

Designing new practices of transformative urbanism: an experiment in Toronto

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Abstract The increasing complexity, rapid change, and often unpredictable outcomes of city-design-and-building processes demand new modes of practice that are responsive and adaptive to the specifics of such changing contexts in the twenty-first century. These include open-ended outcomes, rather than rigid and predictable products, that emerge out of interactions with a specific context, specific communities and specific interactive processes. This article describes how we can design such new practices of transformative urbanism, derived largely—but not exclusively—from the innovation, resourcefulness and collective creativeness of informal urbanisms. To illustrate such new practices of transformative urbanism, the author describes an experiment in the city of Toronto undertaken as a partnership between the residents of the Thorncliffe Park neighborhood and urbanists from the University of Toronto. The article concludes by describing several promising results of the experiment.

Keywords Urban design · Informal urbanisms · Transformative urbanism · Toronto

Introduction

Public spaces are an integral part of the public realm, which is the realm of common assets and collective governance and which is filled with multiple stakeholders, contested decision-making processes and resultant spatial products that are in a constant state of flux. The increasing complexity, rapid change and often unpredictable outcomes of city-design-and-building processes demand new modes of practice that are responsive and adaptive to the specifics of such changing contexts. These include open-ended outcomes, rather than rigid and predictable products, that emerge out of interactions with a specific context, specific communities and specific interactive processes. This article describes how we can design such new practices of transformative urbanism, derived largely—but not exclusively—from the innovation, resourcefulness and collective creativeness of informal urbanisms.

I describe an experiment in designing such practices for the twenty-first century based on informal urbanisms that we engaged with in two ways: an investigative approach that I call “research as practice” combined with a process-oriented approach that I call “design projects as means.” The experiment, which was extremely successful, was a 1-year partnership between scholar-practitioners at the University of Toronto’s Department of Geography and Planning, Thorncliffe Park Women’s Committee and the residents of Thorncliffe Park in Toronto in 2015 and 2016 (see Fig. 1). I prefer the term “scholar-practitioner” to professors and graduate students, because what we are doing is a deeply intertwined combination of scholarly research and on-the-ground practice while engaging with actual conditions and communities rather than only hypothetical ones. In addition, in this context, informal urbanisms imply that rather than proposing the types

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Fig. 1 The image from a March 2016 event captures the rich and multifaceted nature of designing new practices, including group conversations, hands-on creative exercises, public exhibition of research and proposals and input from key stakeholders. *Source* Maria Grandez



of predetermined formulas that are common in urbanism, we looked at existing approaches of informalities as strategies for transformation. Thus, we build upon informal strategies such as volunteer networks and community organizing, informal economies such as markets and the sale of goods and services by residents, and informal designs such as public space furniture, temporary structures and community gardens as crucial to the vibrant future of Thorncliffe Park (see Fig. 2). As will be seen in this article, this experiment should be understood as something very different from the well-defined, and often pre-determined and fairly predictable, projects of conventional urban design.

The approach of “research as practice” is embodied in the fact that rather than adopting a top-down approach that is common in urbanism, scholar-practitioners at the University spent a great deal of time in on-the-ground research and community dialogue over a 1-year period to understand the assets and opportunities in Thorncliffe Park. The design strategies are thus fine-tuned to the actual needs and opportunities of this particular neighborhood. The approach of “design projects as means” points to the fact that rather than designing projects such as structures and

spaces as final products that are typical in urbanism, we viewed such designs as means as well as ends. Thus, in the Toronto project, a program of planting trees and flowers is also about longer-term youth empowerment, the design of temporary structures is about nurturing informal businesses and wealth generation, and designing accessible public spaces is about community building.

In this article, my contribution to the burgeoning understanding of the relationship between urbanism, informality and practice focuses on informal urbanisms as a new and powerful type of design practice. The article begins with a brief overview of the recent literature on urbanism, especially on public space and on practice that attempts to deepen our understanding of complex and changing nature of both space and practice. I then focus more on informal urbanisms, which remains a poorly understood phenomenon that nonetheless possesses great potential as a design strategy for transforming cities in the twenty-first century. The following section describes the Thorncliffe Park project in Toronto, which developed these ideas further, put them to the test in the field and resulted in an extremely robust yet nimble approach to urbanism. The article then concludes by reflecting on the experiment and



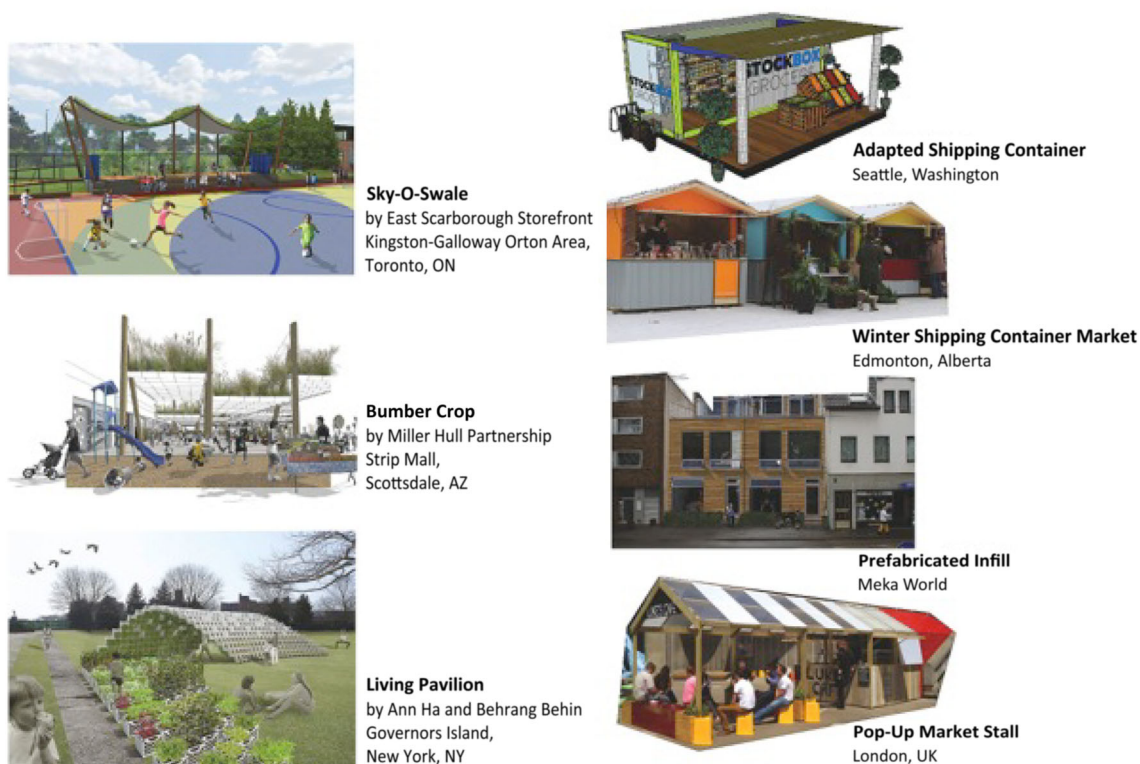


Fig. 2 A palette of different types of design interventions were developed to support the entrepreneurial spirit and informal economies of Thorncliffe Park. *Source* UT Planning (2016)

highlights its value for future practice. While the thinking and practices in this article share some values and interests with previous efforts in informal urbanisms (the “everyday urbanism” of Chase et al. 1999, and the “tactical urbanism” of Lydon and Garcia 2015), what I am discussing in this article is urban transformation that includes not only spatial change but also aspires to deeper social, economic and ultimately political, change through practice.

Urban practice and informal urbanisms

Urbanism is constituted by city-design-and-building processes and their spatial products. Kevin Lynch has described this process as “complex and plural, marked by conflict, cross purpose and bargaining” (Lynch 1981, p. 41), while Spiro Kostof describes vividly how historically it has been power that has designed cities in different ways (Kostof 1991, p. 51). In the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it is institutions with greater power such as government agencies and financial institutions, and groups such as private developers and large corporations that actually shape the city, whether it is through tax policies, land use regulations, infrastructure investments, funding sources and mechanisms for real estate development, purchase and programming of land, or the creation or

relocation of large corporate headquarters or factories. In recent years, there has considerable interest and excellent scholarship on urbanism from the perspectives of multiple aspects of placemaking (Arefi 2014), re-theorizing public space (Carmona 2015), emerging urbanisms during periods of fundamental change (Haas and Olson 2016), ethnographies of space and place (Low 2016), critical roles of stakeholders in public space (Madanipur 2010), and social processes of the material city (Tonkiss 2014).

To this rich literature, I add two crucial components. The first component is a close and continuing examination of practice and its multiple modes. The second component is examining informal urbanisms and their potentialities for deriving new and more effective practices. For the first component, I build upon my own professional experiences and research on various modes of urban practice. These include a comparative analysis of how bureaucratic institutions design cities like Los Angeles and Mexico City after disasters (Inam 2005), how colonial powers such as the United Kingdom designed cities such as New Delhi in its colonies (Inam 2012), different design practices of transformative urbanism from around the world (Inam 2014) and how private profit and public policy intersect to shape contemporary cities such as Las Vegas (Inam 2016). The form of the material city is the outcome of process, and practice is integral to this process. As cities change and our



values change (e.g. from hierarchical to democratic design processes), a shift from conventional client–designer relations to more collaborative partnerships are not only more in keeping with our democratic aspirations but are also creative ways of building and rebuilding communities.

A major insight from this research is the need to develop a wider range of urban practices that mirror the true complexities of city-design-and-building processes and their spatial products. The conventional studio training in urbanism, derived as it is from architecture, is inadequate in that it stresses individual thinking over creative collaboration and an emphasis on a final formal product over an ongoing and evolving process. Conventional urbanism thereby often resembles architecture at a larger scale, albeit with some variations. Key aspects of urbanism, such as political decision-making and financial considerations, are ignored in the architecturally derived training of urbanists. Here I am arguing not so much for simply adding training in politics or budgeting; rather, my research points to the need for a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of city-design-and-building processes and for developing practices that are far more nimble and adaptive to the changing realities of cities.

My second contribution to this literature, informal urbanisms, implies two key points. First, the plural use of the term “urbanism” indicates a multiplicity of conditions, including the most significant one, the “informal settlement,” which is more commonly—and condescendingly—known as a “slum,” as well as other forms of informality, such as the ones in cities like Toronto, described later in this article. Second, what “informal urbanisms” points to are conditions of ambiguity that exists in between conventionally demarcated notions of the city (e.g. legal vs. illegal, acceptable vs. unacceptable, public vs. private, or form-oriented vs. socially oriented). These conditions of ambiguity exist in every city to various degrees and in different forms, whether it is São Paulo, New York, Mumbai, Detroit, or Toronto. An investigative approach towards informal urbanisms looks for opportunities in conditions of ambiguity and inter-relatedness in the city. For example, an informal settlement such as a *favela* in Brazil is in fact a demonstration of the extraordinary capacity of human beings to be innovative in their struggle to survive. Many of these favelas originated with practically nothing: that is, the original settlers had to design and build homes, neighborhoods and mini-cities with nothing—no or very little money, materials or formal design expertise. Yet, they learnt by doing and have built over time what are truly beautiful places, in terms of an expression of extraordinary human capacity to be resourceful, innovative and collaborative.

What this means for designers and urbanists is multifaceted. First, instead of romanticizing, fetishizing or

dismissing informal urbanisms, they could learn a great deal through serious and systematic research on such conditions of the ambiguity between what is acceptable and unacceptable in the city (e.g. Roy 2011). Second, their creative abilities could be applied to designing various strategies to harness and build up the extraordinary inventiveness and resilience of those who inhabit the most extreme types of informal urbanisms, which are the poor living in the favelas. Third, the notion of “investigative practice” suggests an interactive and collaborative method of design in which doing research and crafting proposals are done simultaneously and dialectically. This can be an extremely powerful form of emerging urban practice for the twenty-first century. Fourth, viewed especially from the global south (where an astounding 84% of the world’s population resides), informal urbanisms are an important paradigm, for they recognize spaces of poverty and forms of popular agency that often remain invisible and neglected in the mainstream literature on design and urbanism.

There are two caveats to this discussion of informality. One is that informal urbanisms are also deployed by middle-income and wealthy classes. They often subvert formal planning regulations either on a micro-scale (e.g. by converting large balconies into rooms) or through more obvious measures (e.g. bribing planning officials to turn a blind eye to modifications, additions or new construction that violates master plans or building codes). In those realms, it is just as pervasive but it is usually clothed in a veneer of gentility. Two of the reasons why it is the poor who are more generally associated with informality is because their sheer numbers vastly outnumber the wealthy and because the poor are documented and analyzed (e.g. in economics, sociology, anthropology) much more than the wealthy. The second aspect of informality to keep in mind is that it can involve criminal behavior. For example, Venkatesh finds in his study of New York City that “it took only a little prodding to uncover darker tales of theft, physical abuse, deportation, and immigrants losing thousands of hard-earned dollars on off-the-books financial gestures gone awry” (Venkatesh 2013, p. 61). Thus, for low- to moderate-income residents, informal urbanisms not only reflect the ambiguity of the city, but also a condition of constant precarity. Informality is still the predominant condition of the dispossessed. Furthermore, empirical research demonstrates how informality is not as much about illegality but about the power to designate what is or is not legal, legitimate or illegitimate, and acceptable or unacceptable, including in urbanism.

In cities, informality and formality are not only to be found juxtaposed in space but are in fact corollaries, as a view from the global south reveals. For example, in the commercial center of Mumbai, the informal settlement of Annawadi “had been settled in 1991 by a band of laborers



trucked in from the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu to repair a runaway at the international airport. The work complete, they decided to stay near the airport and its tantalizing construction possibilities. In an area with little unclaimed space, a sodden, snake-filled bit of brushland across the street from the international terminal seemed the least-bad place to live” (Boo 2012, p. 5). Thus, formality can give rise to informality. Other studies in India have shown how new cities such as Chandigarh, Jaipur and Navi Mumbai led to informal temporary—and subsequently permanent—housing for the construction workers, informal businesses and informal services that serve the demand in a new and growing city.

Long considered the domain of the global south [e.g. informal settlements], informal urbanisms are now being finally recognized and studied as an integral part of the cities of the global north. For example, the Museum of Modern Art and the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, both in New York City, have broadened the audience for informal urbanisms in the global north by mounting exhibitions and publishing catalogs on “tactical urbanism” and “design with the other 90%.” Other books have dug deeper into these multifaceted phenomena. The book *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities* (Hou 2010) highlights case studies of Latino urbanism in Los Angeles, appropriating parking spaces in San Francisco, experimental redevelopment strategies in Berlin and public space activism in Toronto and Vancouver. Similarly, the more recent book, *The Informal American City: Beyond Taco Trucks and Day Labor* (Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris 2014), catalogs and analyzes self-help housing communities in Texas, community gardens as informal urban landscapes in Seattle, placemaking tactics by street vendors and others in Phoenix and appropriated places of gathering in Sacramento.

In our case, we are concerned with informality as a creative and transformative design strategy by those who have limited financial or political resources, including traditionally marginalized groups such as low-income populations, immigrants or women. This is in contradistinction to the constraints of formality, which are legal and financial codifications [e.g. building ordinances, construction loans] that have a direct impact on the design of cities. Even in the global north, “the reliance on proscriptive and prescriptive approaches to policy and design, which reveal cultural assumptions about how land is to be used, for whom, and for what purposes, is at odds with existing spatial practices” (Rios 2014, p. 180). Table 1, below, presents several case studies of informal urbanisms as design strategies in both the global south and the global north.

As the case studies summarized in the table illustrate, informal urbanisms take a variety of guises and can inspire design strategies that lead to transformative outcomes in both the global south and the global north. For example, what is particularly impressive about initiatives in the global south such as the Orangi Pilot Project in Karachi and Parque da Terceira Agua in Belo Horizonte is that not only are they located in contexts of extreme poverty but also that they attempt—and largely accomplish—systemic goals through informal design strategies. In contrast, transformative design practices in the global north such as the Community Gardens in Seattle and the Uptown Whittier Specific Plan in Los Angeles occur in much more formalized and codified contexts and thus are more modest in their ambitions. Such strategies are context-dependent, and thus a key component of designing new practices drawn from informality is to investigate and comprehend this relationship between informality and urbanity. Thus, the notion of “research as practice” is essential, which was also central to the experiment we conducted in Toronto, as described in the next section.

Experiment in Toronto

Toronto contains the second largest concentration of high-rise buildings in North America, and Thorncliffe Park was conceived in 1955 as one of the first such suburban apartment neighborhoods in Canada. It was planned to house 12,000 residents originally but now houses nearly twice that number. Due to the proximity of its buildings and a number of walkable destinations, Thorncliffe Park is one of the most walkable suburban developments in Toronto, even though it follows the basic model of Le Corbusier’s “towers in the park.” The residents, most of whom are immigrants, are active in the form of community leadership and organizations. There is also a thriving informal economy. On the other hand, though, the neighborhood is still largely automobile-oriented, with wide streets and many surface parking lots, with a long history of neglected and disconnected public spaces and a lack of investment in building upgrading and community facilities.

The main purpose of the 1-year collaborative experiment in Thorncliffe Park was to investigate the following question: How does one craft an open-ended urban practice? Such open-ended practices are not only intended to be much more finely tuned to the actual accomplishments, needs and aspirations of specific communities but also open to changing conditions. The vast—if not all—projects in urbanism are usually highly defined: starting with a client, a site, a program, a budget and an expected outcome. The purpose of such an approach is to be clear and to have shared expectations. However, extensive research on



Table 1 informal urbanisms as design strategies

Case study	Community priorities	Design strategies	Design projects	Outcomes	Role of informal urbanisms
Community Gardens, Seattle (Source Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris 2014, pp. 79–96)	Generating vibrant community gardens as social and cultural spaces throughout the city	City-wide P-Patch program provides coordination and services for community gardens, and supports market gardening, youth gardening and community food security efforts Sites for community gardens are obtained by working with Department of Transportation, Department of Parks and Recreation, Housing Authority, and public utilities	Designing community gardens not just as ends but also as a means to larger goals such as community building [e.g. food production, but also music, yoga, outdoor classrooms]	Community gardens that are some of the most creative and well-used spaces in the city [e.g. UpGarden P-Patch, on top of parking garage, has vintage car filled with plants and Airstream trailer as toolshed] Building strong grassroots support and political capital through design projects	“Informal urbanisms” meant partnerships between grassroots processes and institutional support Linking and drawing upon existing public, private and non-profit programs to create community gardens on ongoing basis
Night Market, Seattle (Source Hou 2010, pp. 111–122)	Problem of crime and safety issues Activating neighborhood’s parks and open space	Soliciting feedback from community and local businesses using questionnaires Field trip to another night market Coalition of different groups	Pilot night market Designing activities [e.g. games, karaoke, cooking demonstrations], that are also culturally appropriate Design of cross-cultural installations [e.g. lighting, seating, signage]	Regular night market Processes and partnerships that may last beyond the life of the night market	“Informal urbanisms” meant that the night market was initiated by a youth program with few resources [i.e. Wilderness Inner-City Leadership Development]
Orangi Pilot Project, Karachi (Source Inam 2014, pp. 193–206)	Extreme poverty High rate of illness and infant mortality due to lack of sanitation Lack of community empowerment	Partnership between non-profit organization and community groups around a critical issue Using design techniques towards ultimately political goals	Low-cost community-based sanitation system Leveraging community mobilization around sanitation for other issues [e.g. housing programs, entrepreneurship]	Sanitation system bene-fitting over 1 million people Low-cost housing improvement program Women’s entrepreneurship program Education program	“Informal urbanisms” meant organizing people spatially [i.e. lane by lane] Even extremely poor people are willing to pay for amenities if they understand the projects’ benefits
Parque da Terceira Agua, Belo Horizonte (Source Inam 2014, pp. 164–193)	Eroding natural ecosystems High rate of poverty Lack of decent housing	Participatory budgeting Documenting and analyzing needs and priorities Creating job training and income generating programs	Budgeting process identifies priorities and allocates funding Master plan for entire informal settlement	Ecological park created with community participation Beautifully designed community center with multiple programs	“Informal urbanisms” meant giving people power over funding Public space as a means for mobilizing community, especially the youth
South Sacramento Studio, Sacramento (Source Rios in Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris 2014, pp. 173–191)	Purpose of design studio was to investigate struggles over public space, matters of livelihood and rights of inhabitation	“Research as Practice:” Research and analysis to identify sites of spatial appropriation, use and adaptation, especially those in conflict with norms of land use and zoning	Shade structures with built-in counters for parking lot with recycling center, taco truck and fruit cart Hmong cultural hub next to informal community gardens Reusing part of existing strip mall parking for pan-Asian night market	Documentation of spatial practices and range of site conditions Proposals to rethink public/private dichotomy, transgressing property boundaries, and new institutional arrangements from an informal/community perspective	“Informal urbanisms” meant conducting design experiments in often marginalized landscapes Finding ways to represent the informal and the unfamiliar that are absent in official planning discourse



Table 1 continued

Case study	Community priorities	Design strategies	Design projects	Outcomes	Role of informal urbanisms
Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee, Toronto (Source Research by University of Toronto scholar-practitioners and personal communication)	Dilapidated park Lack of social and economic activity	Building alliances and personal relationships with community groups, park organizations and city officials Programs that enliven public space [e.g. arts in the park, bazaar] Doing things "illegally" [e.g. starting bazaar during park workers' strike] to get started	Children's garden Community gardens Garbage cleanup Guided walks Art and fitness classes for women Bazaar [as grassroots community incubator for micro entrepreneurship]	Revitalizing RV Burgess Park into a community meeting place Empowering women socially and economically	"Informal urbanisms" meant taking action through volunteers and networks rather than as a formal organization Community-based, ground-up initiatives that led the city and other organizations to adapt Testing ideas constantly rather than waiting for "perfect conditions" "Informal urbanisms" meant making the design process a political process Reach out and involve as many individuals and groups as possible
Uptown Whittier Specific Plan, Los Angeles (Source Inam 2014, pp. 164–177)	Not enough parking Improving quality of neighborhood	Introducing a community to itself Democratic decision-making Using parking to create walkability	Regulatory framework for high-quality design and development Municipal budget Parking structures, strategy and management	Creating a political constituency for urbanism Long-term processes for design and development	

practice as well as my own global professional experiences demonstrate that even the most comprehensive and precisely defined project never turns out the way it is designed. Much of this is understandable, especially at the urban scale, in which time frames are long (e.g. years and even decades) during which circumstances inevitably change, there are multiple stakeholders with different and often conflicting interests, and budgets are uncertain and usually surpassed. In this context, it serves to pursue more open-ended, flexible and adaptive approaches to practice.

A unique aspect of the design project was its starting point. Rather than a client brief or a given problem to be solved, the starting point in Thorncliffe Park was what the community had already accomplished through their own initiative and informal urbanisms. The studio project built upon the existing accomplishments of Thorncliffe Park communities under the remarkable leadership of the Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee. The Women's Committee began in 2008 as a group of largely immigrant women with little money, no political clout and no business connections. However, they were educated and had professional positions before moving to Canada (Metcalf Foundation 2015). The Committee and their many volunteers deployed creative informal strategies in the pursuit of urban transformation, including activating previously under-utilized RV Burgess Park located in the geographic center of the neighborhood through "arts in the park" programs, Friday night markets and installing an open-air *tandoor* oven for baking bread (Ali 2015; Metcalf Foundation 2015). Other initiatives included organizing and leading walks in the adjacent Don River Valley ravines, training residents for food preparation for food preparation and a variety of hands-on activities for the numerous children who reside in the neighborhood. Their volunteer network, determined persistence and cooperative attitude forced the City of Toronto and funding organizations such as the Metcalf Foundation to adapt to the Women's Committee informal strategies.

Another aspect of engaging with informal urbanisms was to fully understand the actual experience of informality in the neighborhood and to engage with it as a creative and resourceful strategy. For example, what are the kinds of informal strategies that residents utilize to improve their lives individually and collectively? To answer these questions, scholar-practitioners from the University interviewed volunteer members of the Women's Committee on a one-on-one basis. The interviews were extremely revealing in terms of their concerns and aspirations, and how—as women and immigrants—they navigate the multiples levels of government. The interviews also revealed the resilience and resourcefulness of residents. For example, many of them—who are low- to moderate-income—supplement their incomes through informal economic

activities such as preparing and selling food to neighbors, selling clothes from their countries of origin, sewing classes, and math tutoring (see Fig. 3). Thus, the primary goals in the partnership between the scholar-practitioners and the Women’s Committee were: (a) to understand the value of social and economic informal strategies at the neighborhood level, and (b) to find ways to support and nurture them through design strategies and spatial interventions. For example, it was through such strategies that residents created informal networks and strengthened social bonds that translate into spatial practices [e.g. meeting every morning in the shopping mall in the middle of the neighborhood, reviving the long-neglected park by starting their own open air market]. In the interviews, many residents stated that these informal networks and social bonds are among the most attractive aspects of the neighborhood.

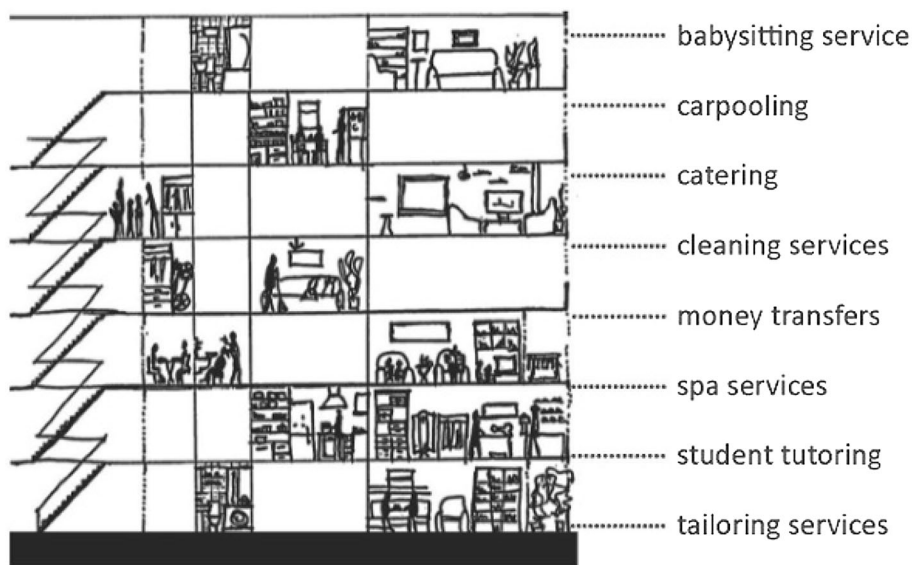
In the “research as practice” approach, serious and systematic research is conducted from the very beginning as an integral component of the design process, such that understanding a situation and strategizing about its future inform each other on an ongoing basis. For example, scholar-practitioners in Toronto studied the history of the ways in which Thorncliffe Park is evolving as well as programs that are applicable to the neighborhood, including the following:

- *Tower renewal*: This project was initiated by a private firm, ERA Architects, based on research on neighborhoods in Europe that are dominated by tower buildings. The goal of the project, in partnership with the city, is to renew the tower neighborhoods in Toronto to adapt them to changing demographics and lifestyles (e.g. activating public space, allowing commercial activity

in residential buildings, improving insulation on buildings).

- *Tower neighborhood renewal*: The project is led by a non-profit organization, United Way, and works directly with communities to increase access to programs and services, provide amenities in public spaces and strengthen community through collective action, especially on issues effecting children and families.
- *Section 37 of the Planning Act*: Section 37 is a provision of the Province of Ontario’s Planning Act to ensure direct benefits to the neighborhood from new construction projects. Toronto’s city councilors and planning department negotiate cash benefits to compensate for the effects of increased traffic, increased populations, increased densities and so forth at the local level.
- *Residential Apartment Commercial (RAC) Zoning*: RAC Zoning is part of the Tower Renewal initiative to allow commercial zoning in certain residential sections of Thorncliffe Park so as to introduce commercial activities such as stores either on the ground floor of apartment buildings or next to them.
- *Recipe for Community*: Recipe for Community is also part of the Tower Renewal initiative in collaboration with the Toronto Foundation. The program creates partnerships with neighborhoods for 1- or 2-year projects focused on community development, skills training and safety. Donors, sponsors and residents collaborate to invest in four objectives: food, convening, youth engagement and neighborhood beautification.
- *Neighborhood improvement area*: Thirty-one neighborhoods, including Thorncliffe Park, were selected by the City of Toronto to create improvements and receive

Fig. 3 An illustrative sketch through a section of an apartment building showing the different types of informal economies that exist in Thorncliffe Park, Toronto. Source UT Planning (2016)



strategic investments in five categories: economic opportunities, social development, healthy lives, physical surroundings and participation in decision making.

Thus, there are multiple programs that communities can benefit from. Scholar-practitioners presented this research within our group at the University of Toronto first in order gain valuable feedback, then presented it to city officials and practitioners (e.g. Silvia Fraser, Manager of the City of Toronto's Tower and Neighborhood Revitalization Program, and Ya'el Santopinto, Project Manager with ERA Architects) to get their comments and finally to the community. This way, the communities can become more fully aware of resources that are available to them and harness them through a public process. The ultimate goal is for communities to not simply accept programs that are imposed on them, but to negotiate benefits that are customized to their particular needs and aspirations, and even better yet, to harness such programs to fulfill their own specific needs through community-initiated bottom-up processes. That would be a very powerful form of urban practice.

The "research as practice" approach is combined with the "design projects as means" approach, in which urban space and form are not only ends (e.g. creation of new public spaces, building of new neighborhoods), but also means (e.g. democratic decision-making, community empowerment). The Thorncliffe Park initiative was designed to reflect the future of urban practice, which must be transdisciplinary, collaborate collaborative and engaged in order to have a meaningful impact. While being interdisciplinary implies combining or involving two or more academic disciplines or fields of study, being transdisciplinary signifies that persons from two or more disciplines teach, learn and work together across traditional disciplinary or professional boundaries. Thus, practitioners must not only learn how to engage with design in an urban context, but also have a relevant knowledge of sociology, politics and economics. At the same, practitioners with different backgrounds (e.g. trained in architecture, art history, political science, English or urban studies) must make conscious efforts to learn from each other and to work with each other. Individual knowledge needs to be increasingly interdisciplinary, while collaboration must be transdisciplinary. On top of that, practitioners much engage with the crucial stakeholders, who are the people that actually live and/or work in a neighborhood. While funding or policy imperatives for projects may emerge out of other sources, the communities themselves are not only those that have to live with the consequences of urbanism, but also can be major sources of ideas, innovations and stewardship. To be engaged is for urbanists to develop fluid partnerships on-the-ground with communities (see Fig. 4).

Given the disparate backgrounds of the scholar-practitioners at the University of Toronto, a number of skill-based exercises enabled them to learn the formal vocabulary and skills of urbanism. They began by with a number of skill-building tasks that also enabled them to better understand Thorncliffe Park as a neighborhood, as a set of communities, and as an ongoing project, which included the following:

- *Field visit*: Digital Photography and Hand Sketches
- *Reading the city*: Photography Essay: Arguments and analyses
- *Visual analysis*: Hand-Drawn Sketch: What are we communicating?
- *Fabric of the material city*: Figure Ground Diagram: Diagramming scale, density and layout
- *Built form and space relationships*: Plan and Section: Relationship between built form and open space (see Fig. 5)

Scholar-practitioners were also introduced to computer skills such as Photoshop, Illustrator, InDesign, SketchUp and Rhino. All these skills and tools were not only applied directly to the site of Thorncliffe Park in order to document and analyze the neighborhood but also involved critical discussions about the strengths and weaknesses of such technical tools of urbanism. Such a critical approach avoided the obsession with representation and its spectacular potential that designers may fall prey to.

Another aspect of "design projects as means" is to pursue creativity not only in the design of forms and spaces of the material city, but also to pursue creativity in the design of processes that yield such spatial products. Scholar-practitioners from the university were thereby asked to design community workshops that were integral to the overall design process. As an example, in December 2015, they designed a 3-h workshop structured around storytelling, informative presentations and brainstorming potential actions, in collaboration with the Women's Committee (see Fig. 6). The goal of the storytelling and asset mapping exercise was for residents to describe their experiences of the neighborhood and to pinpoint what they considered to be the assets of the neighborhood (e.g. park, school, library, recreation center, convenient shopping center, social networks). The informative presentations described City of Toronto resources that residents could leverage, such as the Tower Renewal, Recipe for Community, Section 37 and RAC Zoning programs (described in a previous section of this article), as well as design interventions that scholar-practitioners were contributing to the dialogue (e.g. lightweight structures for food and retail, use of half-empty parking lots of community activities, more accessible open space network). Based on the storytelling, asset mapping, informative presentations and





Fig. 4 A proposal that emerged directly out of interaction and collaboration with the Women’s Committee and community members was the adaptive reuse of the big box retail space and adjacent parking

lot of the empty Target store into a space for community groups, collective facilities and new public space. *Source* UT Planning (2016)

gallery display of design offerings, the final section of the workshop was to brainstorm potential actions in smaller groups focused on three themes: connectivity and walkability, local economy and community activities.

The new practices developed in the Thorncliffe Park experimental project focused on the increasingly critical aspects of urbanism. Rather than design a project that posits a definitive three-dimensional outcome, we devoted our creative energies instead to designing a process of community collaboration and to designing a framework for community ideas and action. In this manner, the three sections of the final document are in fact framing devices for further action: economy, community and accessibility (see Fig. 7). For example, under the rubric of “accessibility,” the idea of accessible space networks builds upon existing community efforts to reinvigorate RV Burgess Park, introduce community gardens and make the adjacent Don River Valley ravines more accessible by stitching together these efforts and introducing additional initiatives

such as night markets and pedestrian furniture in public spaces. The ultimate goal is to vastly increase the degrees and types of physical, visual and legal accessibility to spaces. Another example, under the rubric of “economy,” is to adapt the proposed Residential Area Zoning (described previously) to meet actual community needs by providing a wide range of spaces for informal economic activities and animating outdoor spaces through commercial and non-commercial activities.

Furthermore, in order to truly understand urbanism and its potentialities, one has to go beyond analysis and theorization, and engage directly in practice (i.e. different modes of intervention and realization). This is what I call simply, “making it happen,” and is much more in the spirit of urbanism as ongoing city-design-and-building processes and their spatial products, rather than definitive notions of “final implementation.” For example, in Thorncliffe Park one of the critical ways to make happen the brilliant ideas and creative strategies for urban



Fig. 5 A series of overlapping plan diagrams emerged out of analysis of GIS maps, aerial photographs and on-site field work in order to more closely understand the exact nature of urban spatial relationships towards the center as well the edges of the Thorncliffe Park neighborhood. *Source* UT Planning (2016)

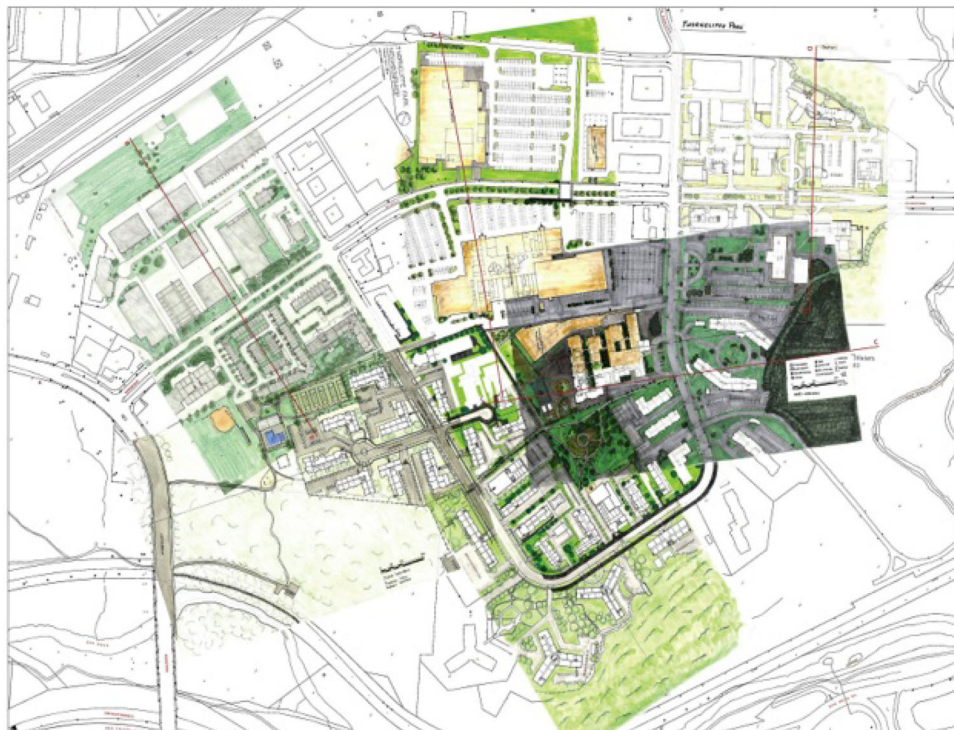


Fig. 6 An interactive workshop in December 2015 with the community organized in collaboration with the Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee generated research and common knowledge through a series of presentations, exercises and discussions. *Source* Aseem Inam

transformation that emerged out of this process was to involve as many stakeholders as possible. For the community workshop in April 2016, we took it upon ourselves to individually invite various community groups, city staff, property owners, local scholars, elected officials and journalists. This effort paid off handsomely as the workshop included active participation from a wide range of community leaders and stakeholders, including Jon Burnside—City Councillor, Rob Oliphant—Member of Parliament, and

Silvia Fraser—Manager of the City of Toronto's Tower and Neighborhood Revitalization Program (see Fig. 8). Thus, while the conventional representations of urbanism such as drawings and models embody the intentions of projects, actual outcomes almost always vary to due to changing circumstances (e.g. changes in budget, leadership, political priorities) over time. Given this reality, a key aspect of designing new practices for transformative urbanism is to create nimble yet rigorous frameworks for making urbanism happen, such as building alliances and coalitions, especially with those who have the power and resources to implement visions. That was one of the goals not only of the April 2016 community workshop but also of an ongoing public process beyond the workshop.

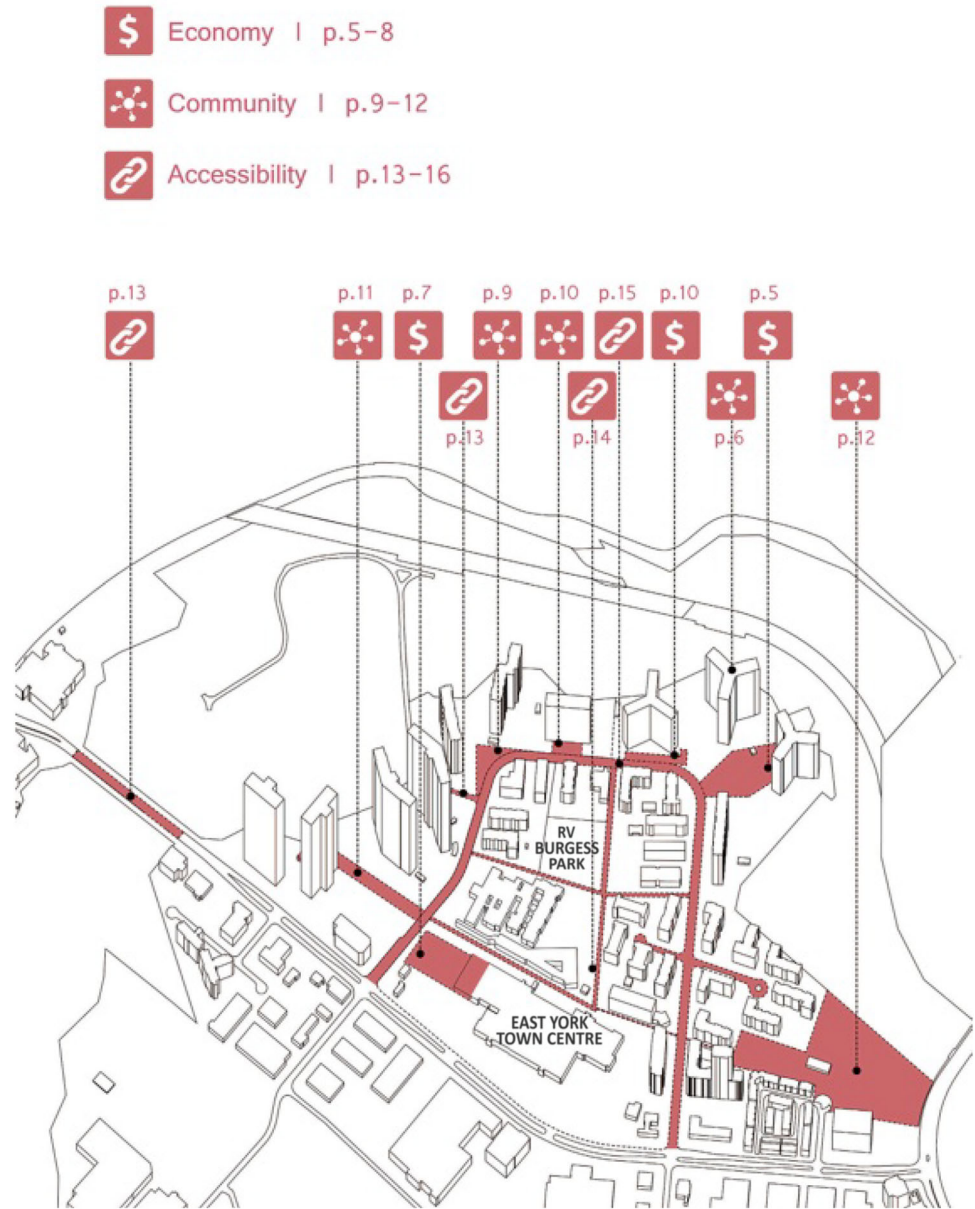
Conclusion

The Toronto experiment in designing new practices for transformative urbanism yielded several promising results. It generated widespread community excitement and involvement, attracted the support of political leaders and created both a spatial vision of the future as well as a process to get there. There are multiple advantages to the practices described in this article. First, the starting point of this design process is not the aloof and top-down ideas of the outside expert; rather it is the ideas of the residents themselves with which the expert collaborates and enriches with her own knowledge and experience (see Fig. 9).



Fig. 7 The visual table of contents of the final booklet submitted to all stakeholders and community members shows how the various strategic interventions in Thorncliffe Park are grouped by three themes: economy, community and accessibility. *Source* UT Planning (2016)

SITES OF POTENTIAL INTERVENTION



Second, the nature of this practice is informal, which is a flexible and adaptive mode of action that every citizen is familiar with. Informality is also a viable complement and even alternative to the sometimes opaque and cumbersome technicalities of overly bureaucratic designs driven by technical jargon [e.g. land use regulations], complicated instruments [e.g. municipal budgets] and narrow expertise [e.g. traffic engineering]. While these may be necessary tools of urbanism, they also need to be more transparent and accessible to citizens. Third, informal urbanisms have been an integral part of cities for centuries: well before the professional fields of architecture, urban design or

city planning were codified and often rendered exclusive. The challenge for us is to better understand informal urbanisms and to harness their potential as powerful design strategies.

The question remains, though, of what will happen in the long-term future of Thorncliffe Park? This question is characteristic of processes of urban transformation, which—as much we think we can control them—are in fact filled with changing circumstances and shifting decision-making. In conventional urbanism to overcome such uncertainties with by creating extremely precise and tightly managed master plans and technical details. However, as





Fig. 8 This image shows a part of the final April 2016 workshop, with starting from third from the left top, Zakia Rahime and Sabina Ali of the Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee, Jon Burnside of the Toronto City Council, a community member, Silvia Fraser of the City of Toronto, and on the right bottom the two scholar-practitioners who were facilitating this sub-section of the workshop, Mercedes Sharpe-Zeyas and Stephanie Cirnu. *Source* Aseem Inam



Fig. 9 A public exhibition of research and proposals invited further interaction and collaboration with community members. *Source* Claudio Sarmiento-Casas

Fig. 10 The potential role of the Thorncliffe Park communities in the city-design-and-building processes and their spatial processes is captured in this diagram entitled "Making Change Happen." *Source* UT Planning (2016)

MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN



truly in-depth analyses of histories of urbanisms have demonstrated (e.g. Lynch 1981; Kostof 1991), even the most precisely defined plans and projects rarely emerge as originally designed. With their multiple stakeholders, conflicting interests and perpetual contestations [especially in democratic settings], cities are in fact highly complex and somewhat unpredictable phenomena. How does one design for these realities?

There are four ways to address this question, as illustrated by the practices developed in Toronto. One is to develop nimble and adaptive strategies derived from informality, as described in this article. The second is to consider informal urbanisms as a much more inclusive and democratic type of practice than conventional client-driven projects. Rather than simply modifying existing practices in architecture, urban design or city planning, this approach requires a more radical shift in thinking across multiple fields. Third, one of the most effective ways of fostering long-term processes of urban transformation is to document and disseminate city-design-and-building processes and their spatial products. Such documentation is about capturing the practices derived from informality to serve as resources for further action, as we did in Toronto, and previously in New York and São Paulo (UT Planning 2016; Parsons et al. 2014; Parsons et al. 2015), rather than as a final and definitive representation of a project. Fourth, it is essential to acknowledge and engage with the reality of implementation, which is often a time-consuming process filled with multiple variables rather than the linear and clearly defined technical procedure we sometimes imagine (see Fig. 10).

From the perspective of this fourth point, in addition to the technical and financial tools required for implementation, it is also crucial to generate long-term public and political processes to make it happen. Such processes of public discourse and political support can enable ordinary citizens to become creative and empowered urbanists. Of course, we need to keep in mind that these processes can be hijacked by the most vocal, could result in lowest-common denominator thinking and the tribalism, bigotry or



misogyny that often plague public discourse. This is an area where urbanists can play a crucial role, more as partners and collaborators rather than as interlocutors or exclusive experts. The knowledge, creativity, experience and critical thinking of urbanists are as vital as ever in these processes such as in helping communities become more creative and take more responsibility for designing their own futures, which may be radically different from the conventional training or practices that urbanists may be accustomed to.

Finally, such practices for the twenty-first can be transformative in a number of ways. Unlike top-down, client-driven or expert-guided design practices, informal urbanisms are modes of practice that are arguably accessible to all. One of the reasons is that informality, or figuring things out as we go along, is a commonplace strategy for navigating everyday life and for accomplishing larger goals, whether it is by children, the elderly or the poor. Another related reason is that informality is truly a democratic (and admittedly messy and time-consuming) mode of design, driven by community needs and aspirations (see Fig. 11). A third, and perhaps most significant, reason is that informal urbanisms are about political empowerment, in which the design process can be a

vehicle for fundamental change, such as how vital decisions about the future design of a neighborhood are made and by whom (e.g. when it is residents rather than expert designers, government bureaucrats or private developers who shape the future of public spaces or community facilities). Thus, one of the most crucial aspects of new practices is to help rectify the uneven balance of power that currently exists in city-design-and-building processes and their spatial products.

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Fig. 11 The chief planner of the City of Toronto, Jennifer Keesmaat—who had over 33,000 Twitter followers at the time—tweeted the newspaper article about the Thorncliffe Park project, thus further contributing to the powerful public and political momentum of the design process. Source Twitter screen capture by Aseem Inam



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