

Women, Safety and Planning in Toronto: The Story So Far

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Summary

Toronto's Safe City Committee has achieved considerable success by educating police, politicians, urban planners, architects, and citizens alike on how spaces can be made safer. Guidelines for reviewing development proposals for safety concerns were adopted by Toronto and other cities. Although the Safe City Committee no longer exists, the municipal Breaking the Cycle of Violence program now funds over 50 community groups annually and has broadened the range of initiatives beyond women and urban planning to focus on building more inclusive communities for the safety of all citizens. Although Toronto is a relatively safe and rich city, its "healthy city approach" is applicable to other places in the world with fewer apparent resources.

A key element of initiatives to prevent violence against women is providing space for women to come together, discuss their concerns, and plan action (e.g., South East Asian Services Centre, Dufferin Grove Park). The Toronto approach emphasizes talking with those most affected by safety problems. Involving these "real experts" in suggesting improvements to their own neighbourhoods allows them in turn to "own" solutions to the problems they have identified.

Governments and citizens need to keep in mind that:

- Root causes of violence and safety should be linked to and integrated with other issues like economics, health, housing, and the interaction of different social groups in mutual tolerance;
- Safety for the most vulnerable makes everyone safer;
- Knowledge about existing resources can be the most important impact of any safety program.

My name is Carolyn Whitzman, and from 1989 to 1998, I co-ordinated the Toronto Safe City Committee, a citizen-based advisory group to Toronto's municipal government, charged with preventing violence against women and other vulnerable groups.

The Safe City Committee was the result of a partnership between feminist and progressive local politicians, bureaucrats, and grassroots activists that came about as a result of several bouts of serial rapist activity. Throughout the 1980s, women worked with the police, the public transit authority, and other arms of regional government to make public spaces safer. Key advocacy groups included METRAC (The Metro Toronto Public Action Committee on Violence

Against Women and Children), Women Plan Toronto, the Disabled Women's Network, York University's Faculty of Environmental Studies and the Toronto Rape Crisis Centre. All 60 rapid transit stations in Toronto were reviewed for safety concerns, and a safety audit kit developed so that community groups could suggest improvements to their own neighbourhoods.

In other words, the Toronto approach emphasized talking with the real experts, in this case women fearful of sexual assault, since people most affected by an issue (1) know the problems; (2) can identify resources; and (3) then 'own' the solutions.

The Safe City Committee began by changing the way urban planners, architects, and designers reviewed development proposals. Starting in 1990, all 50 members of the City's planning department and at least 150 others (park designers, private architects and planners, community activists) attended day-long «Planning for a Safer City» workshops, which looked at how public and semi-public spaces could be made safer. Out of these workshops came a set of guidelines, and a policy in the Master Plan that stated these guidelines should be used in reviewing new development proposals. These guidelines were adopted by many other cities, and published in book form in 1995.

A forum on planning and maintaining safer parks attracted 250 people in 1991. All city-owned spaces, including community centres and parks, were reviewed for safety concerns, and by-laws were developed for underground garages and multi-unit housing.

By 1991, the Safe City Committee had decided to broaden its understanding of women, safety and the planning process. A survey of 180 agencies and community groups suggested that the city's resources might best be used in supporting and co-ordinating the efforts of neighbourhood-based, multicultural, and other community-based organizations. Thus the Breaking the Cycle of Violence program, which today funds more than 50 groups with an annual budget of close to \$1 million, was created. Many of the early initiatives were highlighted in a 1995 conference on «Success Stories: Making Communities Safer».

What kind of planning initiatives, with planning used in the broadest sense, prevent violence against women? One is providing the space for women to come together, discuss their concerns, and plan action. I remember a story from a woman I will call Minh-Ha. She was newly arrived in Canada, living in Toronto's largest public housing project. She knew no English. She was being beaten and terrorized by her husband. One day, two women from the South East Asian Services Centre, who were funded by the Breaking the Cycle of Violence Grants, knocked on the door with a « welcome » package for all new residents, with information on neighbourhood services, including services on family violence, in four languages. Minh-Ha's husband answered the door and immediately threw the package in the trash. But Minh-Ha retrieved the information, sought help (which she believes saved her life), and now works for the South-East Asian Services Centre.

A slightly less dramatic story comes from Dufferin Grove Park. In the early 1990s, both the park and the shopping mall across the street were reputedly gang hangouts. Few people used the park, which included a public skating rink, and the shopping mall had many vacancies. The mall got a new manager, David Hall, who was determined to turn the neighbourhood around. He convinced several agencies to locate in the mall and provide services for the youth. He also approached Jutta Mason, a local resident, and asked her to canvass her neighbours about how to improve the park. Out of this consultation came a community bread oven in the park, which became the impetus for a Latin American catering service, a fire pit which turned into the basis of a multicultural arts festival, and a revamped rink house where older Italian and Portuguese men play cards and rub elbows with children at a parenting drop-in. Jutta talks about how there are still conflicts -some of the young men at the basketball court sometimes use bad language in front of the older people tending the community garden - but the park has become a place where the whole community can meet and mix, and where women undoubtedly feel safer.

I was telling some of these stories one day to a friend of mine who was visiting from Bogota and she was laughing about what we call crime and violence problems. It is true that Toronto is relatively safe, and relatively rich. Yes, women continue to be killed by their partners, yes a growing number of women and children live in poverty in Toronto, but we do as a society

have wealth and safety beyond the dreams of many other cities. Yet, I would like to emphasize that the approach that we took in Toronto, a «healthy city approach» is applicable to other places with fewer apparent resources. Governments need to ask citizens and grassroots groups, as we did: «what are you concerned about? What are you doing to meet these concerns? How can we help? ». Governments and citizens need to look at the root causes of these unsafe environments, keeping in mind (1) that there is no simple answer to crime and violence; (2) that safety for the most vulnerable makes everyone safer; and (3) that knowledge about resources can be the most important impact of any safety program. Otherwise, safety of relatively privileged people is bought at the expense of others, through policing who targets ethnic and racial minorities, people with mental illnesses and the visibly homeless, and the privatization of public spaces (e.g., indoor malls instead of street shopping; gated communities). And issues of violence and safety need to be linked and integrated with other issues, like economic health, affordable housing and the need for different groups in society to interact in mutual tolerance, as happens now at Dufferin Grove.

The Safe City Committee no longer exists. In 1997, senior government amalgamated the City of Toronto with five suburban municipalities, and downloaded all costs for public housing and transportation on to the new City. The political landscape changed from a participatory and innovative atmosphere to a cost-cutting and top-down form of governance, which spelled the end for several citizen-based committees. But some of the legacy remains. The grants program still exists. The idea that proposals should be reviewed for safety concerns remains, although there are attempts to give that responsibility to the police. Most importantly, the community energy that created the Safe City Committee, although beset by cutbacks and increasing disparities between rich and poor, survives. That community energy continues to provide new visions of planning for a safer Toronto. Our stories will continue.