (SPRA) was revived in the mid-1960s, led by a well-known architect who extolled the virtues of the area's older houses. The SPRA's initial concerns included declining businesses, heavy car and truck traffic in the neighborhood, and the preservation of the area's older houses. They were able to achieve several short-term victories, such as banning track traffic exiting the expressway from the Parkdale off-ramp onto residential streets and getting new trees planted where they had been removed for street widening. They also pursued a longer-term neighborhood preservation plan that would promote the area's fine houses and "elite" history (*Real Estate News*, November 1973), which must be considered in the context of a "fixation with property values" (Filion 1999, 431) that has been noted in a more detailed treatment of neighborhood organizations in Canada (Hasson and Ley 1994). By 1970, a local alderman had been elected based on his involvement with the SPRA and the local chapter of the New Democratic Party (Canada's social democratic party). That year, the Parkdale Community Coalition was formed, with representation from the SPRA, religious organizations, and local community service providers, funding for a part-time community worker to build links between agencies, and a community newspaper. The *Globe and Mail* newspaper announced the formation of this "coalition for a village that lost its identity" (November 17, 1970).

This new coalition bore resemblances to the loose group who first promoted Parkdale 100 years earlier. Like the earlier group, there were a high proportion of journalists, real estate agents, and speculators out for a good bargain newly moved to Parkdale. However, at least in its early stages, the Parkdale Community Coalition also included large numbers of social service workers, legal aid providers, municipal employees, and other putatively left-

wing activists also newly resident to the area. These broad-based resident coalitions were not unusual at this phase of community activism, in Toronto and in other Canadian cities (Caulfield 1994). As was true 100 years earlier, there were growing tensions between those who supported development of more affordable housing and those who preferred neighborhood protection policies.

The new community newspaper, the *Parkdale Citizen*, ran a feature on local history every month as part of an effort to develop and redefine local identity and improve neighborhood spirit. These often featured interviews with long-time residents whose oral histories were presumed to provide an accurate rendering of the past. For instance, 80-year-old Ethel Abel told of how when she “first came to the house on Cowan Avenue in which she still resides, it was an area of relative wealth and pleasant surroundings” (*Parkdale Citizen*, September 1971). “Our neighbours were mainly professional people, lawyers, doctors, retired academics, and so on,” she was quoted as saying, and this quote was repeated in later newspaper articles (*Sunday Sun*, February 27, 1977) and in a 1983 City of Toronto planning department report (City of Toronto 1983: 21). The only problem is that when her memoirs are compared with street directory and assessment records, a quite different version of her early life emerges. Abel’s father owned a downtown tailor shop until 1893 or 1894, when the business went bankrupt during the 1890s depression. At that point, he became the head tailor at the Central Prison, and the family moved to their house in Parkdale. The 1898 *Might’s Directory* lists their immediate neighbors as four men working for the Canadian Pacific Railway, two traveling salesmen, a lineman for Bell Telephone, and a telephone operator at a hotel. While Abel senior might be considered a senior civil servant, her neighbors were certainly not “professional people.” By the turn of the century, the Abels were renting out at least a part of their 12-room house, which by the 1930s had become a full boarding house. Rather than Abel’s narrative becoming a story of residential stability and middle-class affluence, as it was used, it can be seen as an example of the lengths some Parkdale families went to in preserving an image of gentility in the face of financial challenge.

Developing a local history infrastructure continued to be a vital part of the community revitalization process in Parkdale. In April 1973, the Parkdale Baptist Church sponsored a Historic Night, and by the following year, the *Citizen* was reporting on meetings of the Parkdale Local History Club (*Parkdale Citizen* April 1973, May 1974). In 1976, a nonprofit Parkdale Village Foundation was created to channel funds for a 1979 celebration of the centennial of Parkdale’s incorporation as a separate village. In the same year, a \$1 million Neighborhood Improvement Program grant went toward creating a

fountain and benches at “the historic centre of Parkdale” and to develop *Parkdale: a centennial history* (Parkdale Centennial Research Committee 1979). In the lead-up to the centennial celebrations, the *Toronto Star*, in an article entitled “The passing years have seen Parkdale’s slow fall from grace,” reported:

The past is present again for the three young women in t-shirts and jeans . . . Morning ’til night, they work over faded photographs, ancient land surveys, old records . . . Not a word is spoken about Parkdale’s current blights: illegal bachelorettes, oppressive traffic, more and more transients . . . It’s Parkdale’s centennial celebration this year, and hope for the future is being sought through a backward glance at the neighborhood’s romantic and optimistic beginnings. (June 17, 1979)

The pattern of the past suggested in *Parkdale: a centennial history* and newspaper articles of the time had mythic resonances. The affluent past was repeatedly referred to as a state of grace, not only in the *Toronto Star* article cited above, but numerous other articles: “Parkdale: where graciousness fell victim to the greed of progress” (*Toronto Sun*, February 27, 1977), “Parkdale . . . was possibly the only true vision of beauty that Toronto ever had” (*Globe and Mail*, September 13, 1980). Although the actual moment of the fall from grace varied somewhat, from the 1930s to the 1950s, most agreed that by the 1970s, Parkdale, with its “leafy” streets and “jewel”-like homes, had become a “dumping ground” for the poor (*Toronto Star*, June 16, 1982), the older houses “cut up into bachelorettes” filled with “two legged rats” who “sleep all day and roam the streets at night” (*Toronto Star*, April 5, 1979), “an unbearable hell not fit for decent people” (*Toronto Star*, September 14, 1980). The *Toronto Sun* said that in 1974, with the sudden growth in the number of bachelorettes (self-contained single-room apartment units with both bath and cooking facilities) “three quarters of a century of relative stability came to an end” (February 27, 1977).

But even in this slough of despond, a rebirth could be predicted by some journalists. In 1977, a *Toronto Sun* journalist in search of “chic streets” described one in Parkdale, “so quiet you can hear your footsteps at 5 o’clock” in the afternoon, with “kids setting out street hockey nets” like a scene from “a planning student cribbing Jane Jacobs” (December 2, 1977). Similarly, the *Globe and Mail*, in a two-page feature on Parkdale, described it rising “phoenix-like” out of its ashes (September 13, 1980), and two years later, quoted a long-time resident: “Parkdale is like a sleeping Cinderella waiting for a fairy godmother to wave a magic wand and bring back the good old days” (March 10, 1982).

The fairy godmother was named the City of Toronto, whose successive planning reports indicate the extent to which it was willing to accommodate a changing sense of Parkdale's history and destiny. In 1967, a draft planning report recommended a quarter of the neighborhood be rezoned for high-density residential redevelopment. At that point, the area's history was summarized as: "South Parkdale was almost completely developed by 1919." Although "generally properties are well maintained," "major repairs have not been extensive because of the area's future redevelopment." The aim of the plan was to "encourage comprehensive redevelopment," since many of the area's houses had already been destroyed and an apartment district was emerging (City of Toronto Planning Board [CTPB] 1967). This draft plan was never adopted, and in 1973, a community-based planning process was instituted. The new neighborhood plan in 1976 provided five pages of community history to justify its primary objective, "to strengthen the residential character of the neighborhood" and "limit the expansion of institutions and institution-related uses." Now Parkdale was called a suburb of the wealthy in the early twentieth century, with only a "few low rise apartments" having "little effect on physical form, environmental or social character" (CTPB 1976). In contrast to this new myth, as detailed earlier, the construction of more than 30 new apartment buildings, along with the conversion of many houses to multiple occupancy in the 1910s had been greeted with moral panic by municipal officials and newspapers. In its quest to identify 1950s urban renewal as the turning point for Parkdale, the Planning Board completely ignored historic evidence. For example, it talked about Jameson Avenue as having "no apartments" in 1955, two by 1957, 16 by 1959, and only two original houses left by 1962. Yet the six-story Kingsway Apartments and at least two other apartment buildings along Jameson are recorded in the *Might's Street Directory* of 1917, and by the 1930s, assessment and directories indicate that most Jameson addresses were rooming houses.

In the early 1970s, supported by a reform City Council, the City of Toronto adopted an ambitious land banking and public housing construction policy called *Living Room*, and assisted by federal government-limited dividend mortgages, began to buy up properties throughout the City (Lemon 1985; Caulfield 1994). There was no doubt that Parkdale got a disproportionate share of some forms of social housing during this period. One-third of the privately owned nursing homes in greater Toronto, and five of eleven group homes for psychiatric outpatients were found in South Parkdale by the early 1970s (CTPB 1974: 5). By 1975, there were 12 group homes and 11 privately operated nursing homes within Parkdale. However, all social housing initiatives—public housing, nonprofit housing, and group homes—still

accounted for less than 10% of Parkdale's total housing stock (CTPB 1976). The problem was not that there was too much social housing in Parkdale, it was that there was not enough supportive housing or indeed affordable housing being built elsewhere (Dear and Taylor 1982). By the early 1970s, there were outright bans or distance restrictions in several central city neighborhoods with similar housing stock, such as Rosedale, the Annex, and Don Vale, and many other neighborhoods had been rezoned R1A, a designation that did not allow conversion into multiple occupancy (*Toronto Star*, August 5, 1975; Lemon 1986). The City of Toronto's ambitious social housing targets were unaccompanied by an effort to challenge restrictive zoning practices in most of the central city.

By the mid-1970s, Parkdale residents' and business groups, backed by their generally left-of-center political representatives, were able to obtain their own restrictive bylaws. In 1973, North Parkdale, with a new residents' association of its own, obtained a bylaw limiting new construction to three stories or 30 feet (CTPB 1973). In 1974, "A Report on the Desirability of the Intense Proliferation of Group Homes, Rest Homes, Halfway Houses and Children's Homes in the South Parkdale Area," recommended an end to as-of-right applications for institutional use in the parts of Parkdale still zoned R4, and also placed distance restrictions on group homes. This report argued that "de-concentrating" group homes would result in "therapeutic effectiveness," a specious rationale that disregarded how few sites there were in Toronto which would allow group homes (CTPB 1974). Contrary to the impression given by panicky reports, Parkdale actually lost 25% of its rental units to owner-occupied houses in the 1970s (City of Toronto Planning Department 1980).

The City also increased restrictions on licensed rooming houses. In reaction, several rooming-house owners, as well as some property speculators who recognized the demand for small cheap units, created self-contained bachelorette apartments, explaining the sudden growth in this form of accommodation described earlier. By 1977, City officials estimated that there were 300 illegally converted buildings in South Parkdale, ranging from single units in some buildings to up to 43 in one former house. There is no doubt that many of these units were squalid and poorly maintained, although this was also true of many units in legal apartment buildings. In 1975, a Planning Board report on "Housing Low-Income Single People" recommended that 20% of all new accommodation built by the City consist of self-contained units with a minimum size of 225 feet (CTPB 1975). The City could have created new standards for small apartments and legalized apartments which met these standards, although it would have required demand-

ing changes to the provincial Building Code (in Canadian urban centers municipal decisions are often constrained by provincial legislation). It could then have cracked down on maintenance violations in all units, since it had been given provincial permission to make repairs and add the cost to the landlord's property bill, and rent controls in place at the time would have allowed small rent increases. Instead, the City responded to the rhetoric of a new resident group called the Parkdale Working Group on Bachelorettes, made up of residents and business associations along with the owners of legal rooming houses. Conspicuously absent from this coalition were more affordable housing advocates, such as Parkdale Community Legal Services, who had previously allied themselves with the residents' associations.

The antibachelorette group argued that bachelorettes "threaten the stability of family neighborhoods," "destroy streetscape," and "bring a host of social problems because of the often rowdy transients they attract as tenants" (Chair of Working Group, quoted in *The Globe and Mail*, June 25, 1979). When the Chair of the group was elected as City Councillor in 1978, the new Mayor, John Sewell, immediately passed a bylaw banning all new and converted boarding or lodging houses in Parkdale and created a Mayor's Task Force on Bachelorettes.

The decade of the 1970s is now popularly known as Canada's urban "re-form era," when the country's largest urban centers began to be viewed by commentators in academic, policy, and media circles as contrasting favorably with the large cities of the United States. Toronto's image changed soon after its 1960s regional planning strategy, including a number of highways which would have bisected many central city neighborhoods, was successfully resisted by landowners, developers, and politicians through fear of rampant urban sprawl (Kipfer and Keil 2002). Modernist planning principles were defeated in a sustained struggle involving, among others, working-class neighborhood organizations, housing activists, and liberal countercultural groups, with pronounced consequences in central city neighborhoods:

[R]ational comprehensive planning hit a wall in the inner city of Toronto. . . . Out of this struggle grew a local political culture centered in downtown and midtown neighborhoods that in the 1970s and 1980s welded social democratic currents with a strongly urbanist orientation of a liberal and "red-Tory" (socially minded conservatives) constituency. . . . Protecting inner-city neighborhoods, implementing neighborhood planning, and encouraging the construction of cooperative social housing helped change the direction and form, not the fundamental substance, of global-city formation in Toronto, facilitating, among other things, gentrification and concentrated development in the central business district. (Kipfer and Keil 2002, 239)

However, by the end of the 1970s, the differences between Red Tory neighborhood conservation activists and more left-wing housing activists was apparent (Caulfield 1994).

Absent from accounts of both the reform era and the current era of neoliberal urban governance (e.g., Keil 2002) are detailed assessments of how dominant narratives of particular neighborhoods may have sanctioned reinvestment and gentrification. The literature is particularly rich in elaborating the middle-class desiderata for settling in heritage-rich neighborhoods, in tandem with the advent of a postindustrial economy (Ley 2003) but thinner on forging links between the imagery of the past and urban transformation. Parkdale provides an excellent example of how mythical narrative constructs nourished urban policy prescriptions.

#### **THE 1980s TO PRESENT: CREATING A BALANCE BETWEEN “VILLAGE” AND “GHETTO”<sup>1</sup>**

In a continuation of early twentieth-century slum rhetoric in Parkdale, which focused on the supposed foreignness of new residents and the moral threat of multiple dwellings, late twentieth-century rhetoric stressed the strangeness and moral threat posed by bachelorette residents. The large number of psychiatric patients discharged from adjacent mental health care facilities since the early 1970s faced limited housing options in other neighborhoods with tighter zoning restrictions, so had gravitated to plentiful low-cost accommodation in Parkdale (Joseph and Hall 1985; Simmons 1990). However, a series of policy initiatives conspired to limit housing options for these residents and other low-income singles. By 1983, the City had spent \$315,000 in legal costs, with at least \$600,000 in further employee hours, to close down a total of 60 bachelorette buildings in Parkdale and dehouse approximately 300 people (*Toronto Star*, May 19, 1983; *Globe and Mail* September 9, 1986). That same year, the same planning report that cited Edith Abel saying that Parkdale had been a neighborhood of professionals called the Task Force on Bachelorettes a “success” and reiterated its aim to transform South Parkdale back into a “stable” “Urban Village on the Lake” (City of Toronto Planning and Development Department [CTPDD] 1983, 5, 17, 21, 46). A 1990 planning update expressed concern about affordable rental housing being increasingly hard to find (CTPDD 1990), but this had no influence whatsoever on the housing dilemma facing “psychiatric survivors” (Capponi 1992) who had few affordable options in the highly competitive rental market within and beyond Parkdale’s borders. In recent years, this dilemma has been made particularly acute though the policy-driven gentrifi-

cation of Parkdale (see Slater 2004 for a more detailed account of the specifics of urban policy vis-à-vis gentrification in Parkdale).

A recent article in the *Globe and Mail* (August 5, 2000) demonstrates the resilience of Parkdale's reputation as a social service "ghetto," a site for reporters to go slumming:

Temple Avenue is pure, distilled Parkdale, a street of big old brick houses that have faded from glory. Some have been carved into rooming houses, others muddled by cheap renovations. All are cast in the shadow of run-down apartment buildings on nearby streets that stand like walls, fracturing the neighborhood. A neighborhood rife with poverty, drugs, and prostitution . . . no place for a child to grow up. Broken glass and wild screaming on the street at night. Prostitutes strolling down the sidewalk. Drunks splayed on the grass asleep.

Interestingly, it is representations such as these that have guided recent urban policy toward low-income housing in the neighborhood. In December 1996, the City of Toronto passed an interim control bylaw that prohibited any rooming house/bachelorette development or conversion in the administrative Ward that contains Parkdale, pending the outcome of an area study. The results were released in July 1997, in the form of proposals entitled "Ward 2 Neighborhood Revitalization" (CTUDS 1997). An examination of the document provides insight into what the City of Toronto viewed as the principal social problem of the area—the presence of low-income single persons in single-person dwellings. The broad objective of the proposals was spelled out concisely:

To stabilize a neighborhood under stress *and restore a healthy demographic balance*, without dehousing of vulnerable populations. (CTUDS 1997, 17, emphasis added)

Here is what was unhealthy:

[T]he area has gone from a stable neighborhood, with a healthy mix of incomes and household types, to one with a *disproportionately large number of single occupancy accommodation*. [sic] (ibid., 1, emphasis added)

This characterization echoes the rhetoric of the apartment bylaw controversy of the early 1910s, where past stability was being threatened by single-occupancy accommodation. Disallowing "non-family" accommodation was once again prescribed as the remedy for this condition. Working on the assumption that "an oversupply of small units has existed for some time" (CTUDS 1997, 23), two strategies were put forward. First, a new zoning system, limiting the number of units permitted in new developments to "one or two units per lot"

and prohibiting any additional small apartments and small units. Second, plans were drawn up to deal with existing rooming houses and bachelorettes in the form of “strategic prosecutions” and possible closures of the worst properties, and enforcement of minimum health and safety standards. While the report promised that some bachelorette units would be legalized, and that “de-housed” tenants would be relocated, the question of *where* these tenants would be relocated was left unanswered.

These planning proposals ignited strong protest by a coalition of anti-poverty activist groups. The City of Toronto responded to outrage expressed in public meetings and demonstrations by inviting representatives of all “stakeholder groups” to partake in a conflict resolution process around legalization of some bachelorettes, mediated by City staff. By October 1999, the groups that participated agreed to a team of planners, building inspectors, and residents (called the Parkdale Pilot Project) reviewing the legalization of bachelorette buildings on a site-by-site basis. The key requirement to allow a landlord to continue running a rooming house or bachelorette building was that all units within it must comply with the minimum unit size of 200 square feet (CTUDS 1999, 14). However, since many bachelorette units are smaller than 200 square feet (CTPB 1976), it is inevitable that some units would be lost, with no mechanism for building more single-room occupancy units, in Parkdale or elsewhere, to pick up the slack. The 1996 ban on all new rooming houses and conversions remains in place in Parkdale, and more recent legislation has limited the amount of emergency housing shelters in any part of the City, again in the name of balance (By-Law 138-2003).

Several antipoverty groups, including the Parkdale Tenants Association and Parkdale Community Legal Services, refused involvement in the conflict resolution process, especially after a preemptive strike closed down one of the bachelorette buildings that was under discussion, dehousing approximately a dozen people (*Toronto Star*, March 11, 1999). Indeed, the Parkdale Pilot Project saw an unusual and uneasy alliance of bachelorette tenants, antipoverty activists, and the owners of the bachelorette properties on one side, with homeowners, business owners, and legal rooming-house operators (many of whom were operating equally substandard and overpriced housing) on the other side. While one antipoverty activist, John Clarke of the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, complained that planners’ talk of “revitalization” was “a code word for gentrification,” a Parkdale homeowner explained that closing down bachelorette buildings “would make it more difficult for pimps and prostitutes to have a room to do their business in.” While a local politician, David Miller, who has recently become mayor of Toronto, saw “the big issue in Parkdale” as “the quality of housing . . . and predominantly—although not exclusively—the unsafe housing is illegal,” one bachelorette

owner plaintively asked what the City was doing about “bastard slumlords in legal highrises” (*Toronto Star*, November 16, 1998).

The bachelorette owner had a point. As mentioned in the introduction, 93% of South Parkdale’s housing stock, and 64% of housing in North Parkdale, is rented. Rental housing in the form of purpose-built apartments and subdivided houses has predominated in Parkdale since the 1930s. While some of the flats in houses and early twentieth-century apartment buildings have been renovated, there are still over 10,000 units of mostly private-sector high-rise housing stock that remain both relatively affordable and critically in need of major repairs. One landlord alone, Phil Wynn of North Parkdale’s West Lodge Apartments, with 720 units, has ignored thousands of health and safety code infractions over the past 25 years. West Lodge Apartments is regularly featured in newspaper reports, as for example in 1994, when a woman burned to death when her space heater caught fire, after the City’s inspections units found that heat and electricity had been turned off in the buildings in January, and the indoor air temperature had dropped to 10 degrees Celsius (*Globe and Mail*, January 13, 1994). However, the living conditions of the majority of Parkdale residents have received considerably less policy interest to the City of Toronto than the problem of restoring “stability” in the form of single-family homeownership to a relatively small number of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century houses, many of which had never seen single-family occupancy until the last ten years. As one rooming house tenant concludes:

There are a bunch of middle class people buying houses north of Queen Street and pushing us into the cold. . . . So we’re all going south of Queen Street now. And the next thing you know, we’ll be in the fucking lake. (*Eye Magazine*, October 29, 1998)

### **TOWARD AN URBAN HISTORIOGRAPHY: UNMAKING MYTHS**

Christopher Mele (2000, 631) argues that

It is wrong to impute causality for the forms of political economic restructuring, such as capital investment or disinvestment in the built environment, directly from observations of dominant discourses about urban places. It is possible, however, to examine how stakeholders, driven by their own interests in neighborhood change, translate, adapt, and deploy prevailing symbols, images, and rhetoric about the city to facilitate restructuring practices that portend dramatic changes in the social and physical environments.

We have shown how a relatively small group of local stakeholders, new residents, and businesspeople in Parkdale constructed a narrative to justify and facilitate discriminatory housing policies, and support gentrification, from the 1970s onward. The narrative assumed a stable, wealthy past, suddenly disrupted by government-supported urban renewal in the 1950s and 1960s, which left the neighborhood at risk of becoming a social service "ghetto." A new generation of urban villagers was bringing hope for the future through returning the houses and the community to its past glory. Newspapers and local government planning reports adopted this dominant discourse about Parkdale, and the policy response was a plan to send the neighborhood on the road to once again becoming a peaceful, balanced, and harmonious village within the city.

We have further demonstrated that this narrative ignored or misrepresented large chunks of the historical record in order to construct this myth. Throughout its history, Parkdale's changing identity was constructed through what Beauregard calls "ambivalence": conflict between providers of low-cost housing and advocates of government invention to protect the neighborhood. For much of its history, local government attempts to prevent affordable housing failed: rowhousing and apartment buildings (both labeled as "tenements") were constructed in the 1880s and 1910s respectively, despite legislation against them, and bylaws to curb subdivision into rooming houses failed in the 1930s. Parkdale lost many cheap units with the construction of the Gardiner Expressway in the 1950s, but gained many more through a new generation of apartment buildings and rooming houses in the 1960s and 1970s. Even the expensive and lengthy attack on bachelorettes destroyed only a fraction of affordable rental housing in the district, albeit the fraction that housed those most vulnerable to homelessness. Narrative images fed into both local government housing policy and private-sector marketing.

Far from being an accurate description of social conditions, the successive labels placed on the area bore little resemblance to social conditions. When Parkdale was being called a middle-class suburb by contemporary commentators, it housed more industrial workers than middle-class commuters. Parkdale began to be called a slum in the 1910s, just as it was at its wealthiest. As gentrification emerged from the 1980s onward, Parkdadians as a whole became poorer, suggesting the underexplored phenomenon in gentrification research (and in urban studies) of simultaneous upgrading and downgrading within the same neighborhood. This offers much to support the striking arguments of Heather Smith (2003), who has traced the recent planning history of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and demonstrated the phenomenon of acute social polarization within neighborhoods. This new strand of inquiry

has much to offer to gentrification theory. For too long, it has been assumed that gentrification involves the wholesale transformation of entire neighborhoods, but the fight in Parkdale—the money and the legislative energy—was over a few hundred homes, while the majority of rental properties remained very much in the undisturbed control of the private sector. What we have tried to do in this article is demonstrate how current gentrification research might draw upon urban history to find parallels and continuities over time in successive conflicts over housing affordability, housing type, and neighborhood character, and then view the contemporary struggles of a neighborhood through an underused historical lens.

From the early twentieth century onward, Parkdale's mythic wealthy past was used to justify housing policy that would limit the number of affordable housing options. The alternative planning history we have provided in this article shows that Parkdale has always been a haven for low-income single men and women in rented accommodation. They have been erased from the widely accepted historical narrative, just as they are being ignored at present, by policies that use mythic narratives to justify a policy-led transformation of a (mythical) ghetto back into a (mythical) village of the past. With the language of ghettos in place, "social balance" becomes the justification for discriminatory housing policies in a neighborhood which already has—and has had for over a century—an uneasy social balance. The terms *ghetto* and *village* become labels to legitimize gentrification. The alternative historical record could just as easily justify housing policies that would build on over 100 years of housing diversity in Parkdale to provide decent accommodation for low-income single people as well as families. But a shift in local and senior government housing policy would require more than a change in the historical understanding of place. It would require a new urban historiography, one that goes beyond accepted cycles of investment, disinvestment, and reinvestment to investigate persistent housing diversity over time. It is our hope that the example of such a historiography that we have provided in this article transcends its local specificity and offers a more general framework for thinking about urban neighborhoods in ways that help us to imagine a more humane and socially sustainable city.

## NOTES

1. We are aware of the ethnoracial origins of this term and its inappropriate deployment in urban scholarship (Wacquant 1997), but use it here to reflect the dominant narrative affecting Parkdale.

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