

Special Issue | 2026

Catch da Flava

REGENT PARK MAGAZINE

ARTS ISSUE

This special edition of Catch da Flava was produced in collaboration with
The University of Toronto Urban Studies Program and the Focus Media Arts Centre

Catch da Flava

IN THIS ISSUE

The Work of Her Hands

└ Part 1: An Introduction To A Community-Engaged Research Project **Page 4**

└ Part 2: Art in the Language of Redevelopment **Page 7**

└ Part 3: Crafting the Self: The Politics of Gendered Practice in Art **Page 10**

└ Part 4: Creative Justice in the Aftermath of Redevelopment **Page 17**

The Living Arts Lane and Economic Justice in Regent Park **Page 18**

Honouring the Life and Work of Saquib Ahsan **Page 25**

FOCUS MEDIA ARTS CENTRE YOUTH DOCUMENTARY PROGRAM **Page 26**

Editorial

It is our pleasure to introduce you to a special **Arts issue** of **Catch da Flava**. Catch da Flava is a monthly journalistic e-newsletter and special edition print magazine serving the Regent Park Community. The newsletter and magazine is produced by FOCUS Media Arts Centre (FOCUS), a not-for-profit organization that was established to counter negative stereotypes about the Regent Park community and provide media literacy and production programming for residents living in the area.

This special Arts issue of Catch da Flava was produced in partnership with students and residents involved in the 2025 University of Toronto Urban Studies course called The Changing Cultures of Regent Park. This course was a 13-week collaboration between University of Toronto and the FOCUS.

The course took place at the FOCUS Media Arts Centre located in the Daniel's Spectrum Arts Centre. Together, University of Toronto students and residents of Regent Park learned about the multi-dimensional history of Regent Park focusing on topics such as immigration and racial formation, urban renewal, housing redevelopment, public health, and community organizing. Next, U of T students, residents and FOCUS journalists worked in teams to envision, research, and produce their own media project about Regent Park. In designing their projects, groups were encouraged to connect their research to contemporary dynamics in the neighborhood and mobilized their projects on various media platforms.

We are celebrating 5 years of the U of T Urban Studies Program and FOCUS partnership by publishing three special issue magazines focused on **Arts**, **Community Gardens** and **Economic Development**, featuring collaborative research conducted by students and residents.

Our collaboration aims to broaden who tells the stories of Regent Park and produce accessible participatory research to keep the community informed and engaged.



FOCUS
MEDIA ARTS



We hope you enjoy the magazine! - Adonis Huggins and Aditi Mehta



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**Watch The RPTV documentary about
Changing Cultures of Regent Park Course**



The Work of Her Hands

Part 1: An Introduction To A Community Engaged Research Project

By: Sunnie (Yang) Hu, Leticia Ramirez-Arana, Amie Therrien and Youjia (Avila) Zhang

In Regent Park, immigrant women turn crafting—often dismissed as domestic labour—into powerful acts of resilience, resistance, and renewal.

Leticia Ramirez-Arana considers herself to be many things: an activist, a survivor of violence, a singer, a beader, a *pico de gallo*² virtuoso, among others. However, when she first arrived in Regent Park twenty years ago, her identity was completely eclipsed by the demands of being a grieving single mother striving to make ends meet in systems not designed for her. In a neoliberal city like Toronto that values speed and productivity, Leticia felt that taking time for herself was something she simply could not afford. That is, until she joined the Digital Storytelling Program at the Central Neighbourhood House, a program designed to bring women together and give them the space and the tools to tell their own stories through media arts.

“It was beautiful to have that solidarity. We were [about] 10-12 people, mostly from the Regent Park area... It was the beginning of the redevelopment, and a lot of women had to move from their first homes and settle down in Canada... [and then the redevelopment] uprooted people again. So, I remember that this digital storytelling was a safe place for us to come together and grieve collectively for women

living in Regent Park [sic.]”.

She told me this over a crumbly peach Danish under the cold sun of a false spring. While I readjusted my optimistically light jacket, she hastily split the pastry with the back of a spoon and handed me the bigger half, a maternal gesture I recognized from my own childhood. A simple, familial gesture, and suddenly I found myself warm.

We learned so much from Leticia’s talking about her past experiences as a newcomer. In this specific quote, she explained that she was



“depressed, didn’t feel like a complete person until given the space to create among women of all different backgrounds and was able to unlock a creative side of herself that reminded her that she did have talents and abilities.” This theme of creative expression and community resilience breathed life into our story and research. What followed was an unfolding of stories where art, memory, and survival intertwined—women’s voices, which were once muffled by the weight of their circumstances, began to reclaim not only their personal narratives but the larger cultural history of Regent Park itself.

Regent Park has long carried a reputation that continues to define much of the neighbourhood’s history and complicates its present. Located on the traditional territories of the Anishinabek and the Huron-Wendat, it is now home to more than 10,000 residents, over 45% of whom identify as

immigrants. More than half speak English as a second language.³ For decades, mainstream media has portrayed Regent Park as a local and national symbol of poverty—overcrowded with immigrants and marked by violence, displacement and other social issues.⁴ This negative reputation discouraged outsiders from entering, pushing residents to turn inward. In response, they built tightly knit communities, often within the walls of their own homes. It is within these very walls—both literally and figuratively—that crafting blossomed as a means of empowerment, transcending simple material production to become a communal language of resilience and resistance.

Ramirez’s story is a familiar one in Regent Park. For decades, working-class immigrant women—facing systemic barriers to economic stability—have carved out space to gather, create, and organize. Regent Park was built on the backs of families and women deliberating in church basements and community centre rooms. During a time when few publicly funded spaces existed, crafting circles became more than just a social extracurricular. Through shared creative practice, women formed informal support networks—safe spaces to grieve, connect, and push back against a world that routinely invisibilized their struggles. Grievances caught in the loops of crocheted blankets and quiet gatherings evolved into full policy booklets, eventually landing on the desks of the City of Toronto and Daniels Corporation. These blankets and their stitches and loops are political: a way to hold onto memory, to speak across language barriers, to transform silence into patterns, and to care for others.

Years after participating in the Digital Storytelling Program, Leticia came across an old audio recording from 2005—her voice captured at a



time when she was still piecing herself back together following relocation and displacement. Listening to it was like being momentarily suspended between two selves: the grieving single mother who was still adjusting to a new country and the woman she had since become—an artist, a community leader, and a storyteller. As we learned more about the experiences of Leticia and other women from Regent Park, it became clear that their experiences with art and creativity were inseparable from their everyday lives and their homes. It wasn't long before we noticed the patterns: crafting wasn't simply about art—it was about redefining labour itself, questioning whose work matters, whose time is valued, and whose voices get heard.

Traditionally, the domestic tasks of care-giving, homemaking, and nurturing are roles quietly placed upon women's shoulders. A quick Google search of "*feminine hobbies*" brings up gardening, sewing, knitting—activities that society often dismisses as leisurely, decorative, even trivial. But beneath their gentle surfaces, these practices have always held power. They are ways of recording histories, processing emotions, building community, and, at times, staging quiet acts of resistance. For the women of Regent Park, whose stories are rarely told in mainstream narratives, crafting has taken on a significance far beyond pastime. It's survival. It's agency. Crafting is how these women reclaim dignity and carve out space in a city that too often overlooks their worth.

These threads of resistance and care led us deeper, prompting us to wonder:

- What barriers do women in Regent Park face when expressing their creativity?
- How do they push through those barriers to reclaim power and autonomy for themselves?
- And in what ways do crafting and creative community practices contribute to economic justice and support independence in Regent Park?

In answering these questions, we learned that crafting was more than a hobby. These women were not just stitching fabrics together; they were mending the frayed edges of their communities, creating informal networks of support, and finding solidarity in shared experiences. Crafting became a means of breaking the silence—each stitch transforming personal grief into collective strength, challenging a society that undervalues their labour.

Through artful resistance, Regent Park's women are rewriting the narrative, transforming what society deems invisible into vibrant stories of resilience, community, and hope.

Part 2: Art in the Language of Redevelopment

Since the turn of the 21st century, an indelible link has formed between urban development strategies and creative practice. It seems as though you are not a real North American city if your streets are not inundated with hybrid cafe-pilates studio-thrift stores and farm-to-table, Asian fusion tapas bars. We can attribute this change to Richard Florida, a pop urban economist whose 2002 book *The Rise of the Creative Class* fundamentally revolutionized how cities master plan neighbourhoods.⁵ Richard Florida argues that the modern economy is driven and innovated by an emerging ‘creative class’ composed of artists, entrepreneurs, and tech savants. He points out that this defining class is attracted to urban attractions like trendy restaurants, murals, nightlife, and other urban experiences. Therefore, it follows that cities that are looking to have thriving urban economies and facilitate creative practice should build neighbourhoods that cater to the aforementioned interests of the creative class.

Upon publication, Florida had planners eating out of the palm of his hand. Creativity became the hot new urbanist buzzword. Toronto, Florida’s homebase, was one city that wholly embraced this hot, new planning logic. In 2003, the City launched the “*Toronto Culture Plan for the Creative City*”⁶, which strived to “attract the educated, mobile newcomers we want, keep our best and brightest at home, and make our economy among the strongest anywhere”. Read that again: *the educated, mobile newcomers we want*.

But as this vision swept through planning departments, one critical question remained unanswered: *who exactly are we planning for?*

Of course, this vision of the “creative city” wasn’t for everyone. Building neighbourhoods around niche boutiques and public art walls might attract the creative class—but what happens to the families, the services, the cultures that don’t fit that aesthetic?

The redevelopment of New Regent Park is developing into a picture-perfect example of a creative city in practice. Murals bursting with colour distract from the price of new-build condos. Stylized community slogans about “*home*” and “*togetherness*” line construction site fencing. Public art projects are used to celebrate diversity, soften gentrification, and symbolically link the old neighbourhood to its new image. In the eyes of planners who subscribe to these notions, creativity transforms from a beautiful vessel for resilience and self-actualization to a means to displace those that do not fit into your artistic vision of a neighbourhood.

Regent Park’s redevelopment is jointly managed by the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) and Daniels Corporation—the latter a private developer that brands itself on its “people-first” model of community building. When we met with Heela Omarkhail, Daniels’ Vice President of Social Impact, art and community programming seem to have been central to their approach since the earliest phases of redevelopment.

“*Regent Park has an amazing history of community engagement and advocacy,*” Omarkhail stated as she sipped on her seasonal beverage at Zuzu Cafe—a corner bistro that has become a staple of the redeveloped neighbourhood.

“If you actually look back at the history of the revitalization from the early days, it was residents gathering in community centres, and church basements, and each other’s kitchens to talk about a different vision for Regent Park than what they had known through the 70s, 80s, 90s... So, the community worked with the City of Toronto, with TCHC, with community service agencies on a vision for the revitalization that included offices being rebuilt, yes... But also, there was a really intentional conversation around what social infrastructure is. How do you build social cohesion and social integration? What brings people together? What are the types of spaces where people can build relationships and celebrate? Beyond homes, what makes a neighbourhood?”

While these conversations may have been had, minimal action was taken in the early days of redevelopment to realize those plans. In fact, although the community-led Social Development Plan (SDP) was first approved in 2007 by the City of Toronto and the TCHC, it wasn’t until 2020 that the plan received dedicated funding and began to move toward full implementation.⁷

That being said, an early win that emerged from this line of thinking—and the ensuing community consultations—was Daniels Spectrum: an arts and culture hub designed to celebrate the neighbourhood’s creative spirit under one roof. While official numbers vary, the development of the facility was supported through a combination of private and public funding, including a \$9.7 million donation from partners and government agencies announced in 2012.⁸

From the start, Daniels Corporation was told that creativity wouldn’t flourish in sterile, prescriptive spaces designed from the top down. It needed to be flexible—alive with the ideas of the people

who would actually use it. Through extensive community consultation and partnerships with local organizations, residents were invited to help guide the vision for how the space would be programmed and activated.⁹ It was a conscious pivot away from the kind of creativity imagined in Richard Florida’s theory—one that privileges curated, polished experiences—and toward something more grounded: the daily, messy, meaningful creativity that emerges when people are trusted to lead.

“It’s the heart and soul of the community in terms of where programming events happen. Really critical conversations and community moments happen there, in addition to fantastic programs run by the anchor tenant organizations”, Omarkhail mused.

However, she also admitted that this was not the case from the start:

“I remember in the early years, it was like ‘Yay! Mission accomplished! We delivered this space that was the community vision in the social development plan! But, why aren’t they [residents] coming in?’ Well, because it’s this shiny new space that looks like it was probably built for someone else... [Cross-class resident participation] happened organically over time, but it needed that intentionality up front as well. The experience highlighted to us at Daniel’s very early on that there is a convening power of arts and culture, and how that is something that really is —when we are looking at a neighbourhood in transition like Regent Park—a remarkable tool for bringing people together for a lot of that resiliency work”.

Omarkhail’s testimony points to another fundamental flaw in creative city planning: the logic views creativity as limited to one subset

of people, as opposed to a tool that everyone can wield to unlock the potential of themselves and their surrounding community. Regent Park did not need a master plan developed by suits in a boardroom to harness their creativity; art bursts from the seams of the neighbourhood across mediums. And while creativity in Regent Park takes many forms—from murals to music to dance—for this story, we're focusing on what we found in the work of women's hands: the arts

and crafts that stitch together resilience, memory, and quiet resistance.



Portraits installations The Faces of Regent Park, created by artist Dan Bergeron, are displayed in front of Daniels Spectrum, a newly built cultural centre of the neighbourhood. (Photo by Nathalie Prézeau)

Part 3: Crafting the Self: The Politics of Gendered Practice in Art

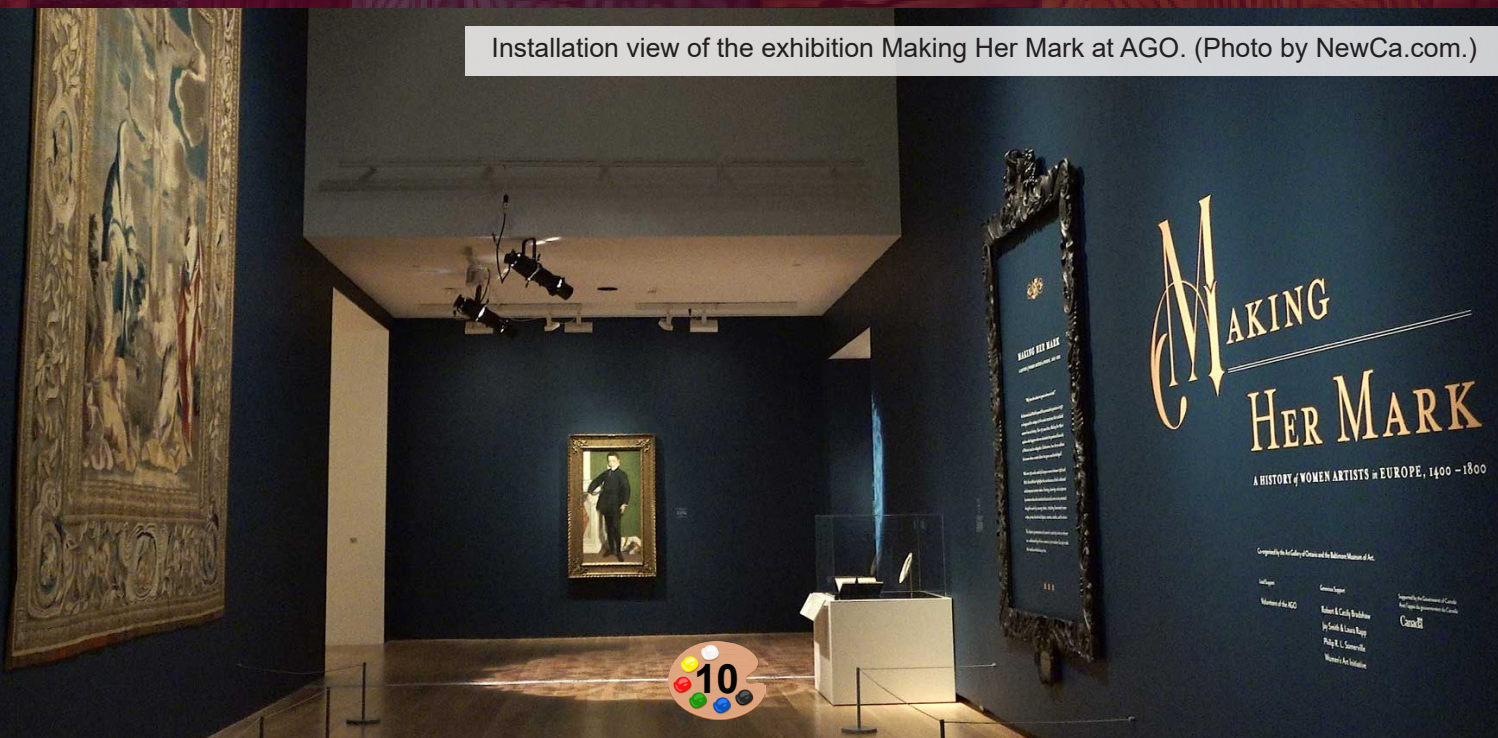
Western art history often ignores women's "crafting". These forms of expression are often domestic and utilitarian. But crafting has always been more than crafts. In the hands of women—particularly immigrant and racialized women—it has often been a tool for survival, storytelling, and subtle defiance. Yet, in the eyes of the art world, it rarely earns the title of "art". Sewing, quilting, beading, embroidery—these have long been dismissed as domestic pastimes, feminized and tucked away from history books, galleries, and art spaces. But in community rooms and kitchen tables across neighbourhoods, this kind of work is the backbone of the household.

American art historian Linda Nochlin's renowned essay "*Why have there been no great women artists?*"¹⁰ addresses these historical and social barriers that have prevented women from being recognized as "great artists" in the traditional Western canon. By articulating just how male-centric the world has always been, she explains that women have only ever been allowed and able to access a limited world. They faced (and continue to face) structural obstacles, oppressive policy, and they continue to face residuals of past

oppressive and diminutive mindsets. Exhibitions such as *Making Her Mark*¹¹ at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) work to explore these male-centric histories, asking viewers to reconsider the dominant perspective and challenge the subconscious crafting of a hierarchy of artistic mediums. The forces of a patriarchal and male-centric world never allowed for the cultivation of female success or innovation, and thus, the history books were never privy to the words of the homesteaders and mothers.

Craft work has never been deemed to have the same worth or legitimacy as artistic equivalents to the grand mediums of painting and sculpture. This perspective has led to their marginalization within mainstream arts institutions. Textiles, characterized by their delicate fibers, intricate patterns, softness, and reliance on repetitive, labour-intensive techniques like stitching, quilting, lace-making, and fine needlework, have often been undervalued as art precisely because these tactile qualities evoke intimacy, gentleness, and meticulous care—traits culturally coded as feminine and domestic.¹² The expectations have always been for them to

Installation view of the exhibition *Making Her Mark* at AGO. (Photo by NewCa.com.)



remain in the background, be soft, be quiet, and be ornamental.

In Regent Park, the most remarkable piece of craft and one of the most enduring symbols of Regent Park's grassroots creativity is "A Love Poem"—a collaborative textile artwork that began with two local women and eventually grew into a patchwork of memories, languages, and shared resilience. Commissioned by Daniels Corporation, these women designed and crafted the quilt from fabric scraps using embroidery techniques that merged Mennonite quilting with traditional Bengali nakshi katha.¹³

Omarkhail reminisced fondly on the collaboration of the quilts:

"Our President and CEO at Daniels, Mitchell Cohen, met a group of women who had a quilting and sewing club... We had a conversation with the organizer of the group—an amazing woman by the name of Sakina—who said, 'You know, we are a group of women, mothers, and it is really important for us to know what happens to this neighbourhood and how we can be involved'".

This conversation led to the creation and sale of 10 quilts to Daniels Corporation including *A Love Poem*, all of which include scenes from Old Regent Park

Quilts as a medium are repositories of past and present lives; meticulously stitched, they hold the interwoven legacies of home and family. The iconic quilt in question depicts local landmarks and scenes—including the transition from old red brick buildings to new condominiums, a playground, a flower garden, and the Peace

Garden memorializing children lost to violence. For its creators, it represents both cherished memories and profound loss, capturing the tension between appreciating new conveniences and mourning displaced community spaces. Developers like the Daniels Corporation publicly framed the quilt as a symbol of multicultural harmony and urban renewal. In Regent Park, this piece was both a literal and figurative act of weaving together a fractured community during a time of major upheaval.

In Omarkhail's recounting of this experience, however, she seemed less focused on the quilt's embedded meaning and more about the transactional exchange between corporation and community.

"They were creating this quilt piece that was generating income for women in their group and use this piece to welcome new residents to the neighbourhood". Omarkhail harkened back to the quilts' unveilings, "There wasn't a dry eye in the room... And now, when we look for artwork, we actually work with groups to create those opportunities where there's a financial benefit to the groups".

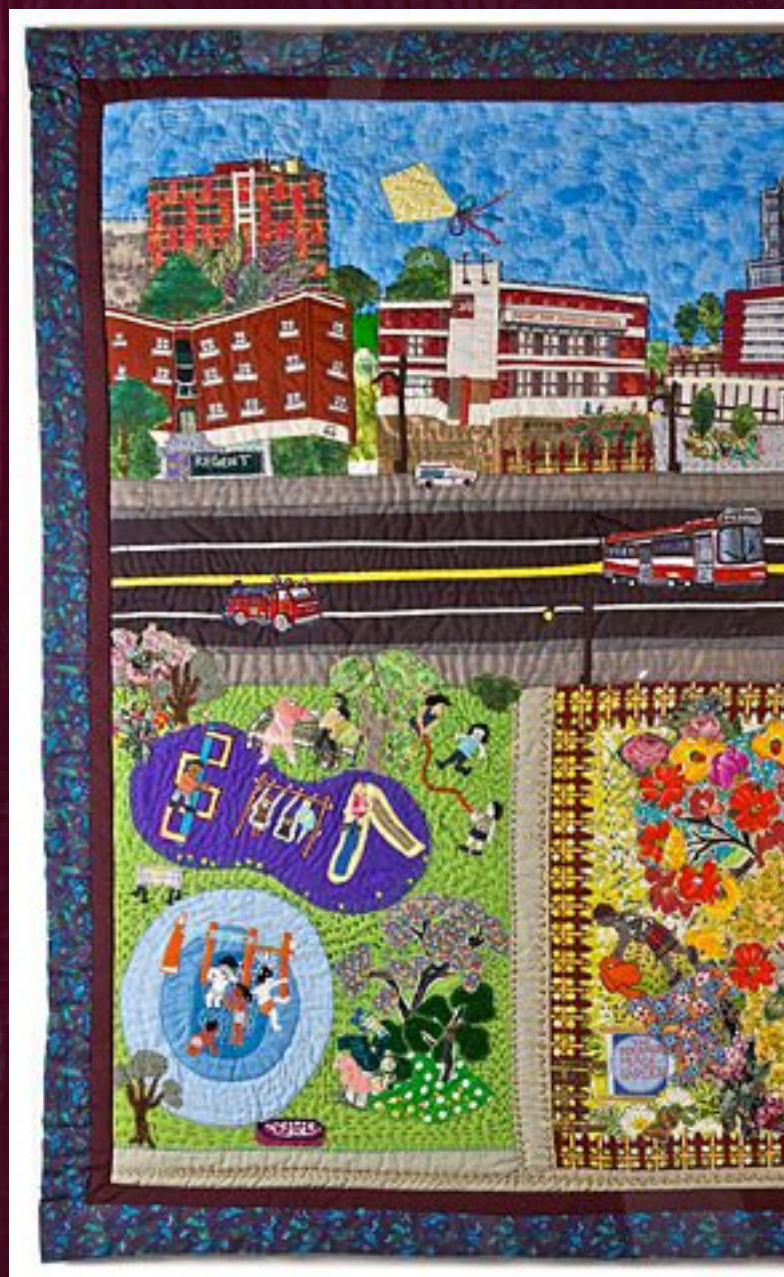
Putting money back into the hands of communities instead of corporate art spaces is an inherently good thing; however, as our research went on, we became more critical of why this experience was championed so highly by developers in Regent Park.

At the unveiling ceremony in June 2012, Martin Blake, the Vice President of Daniels Corporation, stated that from the beginning, they worked to create one cohesive community and recognized the art and craftsmanship from within the

Regent Park community to tell the story of the neighbourhood.¹⁵ This same anecdote was presented in a keynote presentation by Mitchell Cohen, President of the corporation, in 2019.¹⁶ The story of the Bengali women who worked on the quilt was covered extensively in media, including the Toronto Star.¹⁷ But while the quilt has often been held up as a heartwarming example of community spirit, it also invites deeper questions: *who is being celebrated in these narratives and who is benefiting?*

Many of the women who contributed their time, skills, and emotional energy to these works have remained unnamed in public acknowledgments. Their labour—of which we know is often performed in church basements or during unpaid evening sessions—was rarely framed as art in its own right, but as decoration, community engagement, or softening material for the harder edges of redevelopment. Now the quilt, which serves as a memorialized and frequently referenced cultural relic of the neighbourhood seems to be a cornerstone of the TCHC and Daniels Corporation's story of unity, cultural diversity, and community-organized art, becomes a piece of evidence that they can use to justify the pursuit and inclusion of marginalized voices and community in their redevelopment plans and future policy.

There is power in these quilts, no doubt. They are stitched from stories and silence, from exile and arrival, from the hands of women who rarely appear in city plans but are always impacted by them. Yet their symbolic power shouldn't eclipse the realities of the labour that made them. Art, in these contexts, risks being used more as a visual language of inclusion than a practice of justice. When community work is showcased as emblematic of togetherness, but the contributors remain uncompensated or invisible, we have



to ask: Is the art being honoured—or only the optics? It was, thus, important for our group to seek out organizations that did not fall into this performative “artwashing” that could be co-opted for capitalist gain.

Despite all of the belittling and refusal from oppressive systems to acknowledge the individuals behind crafting practices, for many women, especially those pushed to the margins of public life, crafting continues to be one of the few spaces where expression was possible when other avenues were closed to them. The rise



A Love Poem, a quilt created by a group of Bengali women in Regent Park.
Photographer unknown; image via Pinterest

of “craftivism”—a blend of craft and activism—makes this power even clearer, using thread and fabric not only as forms of personal expression but as instruments of resistance . Through craftivism, women challenge societal norms, provoke conversation around uncomfortable issues, and affirm their place in a world that often silences them.

Craft Programming in Regent Park

Layla Zia—Manager of Operations and Strategic Initiatives at the Centre of Learning

and Development (CL&D)¹⁹ —offered us a different kind of clarity. If Leticia’s story showed how craft could be a tool for healing and identity reclamation, Layla’s perspective expanded the frame: sewing and creative practice could also be vehicles for economic empowerment and community leadership.

Her words echoed many of the questions we found ourselves returning to: How can craft help women feel seen, connected, and self-sufficient in a system not built for them? What does justice look like when expressed not through laws or policy but through shared time and mutual care?

Layla introduced us to several CL&D programs rooted in these very questions—initiatives like the Immigrant Women Integration Program (IWIP)²⁰, a full-time leadership and employment skills training program, and Digital Storytelling, which gives women the tools to narrate their own lives. These programs show that when women are given access to resources, mentorship, and creative freedom, they don’t just find their voices—they amplify each other’s. Layla reminded us that art, in these contexts, isn’t decorative. It’s transformative. It remakes the systems that too often render these women invisible.

For many years, the CL&D has worked primarily with immigrant and newcomer women—many of whom, like Leticia, face not only language and financial barriers but also deep social isolation, unfamiliarity with local customs, and the everyday disorientation of trying to navigate life in a new space. Since 2015, one of the programs offered at CL&D is the Regent Park Sewing School (RPSS).²¹ It all began with two Regent Park women walking into the Centre and asking to start a sewing circle that continues to remain open to everyone. Today, that circle has grown



Photo of a seniors' class of jewelry crafting. (Courtesy of the RPSS official Instagram. ²²)

into a community hub, offering multi-level sewing classes to over 100 students each year.

Evidently, what keeps these women coming back is not just skill-building. It is the sense of connection. Layla explains that, time and time again, participants say the same thing: that while they came to learn sewing, they stayed for the friendships, the laughter, and the sense of belonging. Sewing became a tool and resource for women not only to sew and craft but also as a means of connection, collective learning, and friendship. The school hosts an annual fashion show—complete with fellow neighbours as models—where students proudly present their creations for sale. In this way, popular, institutionalized “Big C” Culture (or what we think of as formal culture such as high fashion and popular culture) is carried into communities through crafting and women-organized community building. This kind of collectivity

ultimately transforms and connects not only the women that initially began the sewing circle but also the youth, community newcomers, families, and the rest of the city. It serves as not only a social gathering and celebration of arts and labour but also a way to combat economic injustice and reward participants for participating.

Additionally, RPSS also runs a mending studio where anyone in the community can drop off clothing for repair, with 100% of the payment going directly to the woman who did the work. In a city where women’s labour is too often underpaid or invisible, RPSS quite literally puts value right back into their hands.

What makes the program especially powerful is how intentionally it meets the needs of the women it serves. From offering childcare to celebrating language and religious diversity, RPSS creates a space where women don’t

have to shed parts of themselves to participate. One early project invited participants to share embroidery techniques from their home countries—a gesture that turned cultural differences into creative strength. Through partnerships with organizations like George Brown College²³, RPSS has even helped some women transition into work as seamstresses or entrepreneurs, providing a rare economic bridge from community-based learning to financial independence.

In this way, RPSS offers more than just skills; it also offers a glimpse into what art can do when it is rooted in real community needs. Nonetheless, it offers quite a re-imagination of what economic justice could look like. The existence of such a program serves as a grassroots push to radicalize dominant ideas of what making money can look like; we can still further themes of social aid and distributive justice, even in an overwhelming capitalist, profit-oriented environment.

Similarly, ArtHeart²⁴ has always seen the potential of art as a source of healing for those undergoing socioeconomic grief. Founded in 1991 under the name “A Home for Creative Opportunity”, the non-profit was formed under an alliance of families, unhoused folks, and residents of the social housing complexes that wanted to bring free visual arts programming to Regent Park residents. They originally operated out of Fred Victor at 40 Oak Street but found a home at Daniels Spectrum in 2012. Today, staff and volunteers teach the community how to work with watercolour, acrylic, mixed media, screenprinting, collage, photography, fibre arts, and digital arts to build community, harness creative expression, and tell stories where words fall short.

When we visited the organization at their post on the second floor of Daniels Spectrum, the floor was buried in rolls of fabric, construction paper shrapnel, and narrow watercolour streams sprouting from the haphazard cleaning of brushes in the corner. In the studio space, a youth after-school painting event was taking place. Mothers rubbed their children’s shoulders, as they listened attentively to the captivating speaker at the front of the class. The space was at full capacity.

The other ArtHeart workers looked on at the sight, exasperated but smiling, explaining to us that their programming was at full capacity now that spring hit and they barely had time to breathe. Much like RPSS, ArtHeart understands that their community is diverse and requires tailored programming to fit their needs. That’s why ArtHeart provides different visual arts programs for youth, adults, women, and seniors. However, their programming extends beyond creative instruction: ArtHeart also runs an extensive youth employment program, as well as their No Starving Artists program out of Daniels Spectrum, which provides food for community participants. Art is not only therapy for many participants, but medicine. One participant testimonial states,

“It’s an important helping hand, especially for us seniors who have difficulty with food prices at this period. A lot of us have problems with arthritis; painting and crafting is helping in the form of exercising our muscles. But, the lunch and dinner programs ease the stress of preparing meals also to make ends meet and even benefits part of our health care so, there’s a big reliance on the food program at ArtHeart.”

While ArtHeart may have moved from Old Regent Park to New Regent Park under the

circumstances of redevelopment, it has certainly not lost the critical, community-focused values that it was founded under. While the space is bursting at the seams, ArtHeart's move to Daniels Spectrum has given the spatial stability to expand their types of programming and collaborate with other community partners to create more equitable creative spaces within the neighbourhood. A 2018 audit found that the organization created 2.8 million dollars worth of annual socioeconomic value for the neighbourhood. From providing free food to teaching transferable skills to building community bonds, they are yet another example of how art can be used to bridge the socioeconomic gaps found within Regent Park.

To answer the questions that we posed: How can craft help women feel seen, connected, and self-sufficient in a system stacked against them? It seems that the answer lies in interconnected systems of care and collective advocacy. The women who gather there are not just sewing or painting for leisure; they are turning overlooked forms of care and creativity into a teaching tool and a livelihood. The sewing circle creates an opportunity not just for the community to connect but also a means to pass on and share crucial ways for these women to self-actualize and grow beyond the boundaries of the domestic home. In a neighbourhood shaped by redevelopment and erasure, the needle and thread become tools of presence and persistence. Craft becomes currency, and then art becomes a means of survival. For many women in Regent Park, it becomes a way to move through the world with dignity intact and something to call their own. They are reclaiming time, space, and value in a city that often disregards them.



Part 4: Creative Justice in the Aftermath of Redevelopment

The women of Regent Park demonstrate that crafting is far more than simply a domestic pastime—it is a tool for resistance, resilience and empowerment. Through these creative practices, they reclaim narratives that were often silenced by displacement and marginalization. For women like Leticia Ramirez, creative expression offered a way to reclaim a sense of self and forge community in a city that rarely paused to notice them. The Digital Storytelling Program was not just about learning to use a camera or edit audio—it was about building something lasting in the aftermath of displacement. The program brought together women from diverse backgrounds, all shaped by migration, grief, and economic uncertainty, and each of them searching for something that felt like home.

What does community-building look like in a “complete” neighbourhood? As Regent Park nears the completion of its redevelopment, new questions about the role of community building in a “complete” neighborhood emerge. While art initiatives have the potential to foster belonging, they also raise concerns about their function as instruments of branding rather than genuine community engagement.

The redevelopment process, driven by institutions like Daniels Corporation and TCHC, raises the question of how these organizations balance public commitments to inclusivity and equity with the private realities of urban development, where profit often trumps community well-being.

Are institutions like Daniels Corporation and TCHC balancing their public commitments with the private realities of development? For now, the answers may lie in the work itself—in the quilts, in the stitching circles, in the stories told aloud and those passed between women behind closed doors. Art may not always change the systems. But it can make space within them. Sometimes, a starting point is all a community needs.



The Living Arts Lane and Economic Justice in Regent Park

By: Sandesh Basnet, Kabir Syed, Gayathri Siva and Connor Broughton

On a cold winter's day, wind whips through the avenues of Toronto's Regent Park. The neighbourhood's newly built towers tunnel frigid wind at highway speeds, and like the rest of downtown Toronto, there is little incentive for a wanderer to leave their house at this time of year.

However, the frigid conditions slow upon entering one of the small laneways that branch off the neighbourhood's arteries. For our wanderer, these paths are a safe place of refuge.

Specifically, Ratna Lane feels the safest of them all.

In this passage, quick winds and quicker vehicles are stalled at the entrance, where the built form denies their access. On Ratna Lane, this wanderer will find a collection of placemaking artwork, including benches, tables, and shelters, which have been designed to emulate significant structures of Regent Park's past. However, due to the pedestrian-only nature of this lane, they will not find vehicles.

Despite its short length, Ratna Lane is significant to the Regent Park community. It was named in honour of Ismathara Ratna, who was a mother, aunt, and a dedicated community member that was tragically killed by a vehicle in 2019, and her laneway is designed to welcome community members and visitors. The space is highlighted by its artistic features, which foster connections among residents and creativity.

Alongside public art, the creativity continues within the storefronts that line Ratna Lane's south side. Two art studios stake claim to its at-grade level, housing the studios of Benny Bing and Komi Olafimihan. Alongside them are Melissa Falconer and Morgan-Paige Melbourne, who work and live on neighbouring Tubman



Avenue. These studios make up the Living Lane, which seeks to formally establish Regent Park as Toronto's creative centre.

Despite the significance of art and culture in Regent, creativity hasn't historically been a defining feature of the neighbourhood. The wanderer is more likely to remember pre-revitalization media coverage, which painted the community as a cold and isolated place, riddled with gun violence and drug trade.

Before redevelopment, articles about Regent Park are more likely to begin with "*a spray of bullets fired*" than a spray of colour on a canvas.

A Cold and Isolated Place?

Situated east of Downtown Toronto, bordered on the west by Parliament Street to the Don River, Regent Park holds a unique piece of Canada's

history as its first public housing project. Once heralded as a community for morally upright families, the neighbourhood transformed throughout the latter half of the 20th century. Within 15 years of the project's completion in 1957, opinions changed on its built form, from promoting safety and community to fostering isolation, fragmentation, and criminal activity.¹

By 1968, Regent's developers claimed that the neighbourhood was a failure. Interviews from this time described Regent Park as *"an oversized, poorly planned, criminogenic haven of single mothers, welfare families, and deviants"*. Over the next four decades, responsibility for this failure was never taken and the problems caused by continued neglect and marginalization snowballed.

As the 20th century came to a close, the perception of Regent Park couldn't have been different to its initial expectations. Buildings sat aging and grass grew long, both of which were unkempt by Toronto Community Housing, who themselves were severely underfunded. The local and national media told stories of drugs and murder, describing Regent Park as one of, if not the most, dangerous neighbourhoods in the city.²

In 2002, change was finally slated for Regent Park. The neighbourhood was set to be completely razed and rebuilt by Daniels Corporation alongside the City of Toronto who sought to address the issues that plagued the neighbourhood. Over the next couple of decades, community members would have to say farewell to Oak Street and River Street, set to be replaced by something completely new.

The New Regent Park

Through the revitalization, Daniels Co. have prioritized community building by investing in the development of amenities that commit to the safety of the neighbourhood. This is highlighted in the president of Daniels, Mitchell Cohen's, book that accompanies the Regent Park revitalization: *Rhythms of Change*, where he describes community building as the most important aspect of the project.³ Continuing this

point, Fatima Saya, who leads the Social Impact team at Daniels, describes how much detail was put into guaranteeing neighbourhood safety by highlighting the specific challenge that service lanes presented to developers.

"Service corridors are crucial to [condo building operations] ...but when they're not being used, they're potentially dark and dingy," Saya says. She emphasizes that this darkness fosters crime, meaning that service lanes became one of the most crucial safety-related issues the Regent Park revitalization faced.

To solve this problem, Saya's team brainstormed alternative methods to *"facilitate safety... and social cohesion through the design of [the service laneway]"*. She describes the eventual decision on the use of the space as a reflection on creative exercises and community engagement.

"We really wanted to try some new things," claims Saya.



Photo by Authors

One of these new ideas became the Living Lane, which encompasses Ratna Lane and Tubman Avenue, and has become a monumental component of the new Regent Park. It was envisioned as a community gathering space that seeks to bring attention to the value of arts and culture in the neighbourhood. Practical art and sculptures, including benches, tables, and canopies, line the way – inviting the wanderer to sit and take a moment.

During that moment, they might be confused to find the storefronts on this lane look...different. No clear advertisement of what's on sale or what goes on in these spaces, just the 10 feet tall windows and subtle branding.

Four art studios fill the storefronts of Ratna Lane and Tubman Avenue, housing exceptional black artists of diverse backgrounds and art styles. They were strategically chosen to occupy these spaces by the Black North Initiative, who collaborated with Daniels Co. on the Living Lane Project. The goal of which is to *“celebrate the existing arts community in Toronto and provide a unique opportunity to support Black artists and creatives in developing their practice, showcasing their work, and building relationships in the community”*⁴. From east to west there are Benny Bing Studio, Studio-Olaf, Studio Melissa Falconer, and Studio Morgan-Paige. The artists work in these studios during the day and live upstairs in the attached condos during the night.

Beyond being a space for community gathering, the Living Lane provides economic justice for the artists who call it home. Springboard For The Arts (an independent non-profit who supports artist-led community development work) states there is little to no safety net for most individual artists, especially for black and marginalized artists⁵. The four artists back this by describing how institutional pressures and pressures from family prevent the exploration of a career in the arts. With the opportunity for them to work out of a subsidized-rate studio, they are assured equity in economic opportunity – which allows them to pursue their creative careers.⁶



Photo by Authors

Living and Working in Regent Park's Living Lane

Benny Bing was the first to move into his studio over two years ago. As an artist from Regent Park and being on the board of Artscape, Benny believed the Living Lane opportunity was a perfect fit for him. He saw the opportunity to work out of his own dedicated studio as the next step in his art career.

“Two of the major concurrent [challenges that artists were facing] were funding and space,” Benny says. He believes that by developing dedicated studios for emerging artists, the Regent Park neighbourhood can strive toward economic justice. *“Environment is key in changing the way one feels in how they look toward the future,”* Benny says.

He exclaims that this environmental alteration has changed the way he creates, giving him the opportunity to feel like a business owner and an

artist. By operating out of the Benny Bing Studio space rather than his home, he feels like clients are more inclined to come to his space and buy his work.

Komi Olafimihan, the second artist to move into the Living Lane, echoes some of the same experiences as Benny when reflecting on this new space. His journey as an artist began later than most, where he only began to create art in his mid-twenties. Originally an architect, Komi was never satisfied with the corporate world – his true passion involved working on his art at home deep into the night. Now a career artist, he says the Living Lane studio space gives him the drive to create bigger and better pieces. Since moving in, he has explored his art using scales that wouldn't have been possible without his dedicated studio space.

Despite being a creative kid, Melissa Falconer didn't have a traditional upbringing in the art world either. She was encouraged to get a "normal job", and her good grades made her feel like a career in accounting or finance would provide her with a stable future.

"In the traditional art world...you have to go through these institutions and systems in order to be successful...and the percentage of artists who actually make it through that system is so small," she claims.

Without the belief that she could pursue art as a career, Melissa went to Laurier University and began making portraits as a passion project and side hustle in her dorm room. She says that it took her reaching her mental rock bottom as a student to truly understand that her future lay as an artist. Now, with a university-level background in economics and finance, she sees art as a business.

Since moving into the Living Lane, Melissa has been commissioned to make portraits of black Canadian heroes, including Fergie Jenkins.

Finally, the nonbinary artist, Morgan-Paige Melbourne moved into the Living Lane to pursue



Photo by Authors

their music career. Their use of the space as a recording studio has allowed them to fit three pianos, including a grand piano – giving them the ability to compose, record, and master their work in one space.

Even though they were consistently one of the most talented classical pianists in Ontario through their childhood and adolescence, Morgan-Paige never felt like the classical music system encouraged them to pursue their passion as a career. Morgan-Paige recalls working out of their family home – having to be mindful of the noise they were creating. Throughout the early part of their journey into a career in music, the space they had to work in was a massive detriment to the quality of music they produced. Like many other emerging artists without proper studio spaces, their ability to practice and record on their own terms was limited. They felt that their ability to pursue a career in music was abruptly halted by a glass ceiling represented by access to a studio space.

Now, with reliable access to instruments, recording tools, and noise-cancellation so good that their neighbours can't hear a peep, Morgan-Paige can work any time they please.

Experiencing Economic (In)justice as a Marginalized Artist

For the Living Lane artists, navigating through an art career was close to impossible before earning the opportunity to work out of their own studio. Despite coming from different backgrounds and creating different styles of art, the four artists echo each other's explanation of how they were held back as emerging artists.

First, the two non-male artists highlight how there is no representation of female and non-binary black artists in traditional art spaces. Growing up, Morgan-Paige was told by other pianists and adjudicators that they shouldn't pursue the classical field. Throughout their adolescence, they were told that they should get into jazz rather than classical piano because of its historical role as a black space.

As another talented artist in her youth, Melissa feels she faced the same kind of barriers. She believes "[there's] a lack of representation...and despite how creative I was, it never crossed my mind that I should go be an artist."

Their stories are true and highlighted by the fact that women artists of colour account for less than 1% of the art held at major US art museums.⁷

For Benny, the challenges he described were not directly from a lack of representation, rather the limited opportunities offered for artists as a whole.

"There is a lack of funds in the grant and gallery systems," says Benny. His point is built on by Komi, who says that other artists "can't believe a space like [the Living Lane] exists."

Benny advocates for an increase in funding source diversity. Specifically encouraging the government and private sector to find alternative avenues for emerging career artists.

"One way to make sure artists' needs are met is to give them the opportunity to be in boardrooms and connect with [the private sector]," Benny claims.

He believes that the funding provided to emerging artists from traditional art and governmental institutions is limited and brings up how the private sector can introduce programs for emerging artists to fill those gaps. He concludes that, if art institutions, government, and the private sector can develop creative spaces and provide funding, then there is a future in which artists can thrive.

Fatima from Daniels Co. and the artists praise the Living Lane as a trailblazing case of dedicated studio space for emerging creatives. They exclaim how these units have changed the way they create their work and conduct their business.

These stories emphasize the role of the Living

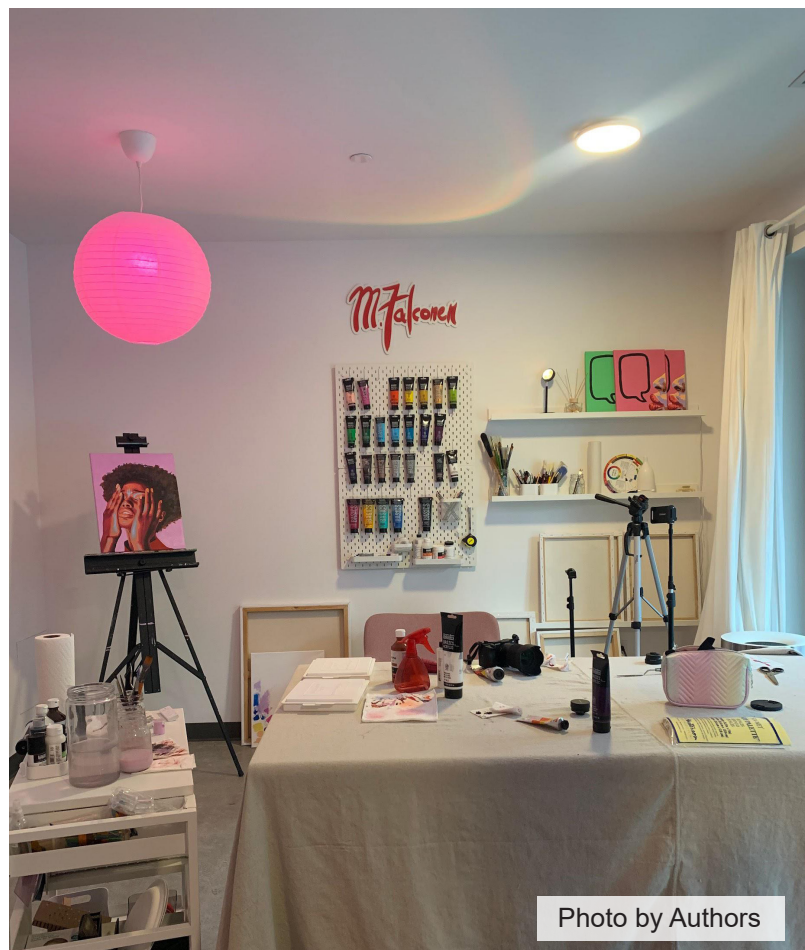


Photo by Authors



“When you bring like-minded people together and think about how to grow a community... magic happens,” Benny says. To him, the group are “not only artists, but change-makers.”

This is reflected by the efforts the artists are taking to give the program exposure to Regent Park. Specifically, each artist either is currently or planning to use their studio space as a platform for other aspiring artists. Benny and Melissa host art classes for the public that reserve seats for Regent Park residents, giving them an opportunity to pick up a paint brush for the first time. Meanwhile, Komi has been hosting a mix of interdisciplinary artists in his space, including podcasters, writers, and other artists. Finally, Morgan-Paige plans to share their studio with other emerging artists on the margins. As someone who has been through the experience themselves, they can relate to how difficult it can be to feel welcomed in creative spaces and recording studios.

Now, as change-makers, the artists understand that role within this community. In which, their platform provides aspiring Regent Park artists with the belief that it is possible to pursue their passion full time. Thus, fostering change in Regent Park becomes a challenge the artists are willing to take head on as they have become the representation they needed growing up.

“Now I can be the representation that [aspiring Regent Park artists] need,” states Melissa. She is excited about her future in the community because “for those folks to see successful black artists in their own space, it opens the world of possibility to them.”

This past summer, as she was walking through the neighbourhood, she saw a group of black girls who had set up their own art supplies to create outside together. Recognizing how much inviting them into her studio would mean to their future in the art world, she took them to explore her studio and use the supplies she has. Clearly, *“the need [for artistic representation] is here,”* she says.

Komi also expresses his excitement for the

Lane in providing economic justice for emerging artists. Notably, the studio spaces have given their tenants the ability to grow themselves, their art, and their careers.

Benny proclaims that, *“when you change the way you create, you are able to create better... tell your story better.”* And, by telling their stories “better”, the artists have been able to build their personal brands and business endeavours. They describe how bigger pieces of art sell for greater prices and are more likely to be displayed in galleries. The increasing profitability of their new pieces also encourages the artists to take greater risks through the exploration of themselves and their art.

Representing Regent Park

As someone from Regent Park, Benny describes how important this opportunity has been for the entire community. He believes the development of the Living Lane studio spaces reflects the positive steps Regent Park is making to foster an economically just neighbourhood revitalization.

location of his platform since, *“for me now, [Regent Park] is home”*.

He relishes in the opportunity to be community leader by describing the Nigerian metaphor, “it’s the person wearing the shoe that will tell you where it’s pinching them.” He explains that as he learns how to find comfort in the shoe that is the professional art world, he can reflect on his experiences and help community members find comfort in their own pair.

The Living Lane and the future of Regent Park
Whether it’s the placemaking artwork or the absence of cars, the nature of Ratna Lane draws people in – making them feel comfortable. And, as our wanderer meets the Living Lane’s exit, they take a moment to reflect on its presence – the story of Ratna Lane may not be present in media channels or Google maps, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t there.

For Regent Park, the emphasis of art in this space is a clear example of the changing nature of the neighbourhood. Finally, Regent is able to express itself – proven by the people who work in the Living Lane studios.

“I see Regent Park as becoming a hub for the arts...over the years I think it’s going to progress and become world renowned for that. There are a lot of creatives in this area and I feel like it will continue to attract more creatives,” Komi proclaims.

Now, as the first collection of Living Lane artists, this group has the platform to be the representation this community needs. Proving that no matter where you’re from, there is always an avenue in the arts.

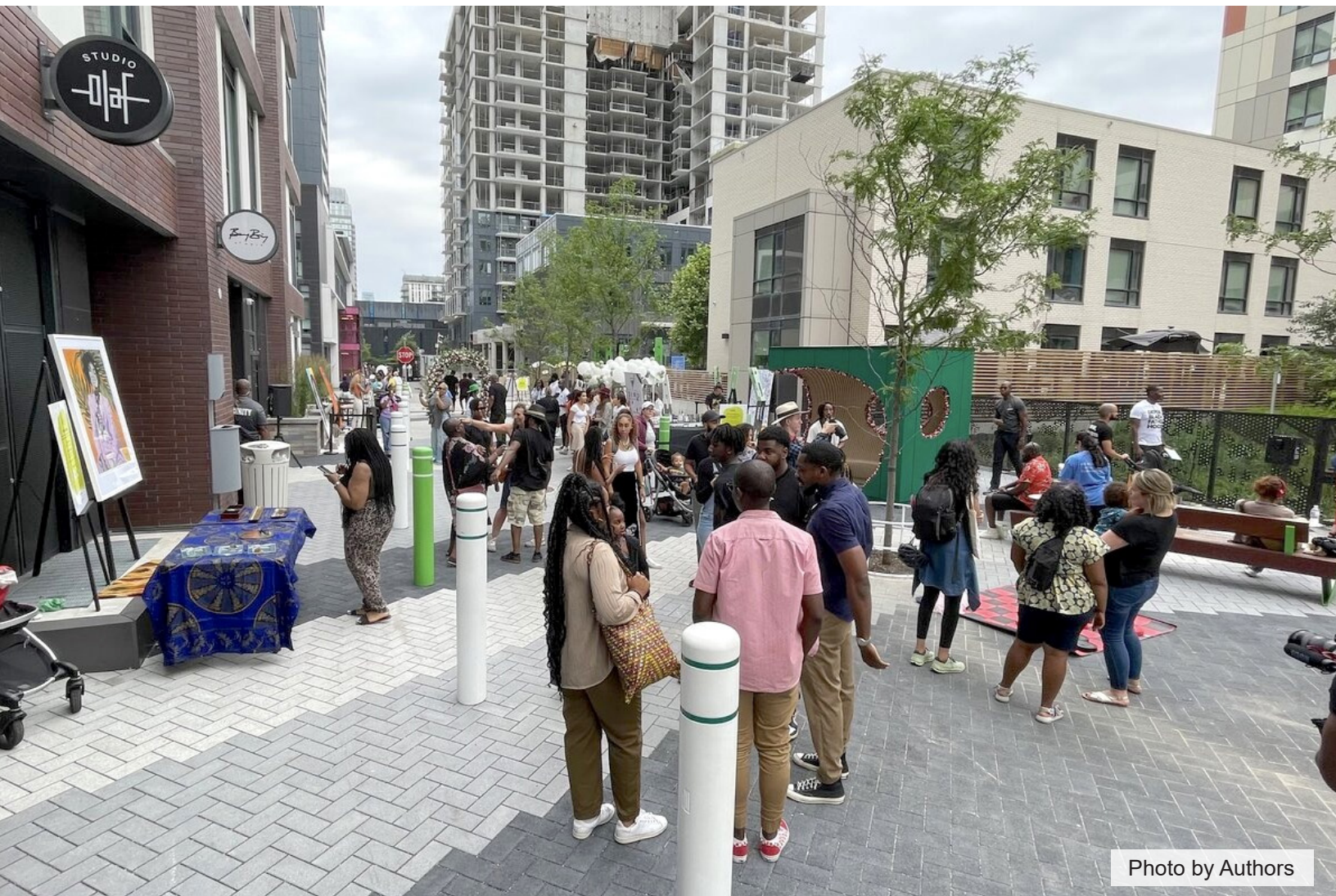


Photo by Authors

Honouring the Life and Work of Saquib Ahsan (1991 - 2025)



By Tyrone MacLean-Wilson

Saquib Ahsan was a first-generation Bengali-Canadian born in Bangladesh who later immigrated to Canada with his family. Saquib resided with his family in Regent Park where he nurtured a passion for social, economic, and environmental justice.

Saquib completed his Master's in Environmental and Urban Change at York University. His research interests include studying methods for designing and developing sustainable communities in post-colonial societies, the effects of environmental degradation on Indigenous land, and the politics of planning for low-income inner city BIPOC communities.

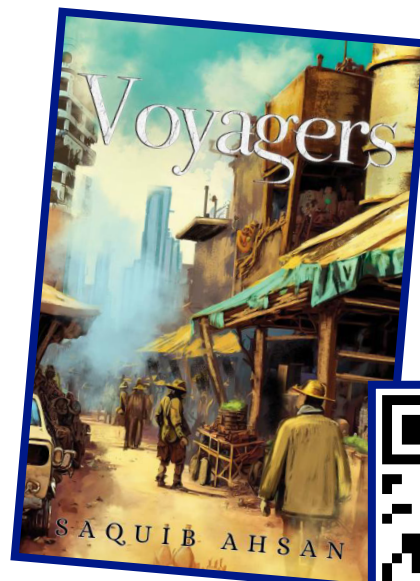
He also later on became co-founder of The Mentorship Initiative for Indigenous and Planners

of Colour (MIIPC), which helped address the under-representation of BIPOC individuals in the planning profession and city-building industry.

Saquib was also active in various Regent Park community initiatives such as the Regent Park Legacy Fund, Friends of Regent Park and RPNA (Regent Park Neighbourhood Association). He also took part in the Focus Media Arts Centre's "The Changing Culture of Regent Park" program where he shared his knowledge and history of Regent Park and its redevelopment process with urban planning students involved in the course.

In 2023, Saquib published a science-fiction novel called "Voyagers". A futuristic tale set a thousand years after an apocalyptic event. The story draws inspiration from his involvement in Regent Park.

Learn more about Saquib and his book you can find the Regent Park TV interview on YouTube scan the QR Code below.



Documentary Filmmaking Program for Youth in Regent Park

Focus Media Arts Centre

The Documentary Filmmaking Program at Focus Media Arts Centre offers youth from Regent Park the opportunity to explore real-world storytelling through film. Designed as a hands-on and supportive learning experience, the program introduces young people to documentary filmmaking as both a creative practice and a way of understanding the world around them.

Participants are guided through the full documentary process, from shaping ideas and researching stories to filming, interviewing, editing, and presenting completed work. Youth learn how to use cameras and sound equipment, conduct thoughtful interviews, and craft narratives that reflect their own perspectives and lived experiences. Emphasis is placed on ethical storytelling, collaboration, and developing a personal voice.

Rooted in community, the program encourages participants to tell stories connected to their neighbourhood, families, and identities. Youth explore topics such as local history, everyday life in Regent Park, social issues, cultural expression, and personal journeys. Through this process, participants gain technical skills while developing confidence, critical thinking, and a deeper sense of belonging.

The program is designed to be accessible and inclusive, requiring no previous filmmaking experience. Youth are provided with access to professional equipment, editing software, and mentorship from experienced filmmakers and media professionals.



By the end of the program, participants complete one or more short documentary films that may be shared through community screenings, public events, or online platforms. These films serve as powerful reflections of youth voices and contribute to a growing archive of stories from Regent Park.

At Focus Media Arts Centre, documentary filmmaking is more than learning how to use a camera. It is a way for young people to see the value of their stories and create meaningful cultural work that reflects their community.

If you or anyone you know is interested in joining the documentary filmmaking program you can register or learn more at:

www.focusmediaarts.ca

TH3RD SPACE

Youth filmmaker Miguel Ventura explores the importance of “third spaces” in a short documentary created through the Focus Media Arts Centre’s documentary filmmaking program. Third spaces — such as cafés, skate parks, libraries and faith centres — are places people gather for connection, creativity and community outside of work or home. Yet participation in these spaces has declined across Canada, with far fewer people meeting friends in person today than in past decades.



Bengali Culture In Regent Park - Two Generations, One Community

Youth filmmaker Jabin Hague highlights the cultural roots and resilience of Regent Park’s Bengali community in a documentary created through the Focus Media Arts Centre’s documentary filmmaking program. Regent Park is home to one of Toronto’s most vibrant Bengali communities, shaped by decades of migration beginning with refugees from the 1971 Liberation War and continuing with families, students, and professionals who made the neighbourhood their home. The film shares personal stories that reflect how culture and identity are maintained across generations.



A Tribute to The Paintbox Bistro

Youth filmmaker Korbin Milo looks at the loss of the Paintbox Bistro, operated by Chris Klugman. The Paintbox Bistro was a community focused restaurant and catering business located in Regent Park. For 10 years, this socially conscious establishment was a prominent and positive force within the Regent Park community. Unfortunately the financial costs of operating a business during the covid-19 pandemic has taken its toll on many businesses and the Paintbox Bistro was forced to close its doors in January 2022. Gone but not forgotten.



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This issue of Catch da Flava was produced in
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This issue of Catch da Flava has been
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