

# **Policy Mobility, Inter-Urban Exchange and Neighbourhood Processes: Evidence from a Study of One Development Company Operating in Two Canadian Cities (Toronto and Vancouver)**

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Recent work on policy mobility has emphasized a constructivist approach to the circulation of ideas, policies, and imaginaries that lead to modes of city building, branding, and urban governance (Peck and Theodore 2015). This take suggests that policy mobility is an ongoing social process where ideas and discourses, often of the free-market variety, travel and mutate across institutional contexts, adapting to the local place characteristics and existing organizational structures. This paper draws from such work and as well as the sociology of culture to introduce the concept of “strategic relationalism,” which describes the way in which agents and groups (in this case developers, planners, and neighbourhood residents) draw from unfixed and fluid spatial narratives and practices to justify their orientation towards urban redevelopment.

The empirical focus of this paper is a large-scale condo project in Downtown Toronto, at the site of a former department store Honest Ed’s, one of the city’s most iconic buildings. Located at the intersection of four historic neighbourhoods, Honest Ed’s was the cornerstone of local entrepreneur Ed Mirvish’s business empire in Toronto. The building, which was constructed in the 1960s, with an exterior of carnivalesque flashing lights and hand painted window display signs, was long a staple discount department store serving new immigrants to the city. In 2015, however, the Mirvish family announced the building had been sold to a Vancouver development company, Westbank, who had plans to turn the block-long site into a mixed-use residential and commercial condominium tower.

With the sale of Honest Ed’s to an “outside” developer, the local media took the opportunity to announce that “Vancouver style city building” had arrived in Toronto (Bozikovic 2014). Westbank, Vancouver’s top local development company, responsible for several high-profile projects including a controversial department store to public-private condo development in the low-income Downtown Eastside, has branded themselves forerunners of “Vancouverism.” Vancouverism, which involves a loose assortment of urban planning principles stressing high-rise liveability, and “socially conscious” development through density for amenity agreements, arose through several phases of revitalization of formerly industrial land in the False Creek area of the city beginning in the 1970s (Punter 2003). This approach, honed over several generations of lead planners, drew from “the new urbanism” school of thought and stressed “context specific” forms of redevelopment through consultation and close attention to local needs. Somewhat ironically, Vancouverism has since become an internationally recognized planning

model with potentially replicable “results” that can be imported to other cities (McCann 2013; Peck et al. 2014).

The data for this paper draws from twelve months of fieldwork and interviews (n=87) in both Toronto and Vancouver. Focusing on Westbank’s development application process and large scale community consultation push in Toronto, I discuss how various agents involved with the project drew from selectively relational discourses to make claims about what was an “appropriate” and “ethical” approach to redevelopment. While early reports stressed Westbank’s Vancouver credentials, the firm attempted to distance itself from this narrative, suggesting that the city’s “hipper-than-thou,” planning reputation would alienate Torontonians. Instead, the company focused on preservation of Mirvish Village, a nearby street of residential homes that had originally been purchased by Ed Mirvish in the 1960s to convert to offsite parking for his store. After the plan was blocked by a progressive city council, Mirvish rented the former homes as artist studios, restaurants and boutiques, which became a quirky commercial enclave.

After hiring several heritage and urban consulting firms, Westbank reformulated their strategy as an attempt to create a “context-sensitive” redevelopment that would preserve the “Mirvishness” of the site. This claim was, however, challenged by local community organizations and ward councilors, who suggested that the concept of Mirvishness, was a “sleazy” attempt at place branding, used to justify the alteration of the physical environment through the abstract preservation of “culture.” Challenging the particularism of Mirvishness, locals drew on the new urbanism of Jane Jacobs, herself a former resident of the area, to suggest the site was an example of “old buildings adapting to new uses.” Thus those involved with the development rejected the neighbourhood orientation of Westbank, instead advocating for “universal” principles of “good urban design,” that “anticipates future uses.”

Through my analysis, I argue that the process of articulating where urban ideas come from is ongoing and forms a “strategic relationalism,” that is linked to moral and practical arguments and claims surrounding “good” redevelopment. This deep cultural approach augments recent constructivist claims in policy mobilities literature and suggests that relationality is an ongoing “accomplishment,” which requires active work on the parts of agents and groups.

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