Ethno-Racial Diversity
and Planning Practices in the Greater Toronto Area

by Marcia Wallace
and Beth Moore Milroy, MCIP RPP

This research addresses the issue of whether ethno-racial diversity is acknowledged in planning practices in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

Among the aspects examined are the day-to-day activities of urban planners, the official plans created under the Ontario Planning Act, and the relations between planning staff and other municipal departments, agencies, boards, commissions, and citizens. To the best of our knowledge, no study of this kind has been done before in Canada, although there are examples of similar investigations in Britain and Australia.

Justification for such a study is rooted in the premise that planners should work in the public interest, but that the public interest cannot be taken for granted, and certainly not in the presence of ethno-racial diversity. Ethno-racial diversity is changing the urban landscape and bringing to light certain culturally specific assumptions embedded in planning practice. To work in the public interest entails striving for equity in plans – this is a principle of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms as well as of provincial codes of human rights. Planners must therefore figure out what is equitable and in the public interest when it comes to ethno-racial diversity.

We have chosen the term “ethno-racial diversity” for use in this paper because it serves a purpose, not because it is entirely satisfactory. Writers in this area most often use “multicultural” when discussing ethno-racial diversity, equity, and equality in planning. We find this term to be an uncomfortable fit in this context, not only
The survey revealed that the vast majority of planning departments in the GTA do not seek out data on ethno-racial populations, even when they routinely collect data on other aspects of the population, such as age or income. Most planning departments do, however, have access to basic ethno-racial data, mostly through general census tables from their regional governments or through information collected by planners themselves. Part of the problem is planners' uncertainty about how they might use the information. If they use ethno-racial data at all, they turn to it for background context: A minority of municipalities, however, has developed neighbourhood profiles, and may have used the data as a substantive contribution to recommendations before council.

Public participation

Planners in the GTA recognize the need to improve participation of ethno-racial groups in planning processes such as public meetings, yet they seem comfortable reaching out only in a very modest way. Fear of losing professional neutrality, concern that planning in the public interest means treating everyone exactly the same, and, in some cases, a lack of resources to do more, were the most commonly stated reasons why most planning departments do not reach out to ethno-racial groups. This hesitation to go beyond traditional mechanisms was interesting when compared with the finding that nearly all GTA planners agreed that they routinely exceed public participation requirements of the Planning Act when faced with such things as a controversial project, pressure from interested parties, a request from councillors or the mayor, or work on a large scale or in a large geographical area. By contrast, those surveyed rarely selected “ethno-racial mix of the population” as a reason for increased participation.

Planning outcomes

Evidence of the GTA’s ethno-racial diversity can be seen in a range of changes to the traditional urban, suburban, and even rural landscapes. It is reflected to some extent in land-use changes which have resulted from specific building or development applications for commercial areas, residential neighbourhoods and places of worship. This change is taking place through the formal process—thus, ethno-racial groups are not coming out to public meetings and demanding changes to the planning process, but are instead following the traditional means for planning and development approvals. In responding to survey questions, many planners argued this change in urban form was a technical planning issue and not a cultural one, and in many cases they are exactly right. However, technical planning issues become cultural issues when the culturally specific assumptions of the “neutral” planning system are revealed. One clear example of this is the case of places of worship, where we see planners breaking through cultural assumptions. Height restrictions have been amended to allow for mansard roofs, and a number of uses have been changed to accommodate places of worship that do not have pew seats. But these examples are relatively easy to see. The survey revealed that, because ethno-racial diversity as a phenomenon is not directly connected to official plans and general municipal planning, changes often occur amidst controversy, even when they could have emerged as part of a continual process of questioning assumptions and updating policies and regulations.

Policy

The survey indicates that, except in the area of staff training, attention to ethno-racial diversity is all but absent from municipal policies. The lack of institutional support and implementing mechanisms for existing policies makes it difficult for planners to bring these issues into the planning process, even in the municipalities most conscious of their ethno-racially diverse populations. At a minimum, it is necessary to recognize a community’s ethno-racial diversity in the official plan with a statement, a set of policies, and implementing capacity. The issue of acknowledging ethno-racial diversity in planning practice has barely been touched. There is work here for planners as well as for municipal councillors and planning schools.