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JPG1518 - Final Paper
December 5, 2014

Transformative partnerships in urban planning;
The Storefront's resident-led model for community engagement and Tower Renewal in Toronto

The right to the city is not merely a right of access to what already exists, but a right to change it after our heart's desires.
- David Harvey (2003)

In a time when the merits for community engagement in urban planning are generally well established, the next question that is posed is what kind of engagement process would provide the space for people to shape their neighbourhoods and city according to their heart's desires. This paper explores *a collaborative partnership model* for community engagement called the Community.Design.Initiative. (CDI). The CDI emerged from a collaborative partnership between the East Scarborough Storefront (a community organization), archiTEXT (a design think tank), Sustainable.TO and ERA Architects (two architecture firms), and most importantly, local residents. Starting as an initiative to redesign the building of the East Scarborough Storefront, the CDI grew to become a resident-led community development initiative and a Tower Renewal project[1]. To better understand the CDI process and the reasons for its success, three main points of research analysis are discussed in this paper: (1) What kinds of partnerships were formed through the CDI and the work of the East Scarborough Storefront; (2) How does the CDI process differ from the traditional opportunities provided by the City of Toronto for public input; and (3) What role did 'sustainability' play in the development of the CDI as well as the work undertaken through the CDI. Based on a review of websites, Storefront

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[1] A **Tower Renewal project** refers to any neighbourhood project in Toronto that has become part of the City of Toronto Tower Renewal program. This program was established by City Council to address the

reports and Storefront related documents[2], as well as three interviews[3], I argue that the

CDI can be considered as a *transformative* community engagement process where

residents can verbalize their dreams, while at the same time, gain the skills and form the

partnerships that are necessary to make their dreams a reality.

It is important to first explore the history of the Kingston Galloway-Orton Park

(KGO) neighbourhood in order to understand how the East Scarborough Storefront and

the CDI emerged within (and in response to) a specific socio-political and economic

context. The KGO neighbourhood is located in Ward 43–Scarborough East, and is

considered to be one of Toronto's inner suburbs (City of Toronto, 2014a). Located east of

downtown Toronto, Scarborough suburbs were designed and built after World War 2 for

white, middle-class car-owning families (Cowen & Parlette 2011, p. 3). However, due to

changes in immigration policy and in labour and housing markets, the KGO

neighbourhood became the home to many low-income individuals, refugees and

immigrants, and lone-parent families (Cowen & Parlette 2011). The settlement of a

vulnerable population[4] in this community unfortunately proceeded during a time that was

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[2] Two documents were of particular importance: *The Tower Community That Could; Tower neighbourhood renewal and the Storefront community development* report written by Jaime Elliott-Ngugi and Anne Gloger in 2014; and *The positive impacts & best practices of youth participation in planning: Strengthening theory & application through diverse contexts; The Community Design Initiative case study in the Kingston-Galloway/Orton Park priority neighbourhood, Scarborough, Ontario*, a Queen's University Master's Thesis, written by Jennifer L. Gawor in 2013. I wish to thank Anne Gloger for providing these two very useful documents.

[3] One informal interview was conducted with a representative from the City of Toronto Tower Renewal Office, and two information interviews were conducted with staff from the East Scarborough Storefront and ERA Architects.

[4] In 2011, the total population of the KGO neighbourhood was 23,427 (as captured by the 2011 Census) where 29.8% was low-income, and over 50% of the population were immigrants (City of Toronto 2013a). While the migration status of an individual does not necessarily directly relate to her/his vulnerability, as highlighted by the World Health Organization, "poverty–and its common consequences such as

marked by a historic under-investment in Toronto's inner suburbs (City of Toronto

2014b, p. 2). As a result, KGO residents faced (and continue to face) many challenges

associated with the lack of social services and inadequate physical infrastructure (Cowen

& Parlette 2011, p. 3). In the early 1990s, successful cases of collective action in

Scarborough that demanded the provision of specific social programs were mainly

concentrated in the richer, southern and northwestern areas of Scarborough (Basu 2002,

p. 274)[5]. Thus, it could be said that the provision of social and physical infrastructure in

Scarborough resembled what DeFilippis and Fraser (2010) call the *political economy of*

space where "the quality and distribution of public goods and services is based on the

class of the people receiving those services" (p. 141). Recognizing the need to address the

socio-economic and infrastructure challenges of the KGO neighbourhood, the City of

Toronto designated the KGO neighbourhood as a Neighbourhood Improvement Area[6] in

2005.

　　Within this context, the East Scarborough Storefront (also referred to as 'the

Storefront') was formed in 1999 to fill-in the gaps in social-service provision in the KGO

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malnutrition, homelessness, poor housing and destitution–is a major contributor to vulnerability" (WHO 2014).

[5] Based on the results of a logistic regression analysis, Basu (2002) argues that the success of collective action in Scarborough around the provision of school-based care was highly correlated with a number of *power variables* such as education levels, mobility, and the ability to present 'legitimate' arguments (p. 282).

[6] **Neighbourhood Improvement Areas**, previously known as Priority Areas, are neighbourhoods identified by City Council as areas for investment. In 2014, 31 Neighbourhood Improvement Areas were selected by City Council based on their low scores on the Neighbourhood Equity Index–a methodology where 15 indicators are used to measure neighbourhood outcomes related to economic opportunities, social development, participation in decision-making, physical surroundings and healthy lives (City of Toronto 2014b, p. 5-6). The Neighbourhood Improvement Areas are part of a "strategic initiative [to] address [the] historic under-investment in social infrastructure of some of Toronto neighbourhoods" (City of Toronto 2014b, p. 2).

neighbourhood. The emergence of the Storefront as an important actor in helping to provide social services in the KGO neighbourhood is arguably part of a much greater structural transformation in the Canadian welfare state due to neoliberal policies. Of importance is the state's downloading of social services' provision to community organizations due to neoliberal restructuring (as explored by DeFilippis *et al*. 2010, and Evans & Wekerle 1998). Starting from the late 1990s, the downloading of social programs and funding shortfalls resulted in a serious *crisis;* non-government organizations in Toronto are often faced with the decision to cut important community services and initiatives because of "systemic and chronic under-funding" (Community Social Planning Council of Toronto 2004, p. 3). The Storefront successfully addresses this crisis by building and maintaining collaborative relationships with other agencies where "each partner in the relationship brings skills, expertise and assets to the partnership" (Mann 2012, p. 33). Levering the power of collaboration, the Storefront plays a key role in forming and managing relationships with over 40 partner agencies with the aim of providing needed social services (such as legal advice, mental health counseling, and cooking classes) in the KGO neighbourhood (Storefront 2014a).

The Storefront's success as a community organization is based on its philosophy and institutional approach of emphasizing the positive attributes of the KGO neighbourhood and the power of collaboration in addressing community challenges (Mann 2012). Beyond the socio-economic and infrastructure challenges outlined above, KGO residents view their neighbourhood as a *multicultural, vibrant community* that is "filled with dynamic residents who work collaboratively with local community agencies and City departments to make the community flourish" (Neighbourhood Action 2014).

This positive and empowering view of the KGO neighbourhood is also shared by the

Storefront's vision, mission and values. The Storefront's mission is to provide a

community space that "facilitates collaboration, builds community and supports people to

learn and create together, to live healthy lives, to find meaningful work, to play and

thrive" (Storefront 2014b). To implement this mission, the Storefront works closely with

local residents, by asking and really listening "to what residents want", and approaching

all ideas with a "yes, we can" attitude (Mann 2014, p. 13). This attitude was fundamental

to the development and evolution of the Community.Design.Initiative. (CDI).

The CDI is a project that engaged KGO youth in a participatory architectural

process and mentorship program in order to redesign the Storefront's building and to "re-

imagine their community service hub" (Storefront 2014c). On weekly basis, twenty to

thirty KGO youth participated in seminar-style design classes that were led by architects,

landscape architects, planners, designers, and over 45 professionals (Gawor 2013, p. 28;

Storefront 2014c). The CDI process was governed by a set of ten overall goals[7] and a

youth facilitation framework/curriculum that was developed by Architext Inc.,

Sustainable.TO, and the Storefront (Gawor 2013, p. 28). Because of the primary role that

the Storefront played in this initiative, the CDI became a "yes, we can" space where the

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[7] **The ten overall goals for the CDI** include: (1) design and build a safe accessible space at 4040 Lawrence that will support community members of all ages and cultures to find and share the supports and resources they need; (2) design and build a community space in which the Storefront model can grow and flourish; (3) support local youth to be the lead designers of the project; (4) build the capacity of local youth by introducing them to the possibilities offered through various professions; (5) use a co-creation approach to the project that would ensure reciprocal learning at all levels; (6) where possible, provide economic opportunities for local residents; (7) include the broader community in guiding the overall direction of the project; (8) use sustainable materials and reuse or reclaim wherever possible; (9) develop and implement a community design process model that can be replicated by others; and (10) use a multi-media approach to capture the community design process and share it across the country. (Adapted from Elliott-Ngugi, J. & Gloger, A. 2014, Appendix A, p. 24)

ideas of KGO youth drove the design of the building *and* the participation process. However, as highlighted by the Seven Phases of the CDI[8], the imagination of KGO youth went beyond the physical boundaries of the building at 4040 Lawrence Ave. East. As a result, the seventh Phase of the CDI contains design ideas for 'site landscaping and integration with apartment towers adjacent green space' (Gawor 2013, Appendix 1, p. 107). The expansion of the CDI project into the neighbouring driveways and parking lots outside of the Storefront created an opportunity to turn this project into a community development and a Tower Renewal initiative[9].

The successful growth of the CDI into a Tower Renewal project was largely dependent on the role that the Storefront played in bringing together residents and various public and private partners to the discussion table in order to make the designs of the KGO youth into a reality. The Storefront's mission to facilitate community collaboration and its organizational structure as a 'neighbourhood backbone organization'[10] (Storefront 2014b) provided the *perfect home base* to bring together local residents, community organizations, government representatives, the tower owners, firms, non-government

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[8] **The seven phases of the CDI** include: (1) Master Plan for the facility and site, (2) the Employment and Resource Centre, (3) the Eco Food Hub, (4) green retrofit, (5) west building expansion, (6) second floor expansion, and (7) site landscaping and integration with apartment towers adjacent green space (Gawor 2013, Appendix 1, p. 107). As of 2014, Phases 1 to 4 are completed, Phase 7 is currently being completed, and Phases 5 and 6 are not presently being implemented because of lack of funding (McAteer, 2014, informal interview).

[9] **The Tower Neighbourhood Renewal project** at 4000-4010 Lawrence Ave. East includes the Storefront building at 4040 Lawrence Ave. East, the roads and the parking spaces outside of the Storefront building, and the two adjacent apartment towers that are owned by CAPREIT (Elliott-Ngugi & Gloger 2014, p. 4). This project has been selected as a case study for the Tower Renewal office (*ibid*.). In 2012, the project was also designated as a demonstration site for United Way Toronto Tower Renewal Initiative (*ibid*.).

[10] A **backbone organization** is an organization that assumes the role of providing "backbone support" in community initiatives and projects in order to create and help manage collective impact and accelerate change (Turner et al. 2012). The backbone organization is usually a separate entity "with staff and a specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative and coordinate participating organizations and agencies" (*ibid.*).

organizations, and funders (please see Annex A, Figure 2 for more information on the

CDI project's partnerships). Furthermore, the Storefront's fifteen-year history as a "high

functioning organization" in the KGO neighbourhood brought legitimacy to the project

(McAteer, Eleanor; Project Director, Tower Renewal Office). Thus, most of the

groundwork for building a relationship of trust in the KGO neighbourhood was

completed by the Storefront before the CDI/Tower Renewal project began.

However, it is critical to underline the importance of the *collaborative partnership*

between the Storefront, local residents and the partner agencies; and the significant work

that was undertaken by the people involved in the CDI/Tower Renewal project. In *The*

Tower Community That Could, Jaime Elliott-Ngugi and Anne Gloger (2014) explain that

the Storefront works "in an *emergent framework* which we describe as finding the sweet

spot where momentum meets opportunity" (p. 5, emphasis mine). Arguably, both

momentum and opportunity emerged from the *involvement of people* and the ideas that

they bring to the table. For example, *someone* provided the idea to use the new RAC

zoning[11] regulations to re-zone one of the towers in order to house an A-Z variety store,

and in this way, help to address the need for basic fresh produce in the KGO

neighbourhood. While the local residents may have provided the idea for the variety story

and voiced the need for fresh produce access in the neighbourhood, the project became a

reality through the tremendous amount of work of the Storefront in providing the

platform for discussion; the Tower Renewal office and the city councillor in addressing

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[11] In June 2014, the City of Toronto approved a new **RAC-Residential Apartment Commercial zone,** which "will permit a number of small-scale commercial and community uses on apartment building sites, providing opportunities for new ventures...The new uses may include, for example, small shops, food markets, cafes, learning centers, barbershops, doctor's offices, community centers and places of worship" (City of Toronto 2014c).

the policy barriers; the various professional firms (including SustainableTO, ERA

Architects, Architext, and many more) in exploring the physical possibilities; the many

funders that made this project financially viable; the numerous community organizations

that got involved; and the willingness of local residents and CAPREIT (the tower

owners) to participate[12]. The success of this partnership can be attributed to what

Southern (2005) calls "building collaborative capital[13]", which is considered to be a

"*transformative process* [that] requires a shift in individual and collective beliefs and

assumptions and new patterns of action and supporting structures that encourage

communicative competence and risk taking" (p. 33, emphasis mine).

When reviewing the process structure of the CDI as compared to the traditional

opportunities provided by the City of Toronto for public input[14], the CDI can be

considered a transformative process in terms of the individuals and the organizations

involved. One of the main differences between the CDI and the City's traditional public-

input opportunities is that the CDI process (and the Storefront's Tower Renewal

initiative) focuses on *the process* and not the defined outcomes, milestones or external

deadlines. Such an approach guaranteed that CDI participants had the dominant decision-

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[12] For more information on who was involved in the CDI/Tower Renewal project, please see Figure 2 in Annex A at the back of this paper.

[13] **Collaborative capital** is a relatively recent concept, and for this reason, the meaning and the application of collaborative capital has not been extensively explored (Beyerlein et al. 2005, xvi). However, collaborative capital can be broadly defined as "the organizational assets that enable people to work together well. It is manifested in such outcomes as increased innovation and creativity, commitment and involvement, flexibility and adaptability, leveraging knowledge, and enhancing learning" (Beyerlein et al. 2005, xiii).

[14] In this paper, **traditional opportunities provided by the City of Toronto for public input** refer to the processes/methods that are *commonly* used by the City to get citizen input such as public meetings, online/in-person feedback forms, project/policy information websites, Community Councils and Committees, etc. Some of these public consultations are legislatively required while others are ways for the municipal government to get citizen feedback on policy initiatives and programs.

making authority over the outcomes of the process and could contribute to changes in the structure of the process. Looking back at Arnstein's (1969) *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*, the CDI process and the Storefront's Tower Renewal initiative would probably fall into the "delegated power" rung where "citizens hold the significant cards to assure accountability of the program to them" (p. 222). In contrast, the City's traditional public-input opportunities (such as public meetings and online/in-person feedback forms) would fall either into the "consultation" or "placation" rungs because there is "no assurance that citizen concerns and ideas will be taken into account" (Arnstein 1969, p. 219-220). On this note, Robinson (2005) highlights that although the City of Toronto offers numerous public-input opportunities, still "residents want to feel as though they have more of a say in City decision-making" (p. 9).

Another major difference, between the CDI and the City's traditional public-input opportunities, is that the CDI process focuses on addressing some of the systemic barriers to participation through capacity building[15]. When exploring the reasons behind the geography of collective action in Scarborough, Basu (2002) argues that successful collective action was highly correlated with the ability of the involved residents "to legitimize arguments, communicate effectively…[and] create knowledge (p. 282). Creating and presenting 'legitimate' arguments requires that the involved individuals or the collective group understand the often very technical aspects of policies or projects, and that they can use the language of policy-making, as well as various networks of

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[15] **Capacity building** can be defined as "activities through which vested parties (individuals, organizations, communities, or nation-states) develop the ability to effectively take part in politics or other forms of collective action. The underlying assumption is that by enhancing appropriate skills, attitudes, and knowledge, these parties will be more effective in their respective governing roles. The result is a greater equalization of power, increased access to decision-making venues, and a more even distribution of society's benefits" (Encyclopedia Britannica 2014).

influence, to present their arguments. The City tries to address this issue through the availability of project/program information websites, consultation booklets, and presentations at public meetings. However, the effectiveness of these methods in addressing the above mentioned barriers to participation is questionable. Through interviews with City staff and observation of staff workshops, Robinson (2005) concludes that "some staff are concerned about 'usual suspects' (consultation-regulars who are active participants at events) who tend to dominate civic engagement activities" (p.9). The accessibility of the City's traditional public-input methods and the opportunity for *all* Torontonians to influence the outcomes of the consultation process is thus questioned.

In contrast, the CDI process is more inclusive because it is fundamentally built around the question of "*how can residents have more say in the environment in which they live*?" (Elliott-Ngugi & Gloger 2014, p. 5). Using an Asset Based Community Development Perspective, the CDI process focuses on *the strengths* of the KGO neighbourhood and on providing opportunities to enhance the community's skills, knowledge and institutional partnerships in order to increase the ability of KGO residents to fully participate in politics and collective action (Elliott-Ngugi & Gloger 2014). This is done through the provision of workshops and information sessions, and the development of institutional partnerships and a community space (i.e. the Storefront) where residents can come together and/or access various community resources. As documented by Gawor (2013), the CDI process provided an empowering community space where KGO youth learned about design methods, effective planning processes, architecture, landscaping, and green building (p. 28-29). Importantly, "young people from KGO [were] being consulted as peers and not shown what to do" (Gawor 2013, p. 30). In this way, the CDI

can be considered as a transformative public consultation process because youth gained

access to the necessary skills and networks and were able to directly influence the

development of their neighbourhood.

Thus, *social sustainability* is arguably one of the main drivers of the CDI process.

While social sustainability can be defined and applied in different ways (Vallance et al.

2011), this concept generally refers to the social dimension of sustainable development

and addresses issues of equity and democracy with an emphasis on "participation, needs,

social capital, the economy, [and] the environment" (El-Husseiny & Kesseiba 2012, p.

792). Social sustainability was addressed through the CDI process in a number of ways:

(1) building social capital through community partnerships and institutional connections;

(2) providing an informative and empowering community engagement process; (3)

encouraging community leadership; (4) promoting ownership of community space; (5)

utilizing a community-led, bottom-up design process; (6) recognizing and addressing

community needs and gaps in service provision; and (7) providing an inclusive space

with an emphasis on youth involvement. Furthermore, the CDI process can be seen as

part of a larger movement where community organizations are "successfully developing

tools to bridge the interests of their residents and the municipal planning process"

(Agyeman 2005, p. 112). These community-based tools are seen as a way of grounding

social justice in sustainability and land-use planning (*ibid*.).

It is important to note, however, that the CDI and the Storefront's Tower Renewal

project emphasized all aspects–the social, economic, and environmental–of sustainable

development[16]. In addition to social sustainability, *environmental s*ustainability was

integrated into the building design (through an emphasis on energy and water efficiency

and the use of recycled materials) *and* the implementation of various programs (such as

the waste diversion program). The *economic* pillar of sustainability was addressed

through a number of initiatives that were integrated into the new design of the Storefront

building including the Employment and Resource Center, and the Eco Food Hub (a

community kitchen that small businesses can use). This strong integration of

'sustainability' into the CDI/Tower Renewal project is directly related to the 'sustainable

development' institutional objectives of the Storefront, the Tower Renewal office and a

number of partner agencies. To illustrate, the Storefront's mission emphasizes the role of

the Storefront in promoting: social sustainability (through facilitating collaboration,

building community and supporting people); environmental sustainability (in promoting

"healthy lives" that will arguably require a healthy environment); and economic

sustainability (in helping people "find meaningful work") (Storefront 2014b). Similarly,

the Tower Renewal office identifies three–environmental, social cultural, and economic–

core project areas that all Tower Renewal initiatives must address (City of Toronto

2014a).

As an embodiment of David Harvey's quote on 'the right to the city', the CDI and

the Storefront's Tower Renewal initiative can be seen as a new, transformative

community engagement process that provides an institutional space for

the *participating* KGO residents to change their neighbourhood according to their heart's

desires. As compared to the traditional opportunities provided by the City of Toronto for

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[16] For more information on how each pillar of sustainability was addressed, please see Table 1 in Annex A
at the back of this paper.

public input, a transformation appears to have taken place both *internally* (within the CDI process) and *externally* (beyond the CDI process). Within the CDI community engagement process, the transformation occurred in the shift of decision-making power from planners and consultants to KGO youth and residents. Externally, beyond the CDI project/Storefront's Tower Renewal initiative, a transformation seems to have occurred within the participating individuals (including those involved through the partner agencies). The CDI process provided the space for relationship building, for enhancing different skills, attitudes, and knowledge among *all* parties involved. One of the things that I liked most about the CDI was the "mandatory and progressive mentorship program" that professionals, involved in the CDI project, had to complete in order to work with KGO youth (Gawor 2013, p. 30). This mentorship program established the foundation for a two-way flow of information and relationship building. However, as was highlighted during the interviews, it takes a lot of time, financial resources, and a well-established community facilitator for the CDI process to be implemented effectively. These are some of the many obstacles of developing and implementing such a comprehensive and transformative community engagement process in urban planning. Despite these obstacles, the Storefront, KGO residents and the partner agencies demonstrated that a comprehensive community engagement process can be successfully implemented. It may be tempting to assume that the CDI process cannot be replicated in other planning initiatives in Toronto, but it should be clear that "every accomplishment starts with a decision to try" (Gail Devers).

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ANNEX A

Image adapted from Google Maps

Figure 1: The growth of the CDI from a redesign of the Storefront building to a Tower Renewal project and a community development initiative
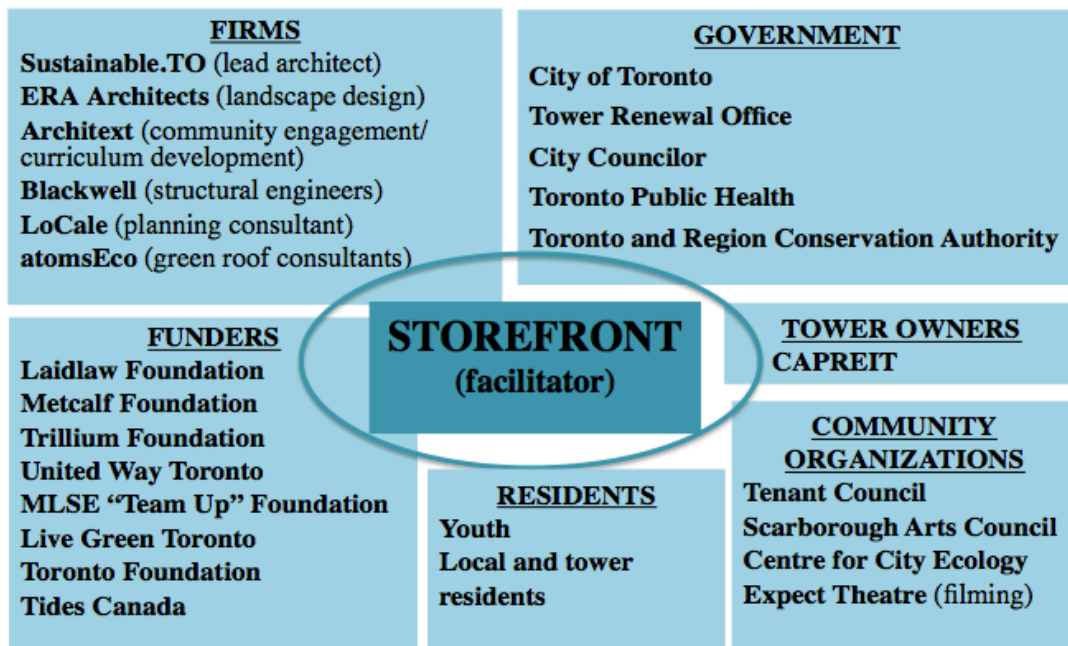

Figure 2: Partnership formation through the CDI process/Storefront's Tower Renewal initiative

Note: The partnerships outlined in Figure 2 were identified through online research and interviews. Some partner agencies may be missing.

Social	Environmental	Economic
• Building social capital through partnerships and connections • Informative and empowering community engagement process • Encouraging community leadership • Local ownership of the project • Community-led, bottom-up design • Identifying and addressing community needs and gaps in service provision • Youth-centered and inclusive program • Pedestrian walkway; accessibility ramp; outdoor play space	• Building design: energy and water efficient • Development of waste diversion program in rental towers • Sky-o-Swale structure - green roof and rainwater filtering and collection • The Eco Food Hub • Community gardening • Use of recycled materials in the design • Bike Repair Clinic • Increased shading through tree planting initiatives	• The Employment and Resource Center • The Eco Food Hub - kitchen space for local businesses • Bike Repair Clinic - low cost of travel • Encourage property owners to upgrade/renovate their properties • Shared driveway-minimize maintenance cost • Health Corner Store Initiative (in the towers)

Table 1: The three pillars of sustainability and the CDI process/Storefront's Tower Renewal project

Note: A number of the above initiatives fall into more than one pillar of sustainability. Additionally, the initiatives outlined in Table 1 were identified through online research and interviews, and as a result, some initiatives may be missing.