The city's next talent incubator starts putting down its Regent Park roots

Scott Dagostino | Wednesday, February 01, 2012

Eli Malinsky of the Centre for Social Innovation. - Tanja-Tiziana

"I grew up in the city but never spent any time around Regent Park," says Eli Malinsky.

Over his seven years as director of programs and partnerships at the Centre for Social Innovation (CSI), Malinsky has witnessed Toronto's incredible growth and the organization's own growth from 14 member organizations to 300. Established in 2004, CSI's offerings—low-cost office space, facilities and nurturing synergies to small and start-up organizations with a social mission—has proved a winning formula. But until now, its success had been confined to locations in the Downtown West, on Spadina (in the historic Robertson Building) and Bathurst, where it has breathed what Malinsky describes as "somewhat rarefied air." Its networked community of social entrepreneurs, activists and thinkers have been "in many ways a privileged community."

This summer, CSI will open its third location in the now-under-construction Regent Park Arts and Cultural Centre at Dundas and Sackville, part of phase two of the decade-long Regent Park revitalization plan. And in doing so, it has had to rethink its way of doing things.

"We've had a lot to learn," says Malinsky. "Our Spadina and Annex locations were kind of 'community agnostic' in some ways." The former has little connection with its Chinatown surroundings and the latter is attractive to far-flung members mostly because it's on the Bloor subway line. Regent Park "will help to ground us and connect us to the city in a way that our other two spaces don't."

As Canada's first and largest public housing community, Regent Park was created in 1948 with the opposite of connection in mind. Its inward-facing "garden city" design was a well-meaning bit of utopian social planning but it essentially separated its low-income residents from the rest of the city. Neglected from without and within, the area eventually became desirable only as an entry point for immigrants to Canada hoping to settle there, prosper, then move out. CSI's initiative is part of a much larger revitalization plan, approved by council in 2003. So far the most visible component has been the destruction of the old housing stock as it's gradually replaced by mixed-use buildings, but Regent Park's social fabric is also changing, even as the various projects take shape. CSI Regent Park will reside in Artscape's building, an organization with which CSI shares a particular kinship in facilitating sometimes unexpected synergies among members/tenants

Amzad Khan is a 24-year-old human-resources manager who moved into the Regent Park neighbourhood from Bangladesh when he was 10. "It was like an army base," he laughs, during our meeting in a new Tim Horton's near Dundas and Parliament. "Every building, every street corner was a carbon copy of the others." Worse was the outside perception of Regent Park as a ghetto. Khan says the messaging was constant: "If you're from Regent Park, you're not going to finish high school, you're not going anywhere."

"But this community is not what it seems to be from the outside," Khan says. It's actually close-knit. He himself has spent the last decade volunteering as a health worker and athletics mentor. "What kind of community member would I be if I didn't?" he shrugs. When he heard about CSI moving into the new arts complex, he was curious and approached Malinsky, who gave him a tour of the Spadina office.

"I hadn't seen anything like it before," Khan says, who soon joined CSI's Regent Park Advisory Council. "One organization that brings in other organizations, ones that probably wouldn't move into Regent Park on their own."

CSI already knows some of its Regent Park parameters. At 10,000 square feet, the office will be about a third the size of each of the two other locations. While CSI seeks to cultivate the same lively mix of social-mission groups by giving access to desks and facilities, it has also declared a preference for tenants based in Regent Park, serving its residents or contributing to "the broader goal of connecting Regent Park with other parts of the city." But much of what the centre will be is still evolving, just as Regent Park is. "We've been trying to engage and understand the neighbourhood as best we can in order to shape our approach to it and the project," Malinsky says.

Khan welcomes the open avenues of communications amongst organizations, businesses and residents. "Eli's always there in meetings, talking to people," he says. "Just that in

itself is a great stepping stone."

Tom Burr, Toronto Community Housing's director of Regent Park Development, is equally impressed at how CSI has been building bridges. "The most important thing to community members, he says, "is access to the opportunities and support to develop ideas and projects."

CSI's Agents of Change youth program, which awards young people desk space and mentoring to help realize their community-building ideas, is likely to be a key component of the initiative. Burr says Regent Park residents have their wish-lists, ranging from family literacy and fitness for seniors to outreach programs to schools in Africa and inner-city health. Malinsky says it's too early to say who'll comprise the new centre's community but he's wary of over-promising. "We don't want to contort ourselves into something completely different. How do we retain our unique flavour and character while also creating room for negotiation, collaboration and adaptation? [We must] integrate with what's already working there and help supplement any gaps, as opposed to stomping around like a big elephant and saying, 'Here's our solutions.'"

That's exactly what Khan likes to hear. "We're not looking for saviours." Residents of this new Regent Park will prove, he says, "you can build a community without isolating it from the rest of the world."

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Photos from top to bottom: CSI's Eli Malinsky, Regent Park resident Amzad Khan and the SCI Annex location on Bathurst.

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