

Planning for Diversity and Inclusion in Toronto's Immigrant Suburbs | Zhixi Zhuang

Ethnic neighbourhoods are highly visible indicators of Toronto's multiculturalism, where immigrant businesses cluster with other ethnic-oriented institutions to serve the needs of the co-ethnic community and beyond. In the Toronto region, many of these ethnic neighbourhoods have been established in the suburbs, where contemporary immigrants tend to settle and concentrate. The increasing immigrant businesses and institutions have readapted and transformed existing suburban neighbourhoods and created vital retail and community spaces. However, there is insufficient empirical evidence that immigrant suburbs are truly embraced in municipal planning policies, processes, and practices. Municipalities need to develop a clear understanding of the processes and mechanisms involved in the making of immigrant suburbs, and how to engage immigrant communities in building diverse and inclusive places.

This research aims to explore immigrants' placemaking practices and municipal planning responses by asking two research questions: How have ethnic neighbourhoods evolved over time and reshaped conventional suburban spaces? What is the role of municipalities in facilitating/impeding planning for diversity and inclusion in these suburban neighbourhoods? Multiple data collection methods were adopted in the study of over 110 Chinese and South Asian retail clusters across the Greater Toronto Area, including reviews of secondary documents, demographic and policy analysis, site observations, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with key informants (e.g., ethnic entrepreneurs, city officials, community leaders, developers, architects), and a consumer intercept survey.

The findings revealed that the rapid development of suburban ethnic neighbourhoods has not been fully recognized or supported by planning authorities; it was mainly a result of community mobilization. Conflicts related to land use, public engagement, and public realm development continue to arise, exposing planning's failure to keep pace with the changing needs of diverse communities. The lessons learned from the case studies reveal that planners tend to rely on their own expertise and impose their power through regulations and uses of urban spaces. Without proper consultation with community members, the planning process further marginalizes minority groups. This lack of communication and negotiation suppresses cooperation between groups in building inclusive communities.