

Hey, what happened to Regent Park?

Huge project transformed neighbourhood into mix of housing and commercial space, brought amenities, resources. Revitalization brings opportunities, hope.

By Tracy Hanes Special to the Star

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3 min to read



Children paint flowers at a Regent Park block party.
Lance McMillan / Toronto Star

It was “a culture shock” for Murwan Khogali when his family moved from Mississauga to Toronto’s Regent Park 21 years ago. “It was a high-crime driven community,” recalls Khogali, who was 12. The housing was deteriorating and there was prostitution, violence and drug abuse, due to poverty.

Built between the Don River and Cabbagetown in the 1940s, the public housing project was isolated geographically and socially, and had no streets inside it.

Khogali “learned the culture really quickly.” Choosing not to live in fear, he wanted to help. In his late teens, he started a tutoring club.

The development, itself, was changing, too. In 2006, Toronto Community Housing Corp. (TCHC) chose the Daniels Corp. to be its development partner for the first three phases of one of the largest of urban revitalizations.

The massive project transformed the neighbourhood into a mix of housing and commercial space. TCHC-subsidized rental buildings integrated with condos, regular rental buildings and seniors’ residences.

The changes brought a six-acre park; a community centre; athletic grounds; the arts and cultural hub, called “Daniels Spectrum”; and grocery stores, restaurants and cafés.

Toronto chief planner Gregg Lintern says the overall vision has been followed. “The idea was to connect the neighbourhood and make it feel and look like the rest of the city. That was achieved by not treating it differently from others, by providing parks, places to shop and to access services, and connecting it physically and experientially so people who have challenges with housing wouldn’t have additional challenges going about their daily lives.”



Heela Omarkhail, vice president of social impact for The Daniels Corp. and Regent Park resident and activist Murwan Khogali, executive director of the charity Healing for One and the social enterprise Infinigard Security, were at a Regent Park block party recently.

Daniels Corp.

Early in the revitalization, Khogali met Daniels' president, Mitchell Cohen, who has supported the former's initiatives. Says Khogali: "It's almost been like a parent and child relationship. He and Daniels have supported us in so many ways."

The revitalization has brought opportunities and hope. Khogali, who lives there still, studied environmental physics at the University of Toronto, but his passion was working with his community. He started "Healing as One," a registered charity in the neighbourhood.

The organization is based in Daniels Spectrum and spearheads initiatives to help vulnerable residents with food insecurity and mentors at-risk youth through programming, financial literacy education and mental health workshops, as well as providing a safe space to gather.

"We have become a workforce development agency and last year's payroll was \$400,000 for youth," says Khogali. "We help with interviews and mock interview support."

Three years ago, Khogali launched a social enterprise, "Infinigard Security and Protection Services." This offers free training to Regent Park youth, who are at risk, to women and to new immigrants, and helps them find jobs in building and event security and condo concierge services.

Now, the development company has launched its final condominium, "Daniels on Parliament," and will later build the final Phase 3 Toronto Community Housing building on the site of the sales centre. (Tridel will be TCH's partner for Phases 4 and 5.)

In Phases 1 to 3, 3,063 market condos were completed and 640 are under construction; 346 market rental homes and 332 seniors' rental homes were completed; 1,261 replacement TCHC rental units were completed, and 189 are under construction; 403 new TCHC affordable rental units were finished and 24 are under construction.

Khogali says that, while issues, such as poverty and drug use, linger, the neighbourhood is much safer.



“The community is flourishing with positivity,” he adds.

Daniels on Parliament South Tower will be the final condo building in Phase 3 of the revitalization of Regent Park that started 17 years ago.

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Heela Omarkhail, Daniels’ vice-president of social impact, herself grew up in a Toronto Community Housing project in North York. “It’s been such a privilege to work in this neighbourhood with these incredible stakeholders, partners, and residents. What a joy it’s been in my career!”

Omarkhail says construction alone would not have achieved the city-building objectives, so Daniels became invested in community development, arts and culture, and other initiatives. One of these is the CRAFT preapprenticeship program, which started in 2016. Since then, 55 TCHC youth have participated and there are nine in the current cohort. Upon graduation, youths become apprentices with Carpenters’ Local 27.

Omarkhail says such social inclusion have been key to the revitalization’s success. “We’ve involved community members in the design of the six-acre park, supported a creation of a park-friends’ group and provided funding for the food and farmers’ market. (I managed it until the community could take it over.) And, in summer, Wednesday evenings are a magical time to be at the park for Regent Park Film Festival’s free movies.

“The first year, there were 140 people watching the movies. Now there are upwards of 1,000.”

Despite the successes, providing additional affordable housing is an issue as the revitalization continues, Lintern says. “The goal is to make a net increase in the number of affordable units, and that’s a challenge. We have the zoning, but we don’t have the funding.

That's always the challenge, whether it's pipes in the ground, new parks, facilities or housing. We need participation from all levels of government. We have a really exciting, more responsive community than before, but we have to get it across the finish line and get an increase in affordable housing."

Latest development

Name: Daniels on Parliament South Tower

Location: 365 Parliament Street

Description: 25 storeys with 313 suites, from 330 square feet to 1,300-plus sq. ft.

Amenities: Co-working space, kids' club, maker space, fitness centre, party room, screening lounge, Wi-Fi lounge, outdoor terrace

Price: From the high \$400,000s

Status: Under construction

Developer: The Daniels Corporation

Architect: Superkül

Interior designer: U31 Design

Landscape architect: NAK