

# Ethnic Enclaves in Multicultural Cities:

## *New Retailing Patterns and New Planning Dilemmas*

by Valerie Preston and Lucia Lo

The increasing ethnic and racial diversity of Canadian cities highlights the importance of achieving social sustainability and peaceful co-existence among people from different ethnocultural backgrounds.<sup>1-4</sup> Retailing is a useful prism for examining the planning dilemmas that must be resolved in order for people from different backgrounds to live in harmony. Shopping brings people from diverse ethnocultural backgrounds into contact every day, generating innumerable social interactions that are opportunities for peaceful co-existence or conflict. The creation of retail businesses is also one of the most obvious ways that immigrants transform the urban environment. Using examples from Toronto, we examine how urban residents negotiate difference on an everyday basis in the development and use of retail outlets. Our goal is to identify the planning challenges associated with the increasing numbers of immigrants in Canadian cities, and the growing diversity and changing geographies of settlement associated with such growth.

According to Germain,<sup>1</sup> successful co-existence requires everyday negotiations of difference at the scale of the city block and neighbourhood. Co-existence also happens when immigrants successfully transform the city's built environment, creating places that signify their presence and testify to their rights to occupy public space.<sup>5</sup> Despite official policies of multiculturalism, everyday retail transactions and efforts to transform retail environments have sometimes generated controversy in Canadian cities.<sup>6-9</sup> To understand the roots of these controversies and the challenges that they pose for planners, we examine how changing geographies of immigrant settlement have influenced the retail environment and shopping interactions.

The analysis proceeds in three sections, beginning with a discussion of shopping and its links to co-existence. Drawing on recent studies of ethnic businesses, we examine the evolution of ethnic enclaves and associated retailing in Toronto, currently the major port of entry for immigrants in Canada. We end with a discussion of the planning challenges raised by the increasing diversity of ethnic enclaves and their retail outlets.

### **Retailing, Shopping and Co-Existence**

Shopping is an important part of the struggle for co-existence for immigrants and for the Canadian-born. Retail businesses offering familiar goods and services in their own languages often help immigrants retain their cultures and languages. The businesses sometimes serve as community-gathering places, where immigrants exchange information and reinforce their social ties.<sup>10-11</sup> Many businesses are also an important source of employment for newcomers who are unable to obtain jobs in their professions.<sup>12</sup>

Immigrants' retail businesses can raise awareness of the community's presence and offer a glimpse into the lifestyles of newcomers and the cultures of their communities that may promote co-existence. The goods and services offered by the businesses also inform people outside the immigrant community about its practices. Some immigrant retailers even establish cultural celebrations such as *Taste of Asia* or *Taste of India* that facilitate co-existence.<sup>13</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum, retail outlets operated by immigrants are sometimes stigmatized as dangerous locations where illicit activities occur.<sup>14-15</sup> The stigma that often extends to the

### **Summary**

*The diverse geographies of immigrant settlement in Toronto have led to new retail formats and varied spatial patterns of retailing, creating land use conflicts and posing planning challenges. Limited by the policies and regulations of senior levels of government, local planners often play a reactive role. However, there is a growing consensus that difference be taken seriously, and various strategies have been suggested, including exposing planners to cultural sensitivity training and recruiting students from diverse ethnocultural backgrounds. While change will take time and effort, by recognizing diversity as a resource, we have the opportunity to pioneer inclusive planning practices.*

ethnocultural communities themselves causes exclusion. For example, similar to Chinatowns worldwide, in Sydney, Australia, a western suburb known as Cabramatta that is home to a concentration of Indo-Chinese-Australians has been depicted as a site of crime and poverty. According to Dunn,<sup>15</sup> (p. 515) the media portrayals go beyond characterizing the ethnic enclave; they associate "murder and gang activity with Asian migrants."

### **The Evolution of Ethnic Enclaves: Examples from Toronto**

As Canada's most important immigrant reception centre since the Second World War, Toronto is a useful case study for examining contemporary planning dilemmas. Until the 1970s, newcomers tended to concentrate in immigrant reception areas in the inner city.<sup>16</sup> These ethnic enclaves were often home to retail businesses selling specialized goods and services to immigrants from each ethnocultural group. Business owners benefited from their intimate knowledge of the preferences and language of their customers, and from social connections with suppliers in their countries of origin.<sup>12</sup>

Beginning in the 1970s, when the numbers of immigrants arriving from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and Central and South America increased and gentrification of inner-city neighbourhoods gained momentum, suburban ethnic enclaves emerged in Toronto.<sup>17-19</sup> Economic success enabled earlier arrivals

such as the Italians and Portuguese to move to new and spacious housing in the suburbs. At the same time, growing numbers of immigrants settled directly in Toronto's suburbs where ethnic enclaves in which Chinese, South Asian and Black immigrants increasingly find themselves living with people from their own group have emerged.<sup>17,20</sup>

The diverse geographies of immigrant settlement in Toronto have led to equally varied spatial patterns of retailing. Many retail outlets operated by immigrants are located in ethnic commercial enclaves visible in a single location, such as the Iranian strip along Yonge Street and the Portuguese Village.<sup>21,22</sup> Others, such as those catering to Italians, Chinese and South Asians, are in several different locations in the inner city as well as in Toronto's inner and outer suburbs.<sup>23-25</sup>

Retailers adopt multiple marketing strategies to serve Toronto's diverse population. Many retail outlets still have the primary function of serving the commercial needs of co-ethnics, offering services that range from a few restaurants and grocery stores to all kinds of commercial and professional services.<sup>24, 26-27</sup> Owners also sponsor street fairs and other cultural celebrations that draw together immigrants and their descendants.<sup>9,13</sup> In the suburbs, reliance on co-ethnic customers sometimes declines as retailers target all nearby consumers regardless of their ethnocultural backgrounds with English signage and marketing campaigns.<sup>21,28</sup>

Immigrants have also inserted new retail forms into Toronto's suburbs. Immigrant retailers still redevelop declining commercial strips; however, many also develop suburban shopping centres on greenfield sites. Although South Asian and Korean developments are now appearing, Chinese shopping centres, sometimes known as "Asian" theme malls, are still the most prominent examples in suburban Toronto. The Chinese shopping centres have distinct characteristics including condominium ownership as opposed to leasehold, an absence of conventional retail anchors such as department stores, a preponderance of restaurants and other eating establishments, and small retail units that are sometimes the subject of controversy.<sup>8, 29-30</sup>

The major land use conflict revolves around the question of whether and where Chinese shopping centres fit into the conventional commercial hierarchy of neighbourhood, community and regional shopping centres. With a regional draw, local residents complain

that Chinese shopping centres are not compliant with zoning for neighbourhood shopping centres, intended to meet the daily needs of people living nearby. Residents also object to the large number of retail outlets in Chinese shopping centres on the grounds that they will generate additional traffic and require extra parking places. The preponderance of restaurants and eating establishments also arouses local concerns about parking, noxious odours and garbage.<sup>8</sup> Residents sometimes fear that owners of individual retail outlets will be unwilling to maintain and renovate the shopping centre.

The condominium form of ownership that requires prepayment from buyers may also influence planning decisions. In the 1990s, when many Chinese shopping centres were developed,<sup>30</sup> there was no legal protection for commercial condominium purchasers. If a planning department rejected a development proposal, as happened in a few cases,<sup>8</sup> developers often did not have enough money to refund purchasers' deposits. According to one observer, "pre-selling can put great pressure on local planning authorities to approve the development application."<sup>30 (p. 24)</sup>

The impacts of public disputes about immigrants' retail developments go well beyond the specific neighbourhood where the mall is to be located. In one case, in Richmond Hill, opposition to the proposed mall was discussed nation-wide, particularly after racist remarks by the Deputy Mayor of the adjacent municipality, the Town of Markham, was publicized across Canada and in Hong Kong.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, a public meeting attracted more than 500 people including representatives from the Chinese Canadian National Council.

### Planning Implications

The controversies associated with Chinese shopping centres illustrate some of the challenges facing planners in Canada's increasingly diverse cities.<sup>9</sup> There is a growing consensus that planners must take difference seriously, rather than viewing people as indistinguishable citizens with equal rights.<sup>4,31-34</sup> To this end, Burayidi<sup>32</sup> has called for cultural sensitivity training to enhance planners' communication skills and to give them more insight into cultural differences. Sandercock<sup>4</sup> has also recommended that planning schools recruit students from diverse ethnocultural backgrounds. The goal is to improve planners' communication with a multicultural public so that they can discern better the beliefs and needs

of people who differ in terms of multiple social characteristics, not just ethnocultural identity. The Richmond Hill case, where many Chinese-Canadians opposed the proposed mall while others supported its development, illustrates the importance of this nuanced knowledge for successful planning.

Planning at the neighbourhood level should ensure a mix of retail activities, some serving a diverse clientele and others that cater to specific ethnocultural groups. This approach implies that a range of retail activities, forms and designs will be acceptable to planners and politicians<sup>33</sup> and they will actively promote the advantages of a pluralistic approach to land use planning. This endorsement is essential to reduce conflict such as that which occurred in Richmond Hill, Ontario where residents successfully opposed a proposed "Asian" theme mall that had been approved by local planners. Local politicians fuelled the controversy by quickly altering the municipality's official plan and approving an interim bylaw.<sup>8</sup>

The extent to which local planning can reduce land use conflicts is often limited by the policies and regulations of the provincial and federal governments. In Ontario, the Ontario Municipal Board, a provincial tribunal, has ruled on proposed Chinese shopping centres. In the Richmond Hill case mentioned earlier,<sup>8</sup> developers' arguments that a Chinese shopping centre would serve recently arrived immigrants from Hong Kong were given less weight than the views of Chinese-Canadians living near the proposed mall who argued it was unnecessary. To facilitate pluralistic and culturally sensitive planning, Qadeer<sup>35</sup> has suggested that policies should be consistent across the three levels of government. He would like to see "all planning regulations, approaches and standards conform to provisions of the *Human Rights Act* and making cultural and racial discrimination valid grounds to appeal a planning decision."<sup>33,35</sup>

Politicians can also encourage urban residents to live successfully with difference by their public support for diversity. For example, in Sydney, Australia, all levels of government publicly expressed their approval of Asian immigrants' investments in Chatswood, a suburban retail centre. Government representatives emphasized the importance of Asian immigrants as a bridge between Australia and Asia, an important destination for Australian exports.<sup>36</sup> The political support undoubtedly contributed to the

acceptance of new retail forms and functions in Chatswood as it had in Richmond, British Columbia.<sup>6</sup> Successful planning depends on comprehensive information about the ethnocultural and socioeconomic characteristics of the population in each neighbourhood.<sup>26,34</sup> Census information can provide a detailed portrait of the diversity in each neighbourhood, however, local opinions and needs regarding shopping should also be assessed by opinion surveys, focus groups, and storytelling that reveal the extent and nature of individual differences in residents' views.<sup>4,32</sup>

The involvement of local residents from all ethnocultural backgrounds is another key to successful planning. In Richmond Hill, the views of Chinese-Canadians who had lived in Canada for some time were heard at public meetings, while the opinions of recent newcomers are not found in the public record. To facilitate effective communication with all groups in a neighbourhood, Wallace and Frisken<sup>37</sup> advocate translation of leaflets, official documents, and advertisements and their publication in ethnic media,

interpretation services, and the placement of liaison officers. They note that the format of public meetings and other forms of public participation in planning processes need to be evaluated to ensure the comfort of newcomers from diverse backgrounds. Adopting many of these recommendations, planners in Richmond, British Columbia successfully defused public disputes about proposed Chinese shopping centres.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

Current research illustrates the planning challenges associated with retailing in diverse metropolitan areas and identifies some of the strategies that different planners have used successfully to achieve peaceful co-existence. Despite recommendations to revamp the planning profession and planning processes, the case studies underscore the reactive roles of municipal planners and politicians. Academic researchers and planning practitioners still have a long way to go to develop the capacity of the planning system to accommodate difference successfully. Comparative research such as that pioneered by Wallace and

Friskens<sup>37</sup> and Bollens<sup>31</sup> would help urban planning achieve its potential to enhance the lives of all urban residents and the vitality of urban spaces. By recognizing that Canada's diverse urban populations are a resource, we have the opportunity to pioneer inclusive planning practices that are in demand around the world. ■

**Valerie Preston** is Professor of Geography at York University and York Director for CERIS – The Ontario Metropolis Centre. Her research interests include immigration issues in contemporary cities, economic restructuring and labour markets, and feminist geography. Currently, she is involved in research projects examining the housing circumstances of immigrants, geographies of discrimination, and vulnerability and social services in suburbs. She can be reached at: [vpreston@yorku.ca](mailto:vpreston@yorku.ca)

**Lucia Lo** is Associate Professor of Geography at York University. Her research interests include immigrant settlement and integration, and retailing and consumption geographies. Two of her current projects look at vulnerability and social service in the suburbs, and banking and immigration. She can be reached at: [lucialo@yorku.ca](mailto:lucialo@yorku.ca)

## References

1. Germain A. The social sustainability of multicultural cities: a neighbourhood affair? *Belgian Journal of Geography/Revue Belge de géographie* 2002;4:377-86.
2. Pestieau K, Wallace M. Challenges and opportunities for planning in the ethno-culturally diverse city: a collection of papers – introduction. *Planning Theory & Practice* 2003;4:253-58.
3. Polese M, Stren RE. The social sustainability of cities, diversity and the management of change. Toronto: University of Toronto Press; 2000.
4. Sandercock L. *Cosmopolis II, mongrel cities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. New York: Continuum International Publishing; 2003.
5. Wood PK, Gilbert L. Multiculturalism in Canada: accidental discourse, alternative vision, urban practice. *Int J of Urban and Regional Research* 2005;29:679-91.
6. Edgington DW, Goldberg M, Hutton TA. The Hong Kong Chinese in Vancouver, Working Paper No. 03-12. Vancouver: RIIIM; 2003.
7. Ferguson J. Shopkeepers charge bias: a developer says his bid to attract Chinese Canadians is niche marketing, but existing tenants don't buy it. *Globe and Mail* 1994:A1.
8. Preston V, Lo L. Asian theme malls in suburban Toronto: land use conflict in Richmond Hill. *The Canadian Geographer* 2004;44:182-90.
9. O'Neill T. West-coast bilingualism: once a symbol of Canada's flawed immigration policy, a Chinese-only mall awaits the wrecking ball. *Alberta Report* 2002;25, 29.
10. Ehrkamp P. Placing identities: transnational practices and local attachments of Turkish immigrants in Germany. *J of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 2005;31:345-64.
11. Wang L, Lo L. Immigrant grocery shopping behaviour: ethnic identity versus accessibility. *Environment and Planning A* 2007;39:684-99.
12. Light I, Gold SJ. *Ethnic Economies*. San Diego: Academic Press; 2000.
13. Hackworth J, Rekers J. Ethnic packaging and gentrification – the case of four neighborhoods in Toronto. *Urban Affairs Review* 2005;41:211-36.
14. Anderson K. *Vancouver's Chinatown: racial discourse in Canada, 1875-1980*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press; 1991.
15. Dunn K. Rethinking ethnic concentration: the case of Cabramatta, Sydney. *Urban Studies* 1998;35:503-27.
16. Murdie RA, Teixeira C. Towards a comfortable neighbourhood and appropriate housing: immigrant experiences in Toronto. In: Lanphier M, Anisef P, editors. *The world in a city*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press; 2003:132-91.
17. Hou F, Picot G. Visible minority neighbourhood enclaves and labour market outcomes of immigrants. Research paper, Analytical Studies Branch, Statistics Canada; 2003.
18. Lo L. DiverCity Toronto: Canada's premier gateway city. In: Price M, Benton-Short L, editors. *Migrants to the metropolis: the rise of immigrant gateway cities*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press; 2008:97-127.
19. Murdie RA. Diversity and concentration in Canadian immigration: trends in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, 1971-2006. Research Bulletin #42, Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto; 2008.
20. Walks A, Bourne LS. Ghettos in Canada's Cities? Racial Segregation, ethnic enclaves and poverty concentration in Canadian urban areas. *Canadian Geographer* 2006; 50: 273-97.
21. Torbati M. Immigrant entrepreneurship: a case study of Iranian businesses in the Toronto CMA. Toronto: York University; 2006.
22. Teixeira C. Community resources and opportunities in ethnic economies: a case study of portuguese and black entrepreneurs in Toronto. *Urban Studies* 2001; 38:2055-78.
23. Luk C, Phan MB. Ethnic enclave reconfiguration: a "new" Chinatown in the making. *GeoJournal* 2006;64:17-30.
24. Preston V, Lo L, Wang S. Immigrants' Economic Status in Toronto: Stories of Triumph and Disappointment. In: Lanphier M, Anisef P, editors. *The world in a city*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press; 2003:192-262.
25. Lo L. Suburban housing and indoor shopping: the production of the contemporary Chinese landscape in Toronto. In: Li W, editor. *Suburban Asian immigrant communities: from urban enclaves to ethnoburbs*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press; 2006:134-54.
26. Lo L, Zhuang CZ. Immigrants, communities and urban planning. *Urban Planning Overseas* 2005;2:11-17 (in Chinese). [English version in Massam BM, Han SS, editors. *Urban planning overseas: special issues on urban planning in Toronto*. Toronto: Urban Studies Program, York University; 2005:16-29].
27. Fong E, Anderson EE, Chen W, Luk C. The logic of ethnic business distribution in multiethnic cities. *Urban Affairs Review* 2008;43:497-519.
28. Fong E, Luk C, Ooka E. Spatial distribution of suburban ethnic businesses. *Social Science Research* 2005;34:215-35.
29. Qadeer M. Ethnic malls and plazas: Chinese commercial developments in Scarborough, Ontario. Working Paper No. 3. Toronto: Joint Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement (CERIS); 1998.
30. Wang S. *New Development Patterns of Chinese Commercial Activity in the Toronto CMA*. Toronto: Centre for the Study of Commercial Activity, Ryerson Polytechnic University; 1996.
31. Bollens SA. Urban Planning and Intergroup Conflict, Confronting a Fractured Public Interest. *J of American Planning Association* 2002;68:22-42.
32. Burayidi MA. The multicultural city as planners' enigma. *Planning Theory & Practice* 2003; 4:259-273.
33. Qadeer M. Pluralistic planning for multicultural cities. *J of American Planning Association* 1997;63:481-94.
34. Wallace M, Milroy BM. Ethno-racial diversity and planning practices in the Greater Toronto Area. *Plan Canada* 2001;41(3):31-33.
35. Qadeer M. Urban planning and multiculturalism in Ontario. In: Thomas H, Krishnarayan V, editors. *Race Equality and Planning: Policies and Procedures*. Aldershot: Avebury; 1994.
36. Preston V. Immigrants and the built environment: metaphors of inclusion. In: Leloup X, Radice M, editors. *Ethnicité, lieux et territoires: les nouveaux territoires de l'ethnicité*. Laval: Presses de l'Université Laval; 2008:205-32.
37. Wallace M, Frisken F. Meeting the challenges of immigrant settlement: is your municipality ready? *Our Diverse Cities* 2004;1:148-52.