

Documentary looks at Regent Park community's response to revitalization



My Piece of the City looks at the changing Regent Park neighbourhood.

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When the revitalization of Toronto's Regent Park neighbourhood was first announced in 2003, the response from the community was mixed. The new documentary *My Piece of the City* looks at reactions from the neighbourhood's young artists. One of those comes from Jael Cabey Jones, who in the film weighs in on the visible erasure of her community with this: "I feel like they stomped all over Regent Park and said basically, your history is not good enough for us to want to keep."

It's a statement that speaks directly to the reality of the revitalization: While it promises to remedy challenges of Regent Park's physical landscape, it has also permanently and irrevocably altered the course of the neighbourhood's legacy. Jones's voice is one of the many featured in *My Piece of the City*, which makes its world premiere at the [15th annual Regent Park Film Festival](#) this Saturday. The documentary explores the revitalization by telling the story of a musical created in the same spirit. *The Journey*, which premiered in 2013 at Regent Park's Daniels Spectrum cultural centre, is based on the stories of three young people living in the neighbourhood, tracing the history of the area leading up to the revitalization.

Directed by Moze Mossanen, *My Piece of the City* is a natural complement to the musical and aims to memorialize the vibrancy of Regent Park while also legitimizing the apprehension of its residents. Mossanen, the Gemini Award-winning director behind the intricate art films *Nureyev* and *The Golden City*, chose the emotive dexterity of an approach anchored by music. Throughout *My Piece of the City*, commentary on the revitalization is interspersed with behind-the-scenes frustrations and triumphs leading up to the *The Journey's* opening night. Polished segments of the musical are cut between shots of the artists rehearsing, adding up to a rich portrait of a neighbourhood undergoing change through the eyes of those affected the most.

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Mossanen started exploring the idea of these kids who remember the old but are also quite cognizant of the new, almost caught between the past and the future," he says. "They've got questions, they're not sure of what the future's going to hold, and not sure about what they've lost. Was it worth it?"

He understood that representing the complexity of residents' experiences necessitated a directorial approach hinged on active listening. He describes one moment when he probed the [artists featured in the film] with what he calls "a stupid white boy question."

"I asked, 'How many of you still experience any kind of racism in this day and age?' Without a hesitation, all 10 kids put up their hand. I gasped. I

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It is moments such as this where Mossanen's film redirects the speakerbox back at the film's artists, positioning them as the arbiters and critics of the revitalization's success and shortcomings. The method delivers a final product that recognizes the limitations of relying solely on unscripted dialogue as an expressive medium, while also prioritizing music as the primary vehicle of storytelling.

Yet it's difficult to ignore the politics around both the film and the musical. Mitchell Cohen, the president of the real estate giant Daniels Corporation, the revitalization's primary developer, wrote the script and contributed songs to *The Journey*. The fact the musical was performed inside the new Daniels Spectrum centre, and that the film was produced in association with Daniels Corporation, carries both ethical baggage and skepticism: Is the film simply an elaborate promotional endeavour?

Mossanen contends that he had total artistic control and the freedom to depict the corporation in an unflattering light. To him, *The Journey* and its documentation in *My Piece of the City* is an extension of the lengthy relationship between Daniels and the community: It is reflective of the years spent conducting extensive community consultations and championing a civic design where walkable streets and accessible amenities offered the best chance of fostering meaningful connections between residents. "Cohen's contribution to the musical was really a continuation of what he started 10 years ago," he says.

There is an element to revitalizations that cannot anticipate the future of a city whose own path forward seems so uncertain. Amidst an escalating housing crisis in Toronto and gentrification that continues to exacerbate social inequality, the success of the Regent Park revitalization is an accidental experiment of what socially conscious urban growth could, or should, look like. It's also a story that is nowhere near its conclusion.

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For Mossanen, *My Piece of the City* is just a single part of that puzzle. "I was anxious about doing it right," he says, "because it's a tough thing to get wrong."
