

# Malvern Memories

From Heritage Preservation to Anti-Displacement in  
Toronto's Racialized Inner Suburbs.

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# Executive Summary

# Executive Summary

A sprawling mall moored on an island of asphalt parking, engulfed by a suburban ocean at the margins of Toronto is slated for major intensification and local communities are not happy about it. The reality of Toronto's inner suburbs is that poor and racialized communities depend heavily on malls as spaces for cultural expression, community gathering, and affordable access to material needs. Using the ongoing Malvern Mall redevelopment as a case study, I investigate informal claims of the mall as a vital piece of social infrastructure and a site of cultural heritage.

Despite claims that diversity, equity and inclusion are priorities in the heritage sector today, the existing heritage framework in Ontario is radically misaligned with the actual needs of marginalized communities. Drawing from the lived experiences of local Malvern residents through interviews, popular media, and a recording of community consultation, I question the assumption that spaces like Malvern Mall do not have any heritage value. I argue that the inability and unwillingness of the heritage sector to act in the face of this displacement surfaces implicit biases embedded in existing practice. I further argue that beyond biases in practice, the existing heritage framework is fundamentally flawed in how it conceives of heritage. Contemporary heritage preservation tools, focused on built form, are ill-equipped for racialized suburbs where cultural heritage value emerges through informal functions of cultural expression and social interaction.

Malvern teaches us that if we are serious about equitable development we must look beyond the tangible-intangible heritage binary. I argue that while an overly precious approach that preserves only bricks and mortar is insufficient for racialized communities, we cannot ignore the tangible socio-spatial systems that enable the formal and informal functions of the mall.

Further, I argue that we cannot simply commemorate stories of poor and racialized communities post-displacement, but that commemoration is a powerful storytelling and research tool to be actively incorporated into community organising and the design process. Through the organizing of a commemoration event for the Malvern Mall, I note that currently neither property owners nor heritage planners are bearing the responsibility to protect the heritage value of the mall, but this must change, as it does fall within the disciplinary scope for heritage planners.

I offer three potential future pathways for heritage and community planners to consider. For heritage practitioners I suggest advocacy for legislative change in the Ontario Heritage Act to de-centre property, and for the City of Toronto's heritage department to proactively develop relationships with Economic Development & Culture, and Social Development Finance & Administration teams to better respond to the heritage needs of spaces like Malvern Mall. For community planners I suggest acknowledging the social, cultural and heritage value of malls in the city's Mall Redevelopment Guide.

Ultimately, this report asks heritage and planning practitioners to offer Malvern care and dignity in the face of intense redevelopment pressure, and imagine reparative heritage futures.

# Introductions

**Introducing Malvern, The Mall, Myself,  
and What You're Reading**

## **Introducing Myself**

My name is Faizaan. Today I live, work, love and play in Toronto, but I am a recent settler on these lands. I arrived as part of a long lineage of migrations and displacements across multiple generations. I inherited rootlessness like a family heirloom. When I was a teenager, I arrived in Canada and settled in East Scarborough at Orton Park and Lawrence, a 10 minute drive south of Malvern. Scarborough was the first place I ever put down roots.

As I spent my days commuting between Scarborough and downtown for school and work, I quickly learned Scarborough's standing in Toronto's urban discourse. Overlooked, undervalued, and undesirable. Scarborough was a place to intervene on, to redesign, to fix and to improve. I was no stranger to all the ways that our infrastructure didn't work for us, but I also saw beyond that. I could also see the beautiful contestations of this particularly hostile urban form that we had inherited. The temples in old warehouses, the weddings in strip plaza banquet halls, and the Taraweeh prayers in gas station laundromats. At the center of it all, the mall as our community hubs.

My mall is Cedarbrae Mall. I would sit in the food court listening to aunties and uncles chatting over their Tim's coffee. I would wade through the steady stream of mall walkers, and I would listen to the high schoolers gossip while I got my hair cut. I originally considered doing this study on Cedarbrae, but as this project emerged, the real and imminent threat of the Malvern Town Centre redevelopment was difficult to ignore. So that's how I find myself here. Malvern Town Centre is not my mall. So I sit in a different food court full of different aunties and uncles chatting, wade through a different stream of mall walkers, and listen to different high schoolers gossip. I hope I have brought Malvern Mall the same care that I would have brought to Cedarbrae. I have been met with openness and generosity from members of the Malvern community who hold this mall dear to their hearts, it is in that spirit that I do this work.

## **Introducing The Place We Call Malvern**

This project is focused on a mall that sits in a place that is now often called Malvern. Malvern is located deep in North-East Scarborough. As you read this report, it is important to remember that this place was not always called Malvern and this mall was not always here. Malvern is on Indigenous land. Specifically, the traditional territories of the Anishinabeg, the Haudenosaunee, the Chippewa, the Wendat, and the Mississaugas of the New Credit territory. This land has been stolen from its traditional caretakers to build the place we now call Malvern.

Today, Malvern is largely inhabited by racialized newcomers, immigrants and settlers. Many arrived here involuntarily due to their own histories of dispossession and colonialism, particularly those brought to these lands as a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and slavery. Our stories

are connected. This city was built on stolen land and stolen labour of Indigenous, Black and racialized people.

This project studies cultural heritage. The same colonial frameworks that have violently erased Indigenous cultural practices and heritage, and continue to do so today, also overlook the histories and heritage of non-Indigenous racialized settlers. As we think towards reparative futures in this place we call Malvern, it is crucial to remember whose land we are imagining these futures on.

## Introducing The Mall

Meet the Malvern Town Centre. It is a sprawling mall moored on an island of asphalt parking, engulfed by a suburban ocean at the margins of Toronto that is slated for residential redevelopment. It will be replaced by 15 towers containing over 5,700 residential units, and local communities are not happy about it. In planning discourse, amid our housing crisis, suburban opposition to residential density can conjure images of wealthy, white homeowners reproducing persistent narratives of classist and racist exclusion. Today, Toronto's inner suburbs are disproportionately home to many of Toronto's immigrant and racialized communities, and are increasingly lower-income (Aery, 2019. Hope et al, 2022). The reality of Toronto's inner suburbs is that poor and racialized communities depend heavily on malls as spaces for cultural expression, community gathering, and affordable access to material needs. Among these inner suburbs is Scarborough, where these factors are particularly acute. These diverse, marginalized communities exist in outdated, car-centric, suburban built form, like malls, that

# Meet the Malvern Town Centre



Figure 1. Malvern Town Centre (source: Malvern Town Centre)



were never designed for them (Cowen & Parlette, 2011). Despite the hostile urbanism and systemic disinvestment, several multi-ethnic and multi-cultural immigrant communities have made their homes here.

## Introducing The Project

Through the interfacing of these communities with a post-war North American suburb, a unique cultural heritage landscape has emerged. Contemporary tools for evaluating and protecting cultural heritage value are focused on architectural form. In practice we see these tools being deployed inequitably, historically prioritizing and protecting architectural form that subscribes to culturally specific systems of aesthetic value. Contemporary tools and the way they are used are ill-equipped for the Scarborough context, where rich cultural heritage value often emerges *despite* the built form it is embedded in.

On June 28, 2022, the current owners of the mall applied for an Official Plan Amendment and a Zoning Bylaw Amendment. Throughout the development process, the applicants make no mention of the mall's cultural heritage value and similarly, the heritage sector in Toronto also has not publicly mobilized to advocate for the mall's cultural heritage. These planning actors do not see any heritage value in the mall. Through this project I argue that not only is there cultural heritage value to be lost, but that the inability and unwillingness to recognize and act on it is indicative of deeply embedded biases within existing heritage planning frameworks.

Discourse on heritage preservation in planning is often intertwined with accusations of exclusionary, anti-density attitudes ([Blonder, 2022](#). [Graham, 2022](#). [Kurek, 2015](#)). To apply a cultural heritage lens to an economically stagnating mall can raise concerns over the weaponization of heritage to maintain the status quo of suburbs. This project aims to take a nuanced approach and expand what we mean when we talk about cultural heritage in relation to Scarborough. The objectives of this project are:

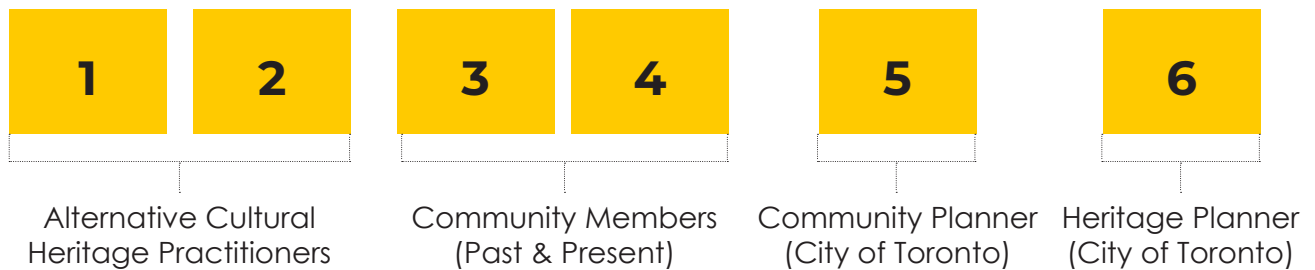
- 1) To unravel how the criteria for determining cultural heritage value are applied and interpreted unevenly along axes of class and race;
- 2) To explain why the existing cultural heritage framework, even if applied evenly, is misaligned with how cultural heritage manifests in Malvern Mall;
- 3) To establish how to think about Malvern Mall's heritage beyond a tangible-intangible binary;
- 4) To urge heritage practitioners to act in the face of displacement, rather than simply commemorate displaced communities after the fact.

# Introducing The Process

This project uses a case study research design, focusing on the ongoing Malvern Mall redevelopment. Using an ongoing development as a case study allows this research to function as a pseudo-archival project. Capturing contemporary sentiments and feelings about the mall, how its development is being handled, and how heritage fits into the conversation. In order to construct a cohesive picture of the Malvern Mall redevelopment, I have conducted 6 semi-structured interviews to collect primary data. These semi-structured interviews are supplemented by content analysis of a community consultation meeting that took place on November 2, 2023, popular media about the mall, and the property owner’s publicly available development application materials.

Using these sources of data to provide an illustrative case study, I then use a literature review to examine the mall redevelopment through a cultural heritage lens. The literature review focuses on understanding both the existing legal framework for cultural heritage preservation in Ontario as well as current paradigms in cultural heritage studies more broadly. This approach allows me to understand how current paradigms and conceptions of heritage are limited and what gaps are emerging in the context of heritage for racialized communities.

## A Key Informant Interviews



## B Supplementary Materials



## C Literature Review



Figure 2. Malvern Memories Community Commemoration Event. (source: Author)

# The Problem With Heritage In Malvern

**The Existing Cultural Heritage Framework  
At Odds with Malvern Mall**

# The Ontario Heritage Act

Within Ontario, the evaluation, conservation, protection, and preservation of heritage is governed by the Ontario Heritage Act (OHA). Prior to 2006, the OHA did not include any formal definition of what determined cultural heritage value or interest. Instead through its text it conflated cultural heritage value with “historic or architectural value or interest.” (OHA Part IV section 29.16, section 33.1.1, section 68.1).

In 2006, O. Reg. 9/06: Criteria For Determining Cultural Heritage Value Or Interest was introduced. This regulation lays out the nine criteria against which all properties are tested to determine if they have cultural heritage value or interest (CHVI) and can be designated as protected (more on what ‘protected’ actually means later) under Part IV or V of the OHA. This provided a functional definition for municipalities to use. The criteria are as follows:

## Physical or Design Value

## Historical or Associative Value

## Contextual Value

<p><b>1.</b> The property has design value or physical value because it is a rare, unique, representative or early example of a style, type, expression, material or construction method.</p>	<p><b>4.</b> The property has historical value or associative value because it has direct associations with a theme, event, belief, person, activity, organization or institution that is significant to a community.</p>	<p><b>7.</b> The property has contextual value because it is important in defining, maintaining or supporting the character of an area.</p>
<p><b>2.</b> The property has design value or physical value because it displays a high degree of craftsmanship or artistic merit.</p>	<p><b>5.</b> The property has historical value or associative value because it yields, or has the potential to yield, information that contributes to an understanding of a community or culture.</p>	<p><b>8.</b> The property has contextual value because it is physically, functionally, visually or historically linked to its surroundings.</p>
<p><b>3.</b> The property has design value or physical value because it demonstrates a high degree of technical or scientific achievement.</p>	<p><b>6.</b> The property has historical value or associative value because it demonstrates or reflects the work or ideas of an architect, artist, builder, designer or theorist who is significant to a community.</p>	<p><b>9.</b> The property has contextual value because it is a landmark. O. Reg. 569/22, s. 1.</p>

In 2022, proposed amendments to the regulation caused “outrage” among heritage conservancy advocates (Coukell, 2022). One of the proposed changes was that where properties once had to satisfy only one out of the nine criteria to be considered as having CHVI, they now had to satisfy two of the nine criteria. This change in particular was cited as disproportionately affecting BIPOC and other marginalized communities. Diane Chin, the president of the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario in an official statement against the More Homes Built Faster Act, stated that “requiring two criteria for designation, instead of one, will make it practically impossible to protect the often-humble buildings that tell the stories of BIPOC and other marginalized communities” (ACO, 2022). Similarly, Dan Schneider, a contributor to the University of Waterloo's Heritage Resource Centre stated, in reference to the City of London's Fugitive Slave Chapel that “is of great importance to the local Black community,” that “the one-to-two change in the criteria will pretty much rule out designation and legal protection of the Fugitive Slave Chapel — and countless historic places like it. Similarly with buildings of ‘only’ contextual importance in places like Kensington Market and Little Jamaica” (2022).

While admirable that these heritage advocates care about protecting spaces of importance to BIPOC and marginalized communities, they fail to question the cultural assumptions underlying their interpretations of the 9/06 criteria, particularly design value, and further, struggle to look beyond the existing framework that centres buildings rather than communities. When viewed in context of the heritage sector's historical inadequacy in protecting marginalized heritage, the appeals to renounce Bill 23 because of its effects on marginalized populations reek of tokenism at best and scapegoating at worst.

Malvern serves as a cogent living example of why this existing paradigm fails to meet the needs of marginalized communities, and why new frameworks for understanding and preserving cultural heritage are vital to explore.

## **The Malvern Context**

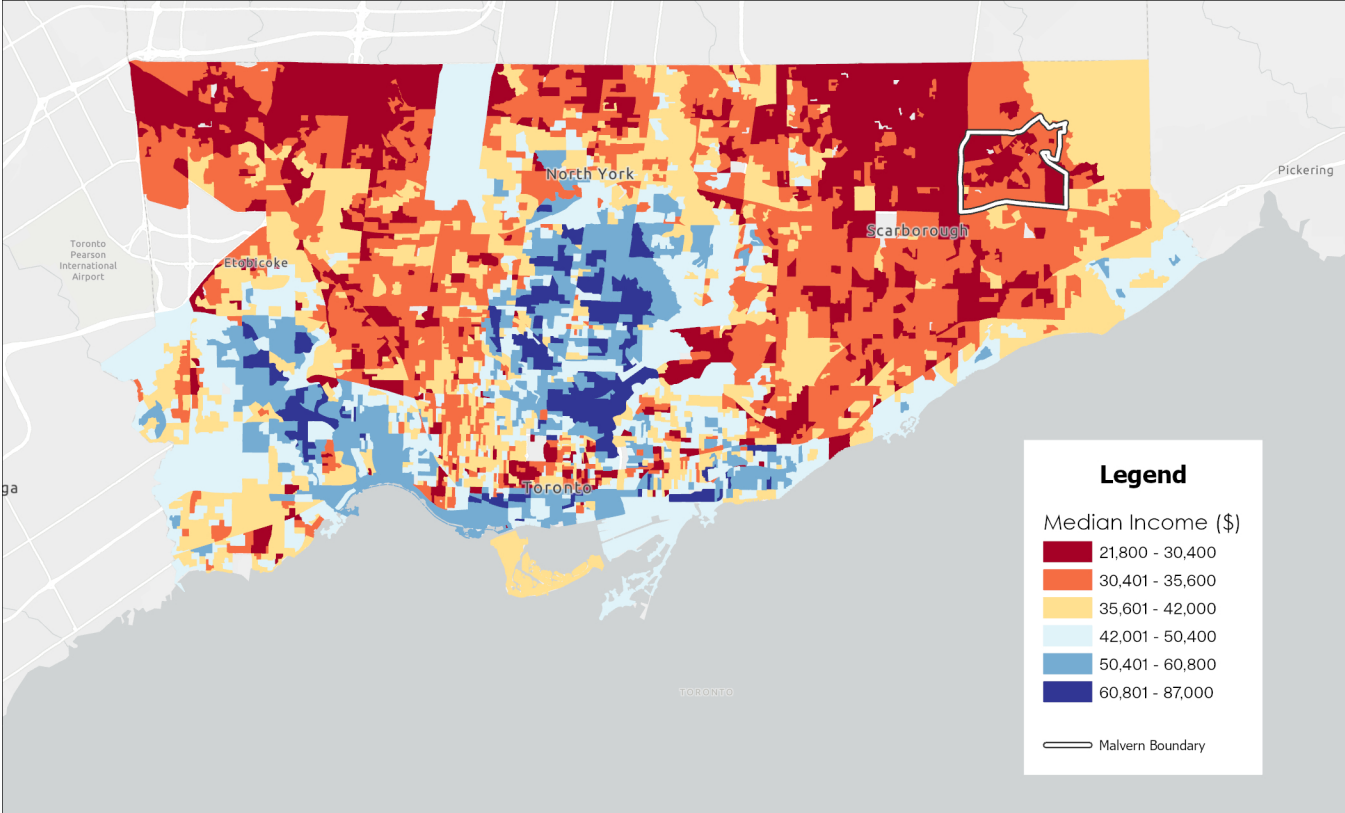
Until 2014, Malvern was considered a Neighbourhood Improvement Area. In the Toronto Strong Neighbourhood Strategy (TSNS), Malvern scores a 43.89 on the neighbourhood equity index. This falls just outside of the 42.89 benchmark to be considered a Neighbourhood Improvement area. The following three maps show Malvern's median income, proportional population of immigrants, and proportional population of visible minorities, all in relation to Toronto overall. Map 1 shows us how income disparity is largely polarized between the downtown/centre regions of Toronto, and it's North-East and North-West inner suburbs, which includes Scarborough and Malvern. Map 2 and 3 show us how this pattern of polarization occurs also when looking at visible minority and immigrant populations respectively. Visible minority and immigrant populations are concentrated in similar regions as the lower income populations.

90% of Malvern residents identify as visible minorities, compared to 57% in Toronto overall

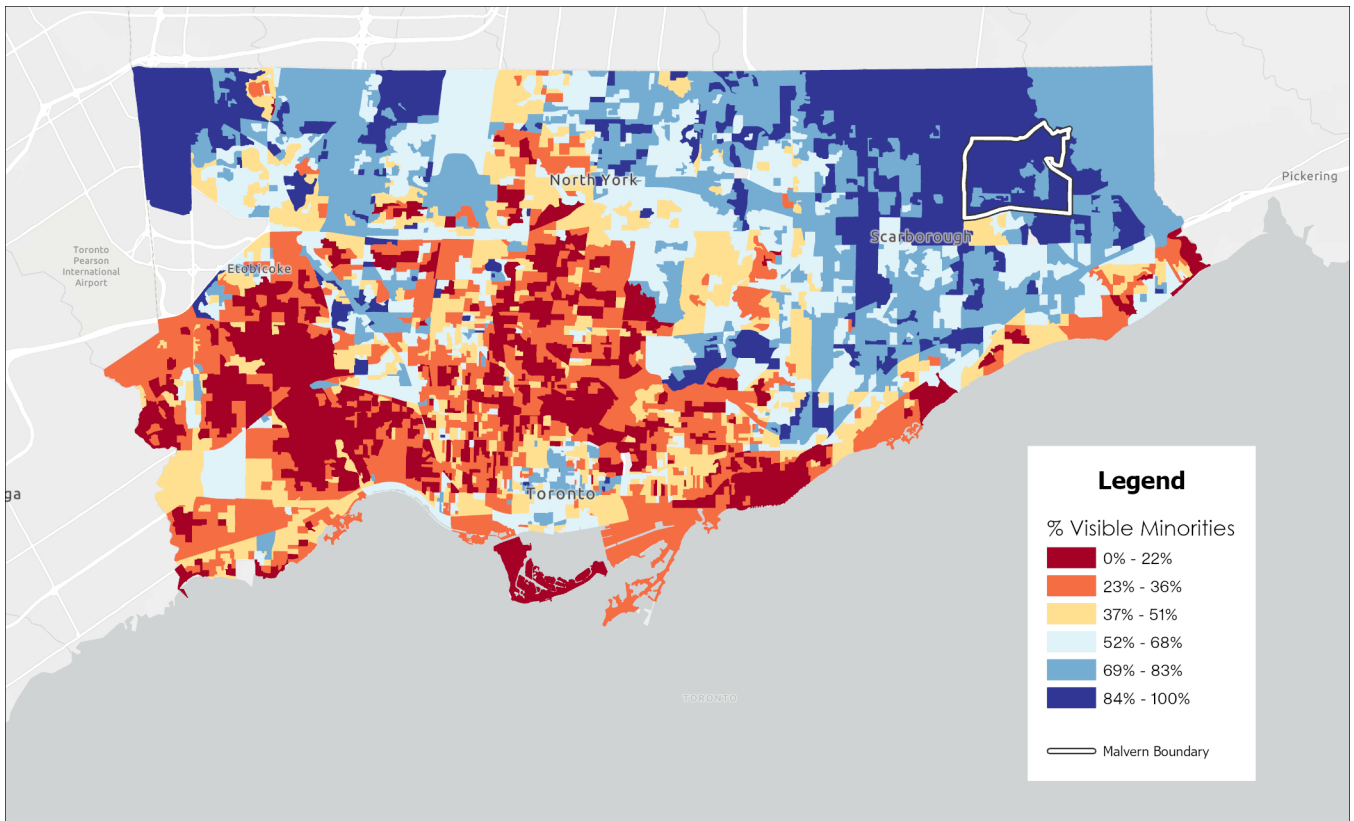
(Statistics Canada, 2021). Malvern specifically has a large proportion of South Asian, Black and Filipino residents. 63% of Malvern's residents are immigrants, compared to 49% of Toronto overall (Statistics Canada, 2021). When looking at immigration by year, Malvern's immigrant residents largely arrived between 1991 and 2010. 12% of Malvern's immigrant residents arrived between 2011 and 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2021). This indicates that Malvern, over the past 40 years has been a hub for newcomers.

Given these patterns of racialization and income disparity, Malvern and Scarborough more broadly also exist in a context of stigmatized cultural and academic discourse. In cultural discourse, pejorative or even racist epithets like Scarlem or Scarberia are projected onto Scarborough, which is coupled with the rise of the 'dead' mall (Bookbinder, 2023), and in academia the concept of the declining suburbs emerges (Pham, 2024). This language centres economic measures of success, and actively erases all other forms of value.

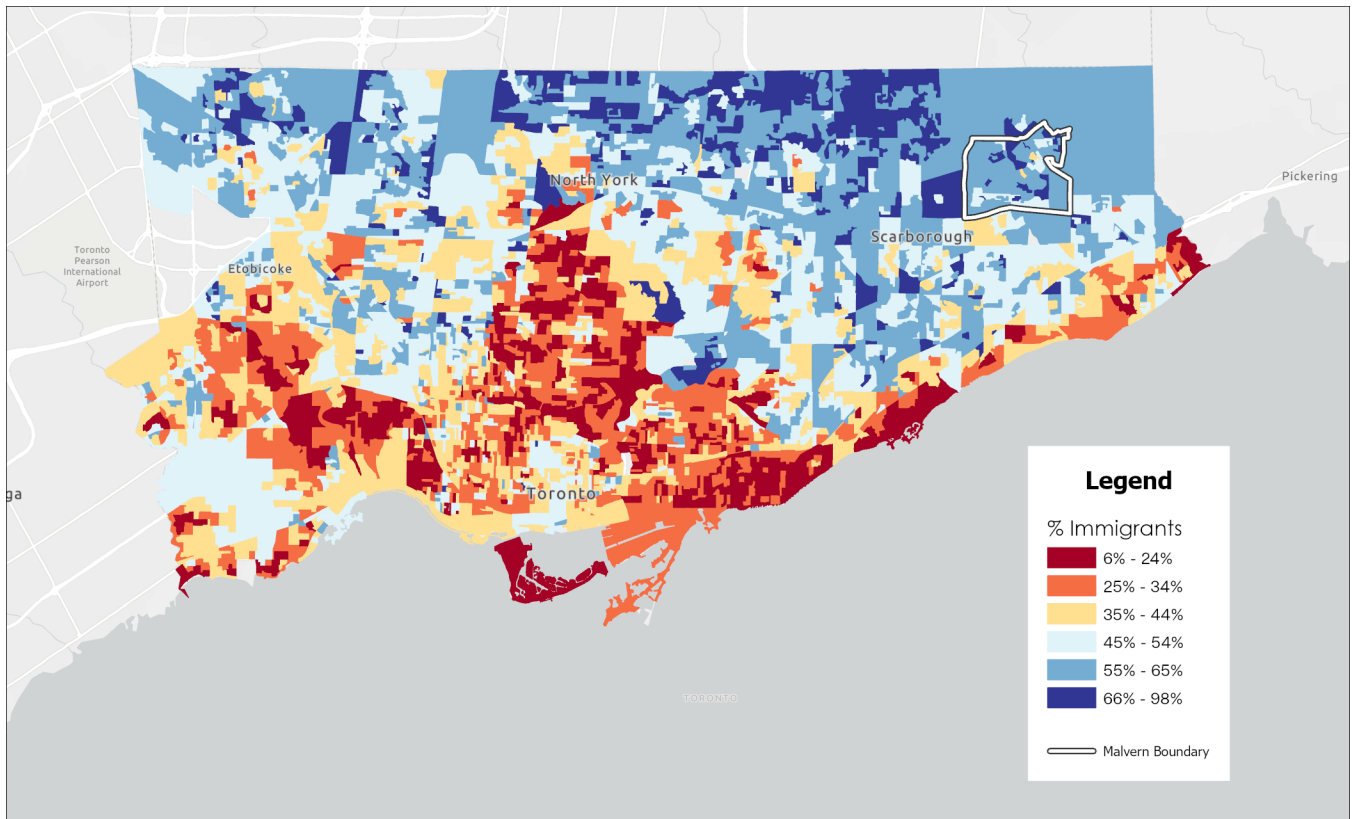
Malvern is home to the racialized and marginalized communities that these heritage practitioners cite in their advocacy efforts to maintain the status quo in heritage policy. On top of that, it exists within a discourse that tends to stigmatize and invisibilize multiple non-economic measures of value. This context sets the stage for how existing heritage practice continues a legacy of overlooking the value, in this case heritage value, of inner suburban spaces along axes of race and class.



Map 1. Median Income by Dissemination Area, 2020.



Map 2. Percent of Visible Minorities by Dissemination Area, 2021.



Map 3. Percent of Immigrants by Dissemination Area, 2021.



# Malvern Mall's Social and Cultural Value

Like many post-war suburban malls, Malvern Town Centre is a single storey enclosed mall surrounded by large swaths of surface parking. While the mall's form speaks to the heavy car-dependency of Malvern, it serves several important functions, both formal and informal, for the community.

Besides its function as a space for buying and selling goods, the mall hosts important human services. First there is TAIBU Community Health Centre, which offers Black-identifying clients from throughout the Greater Toronto Area access to a range of health services, ranging from primary care to meals for those facing precarious food access. As established, there is a disproportionately high number of black residents in Malvern. There is also TDSB Newcomer services, which is fitting in the context of Malvern which we have established to have been a newcomer hub over the past 40 years, and that still welcomes a significant population of newcomers. Most recently there was the addition of the Malvern Aboriginal Child and Family Centre, one of 8 service centres in Toronto, and one of only 4 EarlyON centres.

Formal	
<p><b>Culturally Specific Businesses</b></p> <p><b>Including but not limited to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rubini's West Indian Grocer. <i>*(Replaced Tamil Food Store)</i></li> <li>Delhi6ix.</li> <li>Scotchies.</li> <li>Royal Bazaar.</li> <li>FreshLand Supermarket.</li> <li>Kabul Halal Meat.</li> <li>Kin Kin Bakery.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Community and Social Services</b></p> <p><b>Including but not limited to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>TAIBU Community Health Centre</li> <li>TDSB Newcomer Services</li> <li>Malvern Aboriginal Child and Family Centre</li> <li>Service Canada</li> </ul>

Informal		
Multi-Generational Space	Social Infrastructure for Seniors and Youth	Cross-Cultural Space

Even within the formal and recognized uses of the mall through its retailers, the mall serves the needs of its communities in culturally specific ways. Local community organizer Debbie Naipaul explains,

*“If you look at the retailers in this mall, many of them are newcomers and small business owners. What I love about Malvern mall is there are many cultural items that are available. You've got the West Indian supermarket at the back of the mall. You've got the food court that offers various cultural foods, you've got used clothing, and there are many stores that offer all different types of items that are appealing to many different cultures that reside here in Malvern. So that's what makes the mall not just appealing, but functional. I don't have to drive out I can go right here in Malvern.”*

She further adds,

*“If you look at the retailers, it is a very clear depiction of the cultures in this community. And that's what blew my mind with the developer. Do you not see who is selling products? And what kind of products are being sold in this mall? Chances are they've been here for years because there are people in the community buying it.”*

It is within the mall's many informal social and cultural uses that key themes of its value can be ascertained. One of the best documented informal uses of the mall is the Malvern Mall Walkers club. Niya Abdullahi, a youth artist, in her photo essay on the Mall Walkers explains that “the group began over 20+ years ago as a way to connect and support each other. These mornings that they spent as a group were sacred. After the workout, they spent time keke-ing, catching up and organizing mini-events” (Abdullahi, 2023). The mall functions as social infrastructure for seniors in an otherwise isolating suburban landscape. Abdullahi further explains that, “if someone doesn't show up, they call and check on them. They are truly there for each other” (2023).

The mall is not just for seniors though. Both Naipaul and another interviewee, someone who lived in Malvern as a youth, noted that Malvern Mall functions as an intergenerational space. Naipaul noted that the mall is “definitely a communal space. It is an intergenerational space (personal communication, 2023). She mentioned this in the context of a story of her

joining the Mall Walker Club as she recovered from an accident. As the other interviewee explained, the mall “was definitely a community space. It was for different generations” (personal communication, 2024) noting that the mall was a hang out spot for both seniors and teenagers, during lunch or after school.

On top of the theme of intergenerational use, there is the layer of cross-cultural exchange and socialization. Abdullahi puts it best, “these strangers from around the globe became family” (2023). The Malvern Artist also notes that the seniors hanging out at the mall come “from different cultural communities” (personal communication, 2024).

At a community consultation regarding the development that took place in November 2023, a community member asks the developer, “How many of you have heard of Caribana or have enjoyed Kiddy Carnival and the Tamil heritage festival?” She explains that historically, these festivals are “a deep fabric of the community.” On the topic of the Kiddy Carnival, the speaker notes that the event happens at Neilson Park and that “the only place we park is at lovely Malvern Mall. So, we're now getting into a situation where they move from Eglinton West, because of developers taking up all that open space and the ability for people to celebrate and express their culture.”

The socio-demographic distribution that we see in Malvern today is radically different than the inner suburban neighbourhoods of years past. Where Malvern today is heavily racialized, lower-income and an immigrant hub, the post-war inner suburbs were originally designed to be working class settlements through the Veterans' Housing Act and were eventually dominated by the white middle class (Cowen & Parlette, 2011). Thus, the mall, both as an individual site and as an urban typology, was never designed intentionally to serve these communities. To some degree it has adapted, but ultimately, these communities exist in a built form that was not designed for them. They occupy and contest the prescribed functions of the mall in subtle and unexpected ways. TAIBU, TDSB newcomer services, Malvern Aboriginal Child and Family Centre, Rubini's, Tai Chi, the Mall Walkers; all of these uses take place in the Malvern Mall, not because it was necessarily designed for them or because it is necessarily the best place for them, but because it is the place that existed. It is the place they had access to.

## **Implicit Biases in Interpretations of Value.**

Taking the experiences and observations of community members, clearly the mall holds some social and cultural value to its local communities. The key question in the context of this project is whether it holds any cultural *heritage* value. Luckily, we can use the regulation 9/06 criteria to attempt to answer that.

As Naipaul and other community members explain, just walking through the mall yields important information about the local community and culture of Malvern. To any outsider, visiting the mall provides a snapshot understanding of the Malvern community in all its

multiplicities as a multi-ethnic, working class, newcomer hub. Given the inner suburbs' histories as having been designed for and originally occupied by middle-class white families, the way it is being occupied today by a vastly different set of communities helps us understand not just Malvern but also the history of the suburbs overall. With what the mall can teach us about the history of Toronto and the local community today, an argument can be made that it has some level of historical and associative value.

There is also clearly some contextual value. The mall is approximately 292,000 sq. ft. and sits in the middle of the neighbourhood. As noted by the Malvern Artist that I interviewed, the centrality and size of the mall is what made it a space for intergenerational and cross-cultural exchange. Its location and size allow the mall to function as an orienting feature of the landscape pulling residents across the neighbourhood towards a central node. The mall sits at the edge of a vast swath of parking. I will not argue that it is a good thing that so much of Malvern's urban form is defined by its car-centric urbanism, but it is a defining feature, nonetheless. Having sat in the same location since its construction in the 1980s, the mall has defined the character and been physically and visually linked to Malvern for a generation.



Figure 3. Mary Pink, middle, leads a group of older adults on a walk in Malvern Town Centre. (source: Dan Pearce)

There are certainly arguments to be made that Malvern Mall could be designated as heritage based on its contextual, historical and associative value. This much, advocates like the ACO and Schneider might agree with. Where I contest their claims about marginalized heritage, is the notion that the difficulty with protecting these spaces is in their design. The mall may not be the pinnacle of craftsmanship or have a particularly unique design, however the assumption that there is no 'artistic merit' must be unpacked.

On November 6, 2023, coincidentally just 4 days after the heated public consultation that took place regarding Malvern Mall, an Instagram account called Liminal Assembly posted a reel

titled “Top Dead Malls in Toronto pt.4 Malvern Town Centre” (Liminal Assembly, 2023). In an interview with CBC, the founder of Liminal Assembly describes dead or dying malls as liminal spaces, “spaces that trigger intense nostalgia” sometimes even in people who have never been in those spaces before and have no actual nostalgic connection to them (Bookbinder, 2023). Bookbinder makes specific reference to design elements such as “the furniture,” “low ceilings,” and “pops of colour in odd spaces” when explaining why dead malls have the emotional effect that they do. The emotional responses to dead malls are linked explicitly to the design and aesthetic qualities of dead mall spaces. In the Instagram post about Malvern Mall, you see comments noting that the space is “gorgeous” or that design features like the glass ceiling are “beautiful.”

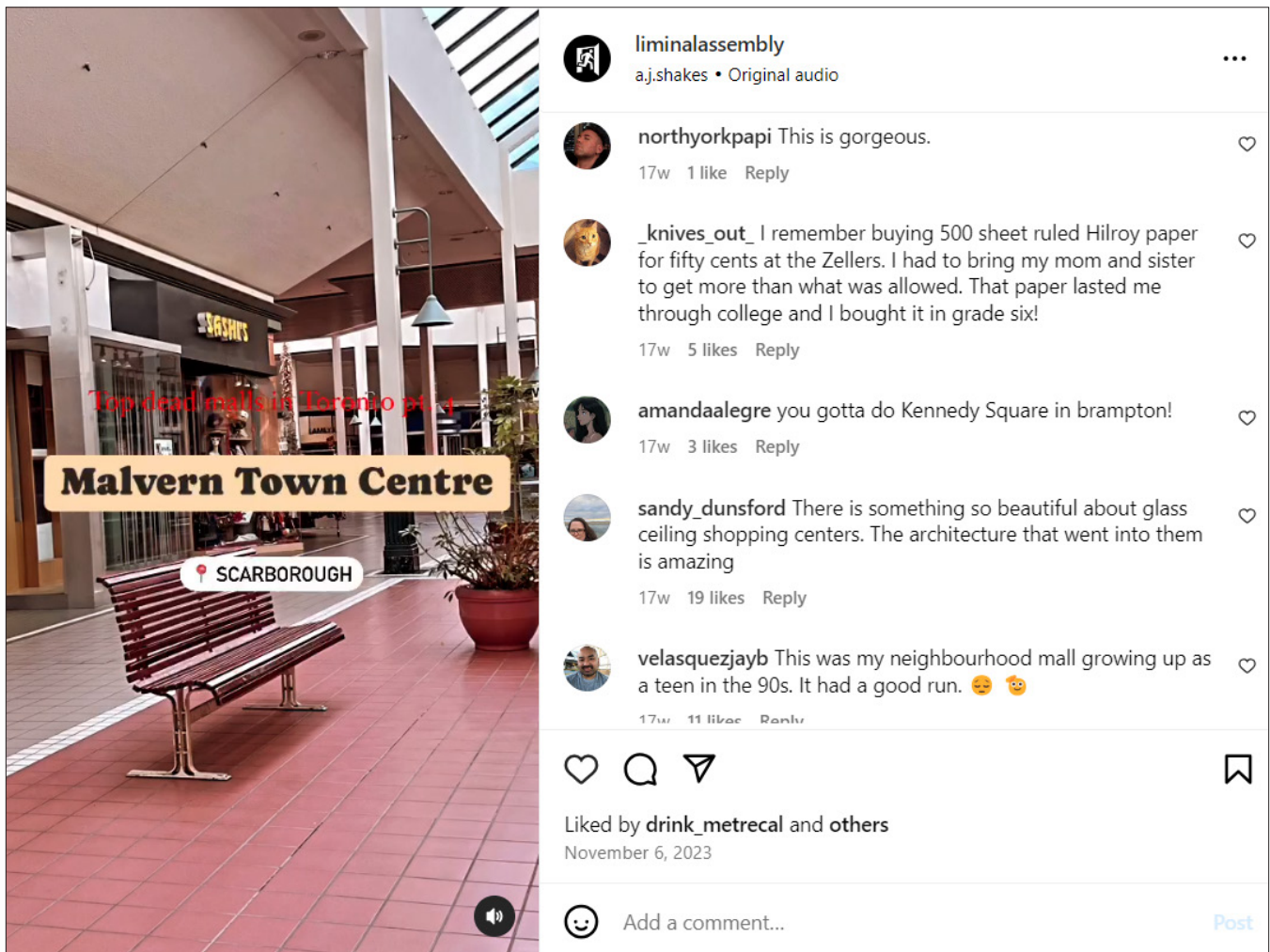


Figure 4. Screenshot Of Liminal Assembly Instagram Post About Malvern Town Centre. (source: Author)

It is jarring to see this post about Malvern Mall only days after the community consultation. Liminal Assembly uses the language of dead and dying malls and only shows photos of the mall that are devoid of people. This stands in stark contrast to the consultation where we see a room full of people very vocally advocating the life of the mall and how it continues to serve the community in important ways. Still, the mall clearly displays some level of artistic merit to a

group of people. Artistic merit without any qualifiers is inherently a subjective metric. To argue that the mall has no design value, but a Victorian townhome or a farmhouse does, can seem arbitrary, but by looking at Toronto's heritage register, we can see that the heritage sector has long privileged interpretations of design value that are rooted in racist and classist colonial worldviews.

While my analyses are not exhaustive, they begin to indicate that when filtered through the Regulation 9/06 criteria, the social and cultural value of the mall can be interpreted as heritage value. The question of whether there is heritage value in Malvern Mall is not being asked by the heritage sector or the planners working on this development. It is simply assumed that there is no heritage value of any kind here as evidenced by the fact that no heritage report was required in the development application. This is despite the fact that a Cultural Heritage Evaluation Report is strongly recommended for development applications that include a property that is not on the City's Heritage Register, but that is believed to have cultural heritage value as identified by the community or for applications on properties that include a building or structure that is 40 years or older, both criteria that Malvern Mall could satisfy ([City of Toronto](#)).

So, an argument can be made that Malvern Mall has cultural heritage value within the existing framework, and therefore should be designated as protected. I propose that this is not an argument worth making.

## **Why The Existing Framework Isn't Useful Anyway.**

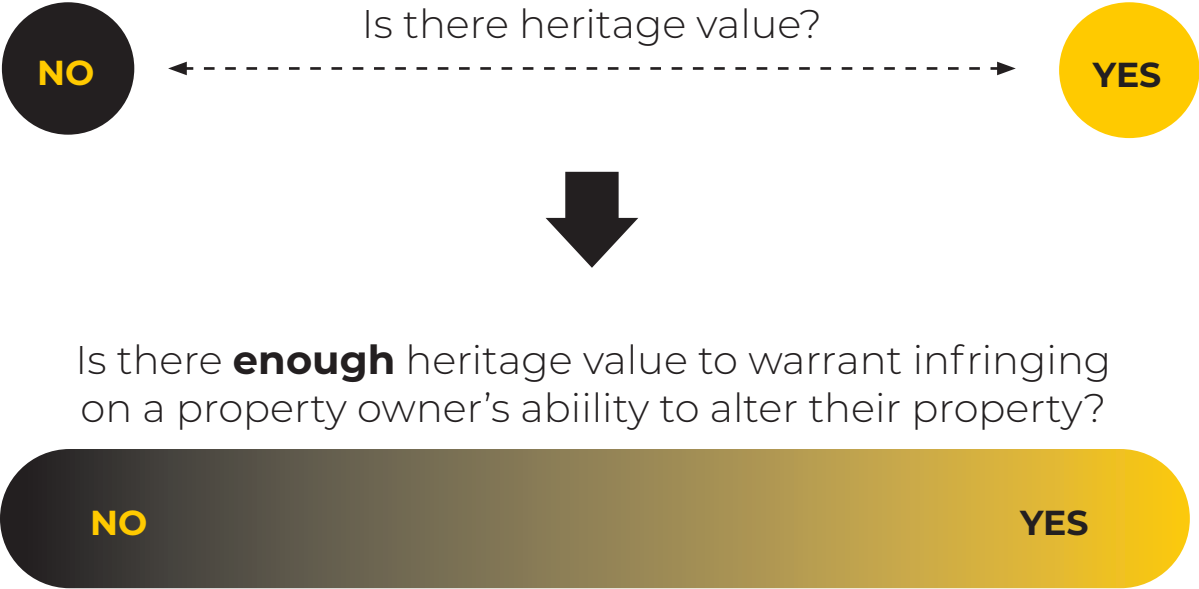
Looking closely at the nine criteria for determining CHVI, each begins by referring to "The property". Clearly, the regulation, and the OHA at large, were designed to evaluate if a *property* possesses cultural heritage value, resulting in policy tools that are focused only on the protection, conservation, and preservation of property, rather than the concept of cultural heritage more broadly.

As Gary Miedema, Manager of Heritage Services at the City of Toronto puts it "the criteria themselves are really quite broad. I think the challenge here is more about cultural assumptions about what merits saving and when you can actually limit an owner's ability to change a property based on the value" (personal communication, 2024). Miedema says this in reference to the recent case of the China Lilly soy sauce factory that city council decided not to designate despite staff recommendations to do so. Coincidentally, a building where the cultural heritage value is inextricably linked to a racialized community. As Miedema elucidates here, the existing cultural heritage framework's preoccupation with property and built form severely limits how cultural heritage value can be preserved. Cultural heritage value in the way it is currently enshrined in law, butts up against the rights of landowners. This moves the

question of cultural heritage value from a binary, 'yes there is value/no there isn't value,' to a spectrum: Is there enough value to warrant infringing on a landowners rights? The answer to this question when it comes to racialized and low-income communities, as we have seen historically based on the current spatial distribution of the Toronto Heritage Registry, is a resounding no (Khan, 2022).

As the ACO and Schneider say themselves, the reason marginalized heritage will be so affected by these proposed amendments is because these buildings are often "humble" and lack physical or design merit. Looking past the implicit biases embedded in these claims, the claims are also an implicit acknowledgement that the cultural heritage of marginalized communities exists, and is worth preserving, regardless of the physical structure that it occupies. Yet, it is only the physical structure or property that can be legally protected within the current paradigm.

There is also still the question of what good preserving the building would even do for the community. In the context of Malvern at least, preserving the building maintains a status quo of hostile, car-centric urbanism that has long been understood in planning practice to be outdated. Preserve the building but displace the businesses and people, and then what cultural heritage have we actually preserved? Within this context, to say that the cultural heritage that emerges out of Malvern can be protected by preserving the mall's built form is misguided, yet this is really the only option available within the current paradigm.



# Beyond Intangibility

How To ***Think*** About Malvern Mall's Heritage.



Until now I have referred to the fact that the existing framework for evaluating and protecting cultural heritage centres property and buildings, and that this framework is at odds with a neighbourhood like Malvern, which is heavily racialized and whose cultural heritage has largely emerged despite the built landscape its communities occupy. So, focusing on buildings doesn't work, where do we go from here? What does it mean to protect cultural heritage if not preserving buildings? The following section develops a framework to understand cultural heritage in the context of Malvern that is rooted in both broader cultural heritage theory and contemporary conceptions of heritage being operationalized by practitioners outside of the existing legal framework.

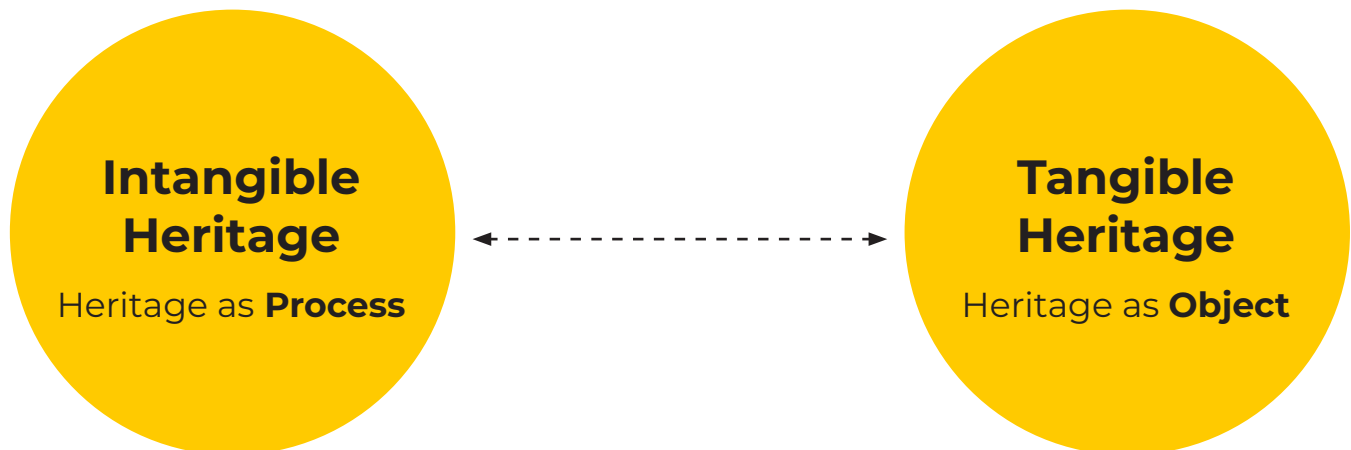
## **The False Dichotomy of Tangible versus Intangible Cultural Heritage**

The OHA's centering of property in its conceptions of cultural heritage is consistent with the idea of tangible heritage. Tangible heritage is broadly understood as the material artefacts which have cultural heritage value, this includes but is not limited to buildings, monuments, places, and archaeological artifacts. Within heritage studies, intangible heritage has emerged as a foil to tangible heritage. Intangible heritage as a framework for understanding built heritage was legitimized in museological discourse by UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Bortolotto, 2007), which was fully ratified in 2006. Bortolotto notes that UNESCO's new definition of intangible cultural heritage is innovative not because it states that cultural expressions are intangible, but because it prompts them to be understood in terms of usage, not just for aesthetic contemplation. This understanding begins to unsettle the OHA's Criteria for Determining Cultural Heritage Value or Interest. Bortolotto further notes that UNESCO's new definition "aims at conceiving of heritage... as a symbolic and living space to be appropriated by local communities who are the bearers of a collective memory" (Bortolotto, 2007). The shift in discourse on heritage, its definition, and its evaluation in Canadian planning is marked clearly by two of Harold Kalman's texts. His 1980 booklet produced for Parks Canada on the evaluation of historic buildings focuses heavily on architectural styles and technical expertise in determining value, while making little mention of usage or community engaged practice. 34 years later, his 2014 book on heritage planning principles and processes shows clear acknowledgement of intangible heritage principles, cultural diversity, and pluralistic processes.

This dichotomy between tangible and intangible cultural heritage has long been contested in heritage discourse (Smith, 2006, p 106). Smith notes that "all heritage is intangible" and Bredekamp suggests that material objects are just the "tangible embodiments of intangible ideas and practices" (Bredekamp, 2004). In our interview, Miedema noted that "without the object. It's much harder sometimes to maintain memories and stories. So, the physical

object like a building can be important for all those reasons" (2024). Smith, Bredekamp, and Miedema's conceptions of tangible heritage taken together suggest that tangible and intangible heritage are not a binary. Heritage as a concept is inherently intangible, and any so-called tangible heritage is simply a material expression of this intangible concept. Examining heritage from the lens of dance and performance art, Iacono and Brown note that many of the activities and concepts associated with intangible cultural heritage are inextricably tied to the human body (2016). Akagawa notes that "heritage involves a relationship between the creator of an object or a place or creative expression, and the one who experiences it". This means that heritage is embodied, and thus a living, constantly evolving process (2015).

Where intangibility was a useful starting point to de-centre built form and physical preservation in heritage discourse, it is ultimately reductive and obfuscates the realities of how heritage is embodied and expressed spatially. The utility of intangibility is its ability to refocus the conversation about heritage on how to think *beyond* property, but it is not necessary to exclude tangibility entirely.



## Heritage as Processes in a Place

I interviewed three people that I would categorize as heritage planners. First, Gary Miedema, to whom we have already been introduced. Miedema works with the City of Toronto and has a mandate to work within the existing legal framework for cultural heritage in Ontario. I also interviewed Daniel Rotsztain and Howard Tam. Neither identifies as a traditional heritage planner, with either a capital 'H' or capital 'P'. Rotsztain is a lead of PlazaPOPs that works with the privately owned public spaces of strip plazas. Largely focused on the inner suburbs, PlazaPOPs uses a variety of design and community development interventions to preserve or at least highlight and celebrate the cultural heritage embedded in strip plazas, an urban typology that is often overlooked and, similar to Malvern Mall, incompatible with the existing cultural heritage framework. Tam led the Dragon Centre Stories commemoration project. This

project looked at the Dragon Centre, another mall in Scarborough, just a 10 minute drive from Malvern Mall. Dragon Centre Stories was a commemoration project that sought to “document and share the history of the Dragon Centre mall in Scarborough, Canada - North America’s first indoor Chinese-focused shopping centre” in the face of an impending redevelopment. All three of these interviewees offer insight into how to contend with cultural heritage in the context of Scarborough and its malls. Like Malvern Mall, heritage was not originally part of the discussion in the Dragon Centre’s redevelopment. Heritage became a conversation when Tam, as a private citizen, independently decided to instigate one with the planner on file. Both Rotsztain and Tam apply a cultural heritage lens to their work but do not operate within the physical preservation paradigm.



Figure 5. PlazaPOPs' WexPOPs Installation. (source: PlazaPOPs)



Figure 6. Attendees share stories at the story sharing circle at the commemoration event on Oct 5 2019. (Source: Morris Lum)

I asked each interviewee how cultural heritage factored into their practice and how they defined it in their work. Miedema notes that “cultural heritage is huge and multifaceted. It can be everything from food, to music, to art, to clothing, to any kind of cultural traditions. Obviously, architecture and built form can be embedded in that” (personal communication, 2023). Tam notes that he looks at “the root of the word which is inheritance...you're passing something on to another generation, or you're passing something on to other people who may not actually understand the context of it. But the context of it actually means something to a particular group of people or a particular generation of people” (personal communication, 2023). Rotsztain states that “it's the everyday practices where people engage in communal expressions of their culture.” further adding in relation to malls and markets that “markets are very fundamental to urban culture, and beyond the buying and selling of goods, the affordability of those goods, and the relationships created through that space are important.”

Here we see that by expanding outside of the legal framework for cultural heritage, the definition becomes less about the object, and more about **practices of cultural expression**, be it through food, music, art, tradition, or even architecture, **and the process of these expressions and meanings being inherited** by new generations or groups. It is within this paradigm of heritage that PlazaPOPs and Dragon Centre Stories operate. With PlazaPOPs the process of incremental community-engaged design allows local communities to continue using strip plazas for cultural expression while also inviting new communities to participate in and experience these cultural expressions. With the Dragon Centre, the process of storytelling allows the many meanings of the mall to be transferred across generations and groups in the face of its changing built form. It is important to note that both projects are focused on malls and plazas in the inner suburbs. The specificity of place is central to these conceptions. Inner suburban malls and plazas are the site of cultural expression for many racialized communities. While cultural expression is the key aspect of heritage that we are focused on, it cannot be entirely de-linked from the place where it occurs.

There is already academic literature that speaks to the social value of malls and strip malls in the inner suburbs as third places and public spaces. Zhixi Zhuang speaks to the role of strip malls in facilitating ethnic retail landscapes that facilitate place-making and belonging (2017), while Vanessa Parlette and Deborah Cowen examine the social productivity of malls as community spaces despite their dwindling economic productivity (2011). These fit into the larger theoretical framework of third places described by Ray Oldenburg (1999). Third places like Malvern Mall offer sites for marginalized populations, like the racialized, newcomer, and lower-income communities of Malvern to express their culture. Cowen and Parlette state that “to recognize that a space, despite a commercial origin, can function as a community hub may facilitate more adaptive redevelopments that support existing and flourishing public functions rather than the attempted resurrection of failing economic ones (2011).

## Socio-Spatial Systems: Maybe Not *This* Roof, But A Roof

It is this notion of adaptive redevelopments that guides how we might further understand the cultural heritage of Malvern Mall beyond intangibility. While it is true that Malvern Mall, as a place, provides the infrastructure that facilitates many of the social interactions, relationships, and cultural expressions that are valuable cultural heritage, it is not necessarily true that the place needs to look like a single-storey mall surrounded by parking. The mall is an assemblage of various spatial elements that enable these cultural expressions and social interactions. The way these spatial elements come together in the context of Malvern form socio-spatial systems that are key to understanding how to address and prevent the displacement of these communities and their cultural heritage.

For example, an interviewee from Malvern tells me, that the mall is “one of the very few places in that area where you can be that’s big enough that has a decent amount to do and is central enough for everybody” (personal communication, 2024). The size and centrality of the mall as a place emerge as important features. Naipaul, in her story about joining the Mall Walkers, noted that she joined them because “it was winter” (personal communication, 2023). The mall being a warm, dry, enclosed space is key to its success. Naipaul further explains, that “so many things are walkable,” so proximity and co-location to housing becomes relevant. Naipaul also explains that “it’s convenient for newcomers, people who are refugees. Canada is not exactly the cheapest country to live in” (personal communication, 2023). The affordability of goods, not just the form, is important to consider. If we look at Rubini’s or TAIBU, the fact that they are rooted in a neighbourhood with cultural communities that they are specifically designed for is vital. Again, proximity to communities of specific socio-demographic make ups makes the mall relevant as a place.

So, socio-spatial features such as size, co-location of programs, affordability, proximity to specific communities, enclosure, warmth, and centrality are key elements of what makes Malvern Mall a place that holds cultural heritage value. These socio-spatial elements put together do not necessarily result in a mall, but it is true that the mall holds all these elements, which is why it holds so much value to its communities.

During the November community consultation, the applicant responds to a community member who advocated for the Malvern Mall Walkers, “I hope the Malvern Mall walkers become the New Park Walkers.” Comments like this are why thinking beyond the tangible-intangible binary is necessary. Within a purely intangible heritage framework, the applicant is noting that the function of the mall, as a space to walk, is being preserved within the new form of the park. However, this response fundamentally misunderstands how the mall actually enables the existence of the mall walkers. At its core, it is a warm, dry space with a roof. Within the tangible heritage framework and physical preservation paradigm that we currently have, the response to this would be to physically preserve the mall, or at least the hallways and roof

that enable the mall walkers. This takes an overly precious approach to preservation that is typical of heritage practice. It is not necessary that the mall's existing roof be preserved, but just that a roof to protect walkers against the elements will be a necessary design feature in the future development if we want to claim that we are trying to preserve the mall's heritage value. There are surely environmental and sustainability reasons for taking a physical preservation approach and re-using existing structures, but it is disingenuous to argue that this physical preservation approach is necessary from a heritage equity perspective.

Another clear example of this tension surfaces in my conversation with Naipaul. She notes that the development renderings show park benches placed several metres from each other. While this of course provides a place for people to sit, a park bench does not do the same job as a food court table which is where people sit in the mall now. The function of sitting is preserved, but the function of social gathering is not. Naipaul asks, "how am I supposed to interact with fellow neighbours that are on the other benches?" (personal communication, 2023). Again, the physical preservation paradigm would respond to this by preserving the food court tables that exist today in the mall. Again, I argue that this is not necessarily required. The food court table works because it has individual seats that face each other and that are placed close enough to other tables that users can interact. New seats can be designed with these principles in mind.

These spatial elements can be designed for in the new development. If a suburban mall can do it, why can a master planned, mixed-use community not integrate these simple elements to allow local communities to continue using this place for valuable cultural expression and social interaction? To look beyond the tangible-intangible binary and understand what spatial elements actually enable functions to thrive requires thoughtful engagement with not only the behaviours that we see in the mall, but the underlying values that are held by the community.



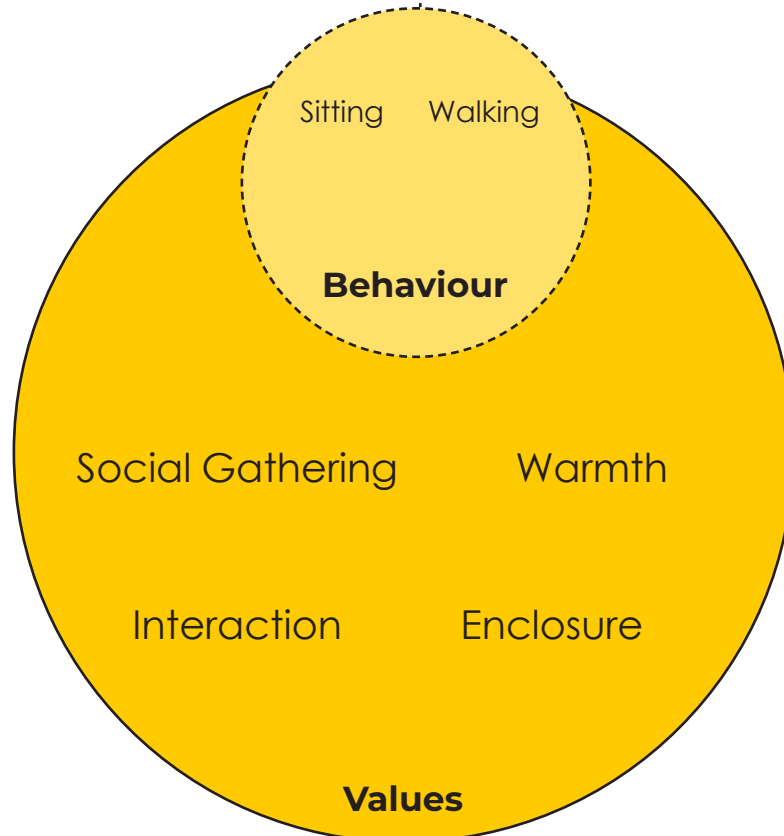
Figure 7. Rendering Of Proposed Malvern Town Centre Redevelopment. (source: Davpart Inc.)

## Preserve Form (Tangible Heritage)

1. Preserve the existing roof
2. Preserve the food court tables

## Preserve Function (Intangible Heritage)

1. Provide a park to walk
2. Provide benches to sit



## Adaptive Redevelopment

1. Ensure new development provides a place to walk that has a roof so that it is protected from the elements.
2. Ensure new development provides seating that is clustered close together and people can sit facing each other.

# Beyond Commemoration

What To **Do** About Malvern Mall's Heritage.



We have established that we can think of Malvern Mall's cultural heritage value as being rooted in the cultural expressions and social interactions that it facilitates, and we understand that the mall facilitates this cultural heritage not because of its specific form, but because of the underlying socio-spatial systems that it contains. We know how to think about Malvern Mall's heritage, now the question becomes, what do we do about it?

## Urban Renewal

The question of what to do about overlooked and undervalued marginalized cultural heritage at the urban peripheries is not new to Toronto. The case of St John's Ward (The Ward) offers a valuable parallel to learn from. The Ward was home to many of Toronto's growing newcomer populations during the 19th century. Irish refugees, Black Americans escaping enslavement, migrant Italian labourers, Jews escaping persecution, and eventually Toronto's growing Chinese community. The Ward was notorious as a site of sub-standard living conditions and was ultimately expropriated and razed to make space for the old City Hall, Toronto General Hospital, and eventually the Eaton Centre. David Hulchanski uses The Ward to explain that a key factor in the erasure of Toronto's alternative histories is urban renewal (2015). Mark Kingwell notes in his essay about The Ward titled "Tabula Rasa," that while the primary aim of The Ward's razing was to pull Toronto into a modernist future, it was nonetheless "convenient that what was being swept away was a most troublesome sector of the shifting downtown core" (2015).

Today, The Ward has been commemorated in several forms. From the book in which Hulchanski and Kingwell's essays were published, to an exhibition by Myseum, and even as the namesake for The Ward Museum which focuses on immigrant histories. Kingwell invites us to "remember them this way: they were Torontonians" (2015). Yes, they were Torontonians; Torontonians who deserved better than their squalid conditions, and who instead had their homes razed, their social networks unravelled and their social infrastructure displaced. Remembering residents of the Ward as Torontonians now does little, but at least we can learn from their story. Malvern's residents today are also Torontonians whose social infrastructure and cultural heritage is at risk. I argue that it is incumbent upon the planning and design disciplines, especially the subdiscipline of heritage, to act.

In contemporary literature, this rhetoric of renewal is emerging around suburban spaces. For many good reasons, suburban built form is seen as needing drastic change and the notion of retrofitting suburbs is emerging in urban design discourse (Tachieva, 2010). Adaptive reuse and retrofitting are key principles in suburban renewal (Dunham-Jones and Williamson, 2009). This offers a more thoughtful and considerate approach to development in inner suburban contexts. As Rotsztain asks, "what are alternative urban futures that are iterative rather than bull-dozy?" While a more thoughtful approach to development from a built form perspective,

we have established that the specificity of built form is not entirely relevant to how cultural heritage functions in Malvern. As Rotsztain emphasizes, “it’s not the buildings that matter, it’s the communities that call those places home and it’s the fact that those places have been relatively lower rent...which has meant that small businesses that cater to the very specific needs of all the diasporic communities get to establish themselves there” (personal communication, 2023). Orly Linovski notes the problems with a design-centred examination of the value of strip malls, such as provided by Tachieva, Dunham-Jones and Williamson, and how this overlooks the benefits this retailing model provides for ethnic business owners that are not found elsewhere in the city.

Both principles of adaptive reuse and retrofitting necessitate that the renewal of the suburbs will not be tabula rasa (blank slate), but that some sites will remain. This begs the questions of which sites will remain and why, as well as who gets to decide the answers to these questions and how. Clearly, we see that Malvern Mall is not one of the sites that remain, and the decision has been made by the property owners. This is where heritage as process rather than object reemerges as a guiding principle on how to deal with Malvern Mall’s heritage value.

## **Heritage In A Housing Crisis: A Note On Gentrification And Nimbyism**

The Malvern Town Centre neatly falls into the narrative of urban renewal. Taking a mall that is deemed to be “underutilized” despite community’s claims to the contrary and intensifying it. Malvern is no stranger to housing precarity, so amid a housing crisis, it is crucial to understand how this development might impact the local communities in terms the value it adds regarding access to housing.

The proposed masterplan adds 5,755 new residential units to the site. However, as noted by a representative of the developer during the community consultation held on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2023, there is no guarantee that any of the new units will be affordable, (regardless of the definition of affordability used), or even that they will be rental units. Given Malvern’s housing precarity, specifically due to its large proportion of low-income households, the inclusion of affordable units would be a valuable addition to the community. Similarly, the addition of rental units to Malvern’s housing stock would diversify the housing landscape and provide more housing options. With neither of these beneficial additions being guaranteed, this development, at this stage, offers little value.

while the proposed development is adding a significant amount of new housing to Malvern, the housing it is adding is not necessarily accessible or attainable to the existing low-income residents. This finding is based on the data that is available as of December 15, 2023. It is possible that as further decisions are made about the proposal’s tenure, affordability ratio, and

other housing indicators, that this may change. As of right now, the proposed development adds little value to Malvern's housing stock.

Importantly, while the development adds little guaranteed value, it simultaneously displaces the social and cultural value of the mall as we have established. Pushback against this redevelopment is not simply a case of NIMBYism but a legitimate contestation of the prescribed function of the mall as a site for generating profit. The direct displacement of services intended for racialized and low-income populations naturally implies that these populations are no longer welcome. While their households are not directly affected, their home is no longer functionally theirs.

## **Commemoration As A Planning Process, Rather Than Output.**

Often commemoration is the tool used to contend with the heritage spaces that couldn't be preserved, thus it is an outcome of a planning process that has either failed to preserve or decided against preservation (of property). Through my interviews, asking people to tell stories about their experiences of the mall through the lens of cultural heritage surfaced many of the socio-spatial systems that I discussed previously. Commemoration and storytelling are powerful tools that allow heritage to be passed from one generation or group to another. As we see with The Ward, commemoration is deployed as a tool only after the communities being commemorated have been displaced. It is an outcome of a planning process that has failed to consider and protect marginalized communities and their spaces.

I argue that commemoration should be deployed as a tool within the planning process. As Howard Tam explains of his practice, "I want to be able to develop community through multiple different channels, so this includes heritage work" (personal communication, 2023). Heritage serves as a method through which community development and planning can take place. Within planning practice, community consultations are one of the few avenues through which communities can provide input and insight into the planning process. What heritage and commemoration as tools can do is allow for deeper insights into community needs.

As Tam explains, "Someone can say to you that we need a grocery store in this neighbourhood. But, if someone talks to you about their experiences with the last grocery store...it helps you better figure out what kind of grocery store we're trying to build for" (personal communication, 2023). Commemoration and storytelling shift community engagement questions from 'what do you want to see in your community' to 'why do you want to see this and why is it important to you?' It surfaces the deeper feelings, values, and beliefs that we can begin to design for.

The Dragon Centre Stories project showed how this approach of using commemoration as

a planning tool is particularly useful for newcomer communities. Through the stories told at the event, it was highlighted that the Dragon Centre was one of the few spaces for Chinese newcomers to go to feel like they could be themselves. While the Dragon Centre stories project emerged late in the development process, Tam notes that “it is important to still document that history, because it allows us to remember what that means and how we might design spaces for other newcomer communities who might be coming from other countries” (personal communication, 2023).

The Malvern Mall has not yet been displaced, the application for Official Plan and Zoning Bylaw amendment have not yet been approved. To apply a cultural heritage lens at this stage may influence how this development moves forward, particularly since full demolition is a few years away. So that is what we tried to do.

## **Responsibility and Power**

Besides this paper, an output of this research has been the coordination and delivery of a community commemoration event for the Malvern Mall. I worked closely with Debbie Naipaul to organize a commemoration event.

I instigated this event, using funds from the School of Cities, and it has been organized and supported by a network of grassroots, non-profit, and community organizations across Scarborough including 42 Voices, Scarbrough Business Association (SBA), Councillor Jamal Myers' office, Toronto Public Library, and Scarbrough Civic Action Network (SCAN). Glaringly missing from this process was anyone from the traditional heritage sector, and the developers of the Malvern Mall. While we did not reach out to anyone from the heritage sector due to time constraints and a hesitancy to over formalize the event, we did attempt to contact the mall management several times to no avail.

The organizing of this commemoration not only puts into practice the notion of commemoration as an organizing tool in the planning process, but also highlights who is acting, who has a responsibility to act, and who has the power to enact change.

Miedema explains that the role of heritage planners at the City of Toronto is two-fold. First is to “find and add properties to the heritage register” and second is to identify strategies to “conserve them going forward.” As discussed, the existing tools that heritage planners have available to them have historically been applied inequitably. As demonstrated by the consistent allusions to BIPOC communities in the ACO's outrage against Bill 23, the sector understands this historic inequity and seeks to remedy it. While commemoration can be a useful design-research tool, the tools available to heritage planners to influence or impact development are incapable of addressing the cultural heritage of places like Malvern Mall. The Heritage sector, or at least the heritage department at the city, needs to expand its toolkit.

The event received support from the SBA, which has received funding from Toronto's Economic Development and Culture division (EDC) to understand business needs in Malvern. The willingness of the SBA to support a community commemoration event hints that the way cultural heritage sits squarely within the City Planning department might be problematic. As we have established, much of Malvern Mall's cultural heritage is rooted in the businesses it hosts and how they act as cultural expressions of the community and provide social infrastructure. While it may be the responsibility of the Heritage department to preserve Malvern Mall's cultural heritage, we see that EDC is the team that has the mandate and potential levers to support some of the most important cultural heritage attributes of the mall. This is emphasized by Rotsztain who notes that PlazaPOPs, "certainly a cultural heritage project" has not yet engaged with the City's heritage team but has instead worked with EDC over the years (personal communication, 2023).

Other than EDC, there is also the Social Development, Finance and Administration (SDFA) division. This is the division that the Senior Planner handling the mall's redevelopment application reached out to when the application came across their desk (personal communication, 2023). The Senior Planner understood that based on Malvern's history as a Neighbourhood Improvement Area and the malls' function in the community due to its "services for newcomers" and "grocery stores that culturally serve the community," a social development and equity lens would be important (personal communication, 2023).

Here, the City's planning department independently initiated a partnership with SDFA because it understood the social value of the mall, but no partnership with the Heritage department was initiated as this social value was not understood to be cultural heritage value. This highlights how the narrow framework for heritage prevents heritage from getting involved in projects that one could argue, as I have, fall entirely within their disciplinary scope.

While heritage planning at the city has a very specific mandate and is tied to the framework outlined in the Ontario Heritage Act, agencies like Heritage Toronto, the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario, and private sector heritage preservation firms are not similarly constrained. While PlazaPOPs and Dragon Centre Stories did not engage with the city's heritage department, they have both been partnered with ERA Architects, a private heritage preservation firm.

Finally, I reiterate that throughout the process of planning this commemoration, attempts to reach the mall management by myself, the SBA, and Councillor Myers' office were met with no response. This is a stark reminder that throughout all of this work, the developers have no legal responsibility to consider the value that this mall holds to its communities, be it social, cultural, or heritage value. Heritage has some of the most powerful policy tools at its disposal, in the ability to hinder a property owner's right to alter their property. This tool however, does

little to actually protect cultural heritage in contexts like Malvern.

Thus, it is vital that the heritage department at the city begin to form partnerships with EDC and SDFA to consider social, economic, and cultural policy tools. This is a process that has already begun in the context of districts like Little Jamaica and Chinatown, where similar questions of cultural heritage are being asked. How these partnerships emerge and take shape in the context of single-property active development projects like Malvern Town Centre is an area that requires further research.

## **Malvern Mall Memories: Community Commemoration**

After months of planning and coordination between myself, Debbie, 42 Voices, SCAN, Jamaal Myers' office, the Toronto Public Library, Scarborough Business Association, and countless failed attempts to contact the mall owners - on March 10, 2024, Malvern Mall Memories finally took place.

We had a community room in the library full to the brim with people coming together to celebrate a mall through the lens of heritage. I spent some time at the start of the event introducing this research and why we were hosting a commemoration for the mall, but I did not really need to. People understood. They were losing their mall and they wanted to celebrate its value now before it was gone. From the few people I got to speak to between the mall trivia and the memory sharing, I got the impression that people understood that the mall is being redeveloped and that there is no changing this eventuality. Still, there was hope in the room that the development could be responsive to the needs of the community.

Malvern Mall Memories marked the end of this research project, but as Malvern communities stare down multiple years of disruption and displacement, it is hopefully just the beginning of more to come. More explicit assertions of the mall's heritage value, more organizing, more collaboration, and more pressure on the heritage discipline to act.



Figure 8. Malvern Mall Memories Community Commemoration Event. (source: Author)

# Moving Forward



Throughout this report I have argued several points. This section summarizes my arguments, and based on these provides potential future pathways for heritage and planning professionals to consider as mall redevelopments continue to emerge throughout the city.

Ultimately, these future pathways are intended to prompt heritage and community planners to begin to take steps towards a future where our disciplines show Toronto's inner suburban spaces the care and dignity they deserve in the face of intense redevelopment pressure. There is value in Malvern Mall and spaces like it, communities already know that, now it is incumbent on us as practitioners to step up and be proactive in imagining reparative heritage futures.

## Summary of Findings

### The Problem with Heritage

1. There is social and cultural value in Malvern Mall.
2. This social and cultural value can be interpreted as heritage value.
3. The fact that the mall's social and cultural value is not viewed as heritage value is indicative of class and race-based biases in interpretations of heritage value.
4. Even if we did recognize this heritage value, the current framework for protecting this heritage is not useful because it is overly concerned with existing structures.

### How to think about heritage in Malvern

5. The binary of tangible and intangible cultural heritage is reductive and prevents a fulsome understanding of how Malvern Mall's heritage is rooted in both its form and function.
6. Heritage attributes are not solely tangible architectural features or intangible social functions in a vacuum, but tangible AND intangible socio-spatial systems that can be designed for.

### What to do about heritage in Malvern

7. Commemoration is a useful design-research tool to surface and understand what socio-spatial systems are relevant to an adaptive redevelopment.
8. The responsibility to protect this heritage is not currently borne by the property owners or heritage practitioners, but heritage practitioners have a disciplinary responsibility to act.

# Future Pathways For Heritage Practitioners

## **1 Heritage practitioners should advocate for legislative change to the Ontario Heritage Act that de-centres the physical preservation of existing structures.**

Within cultural heritage planning practice and discourse outside of the legislative framework, there is an understanding that existing physical preservation paradigm is too narrow and cannot contend with the complex adaptive redevelopments that places like Malvern Mall need. Long term advocacy for legislative change at the provincial level is required, as it is provincial legislation is fundamentally misaligned with the needs of racialized and marginalized groups. As we saw with the 2022 amendments to the OHA, heritage practitioners are willing to speak up for legislative change, but instead of arguing to maintain the status quo, we can instead advocate for future heritage policy that is better able to respond to the needs of racialized and marginalized communities.

## **2 The heritage department must build partnerships with EDC and SDFA, who have the mandate and levers to preserve cultural heritage outside of the physical preservation paradigm.**

Advocacy for legislative change is a long term goal. Until then, heritage planners in Toronto are still bound by tight handcuffs. To counteract this, heritage planners must take the initiative to build partnerships with other city divisions that have both the mandates and levers to better respond to the heritage needs of places like Malvern Mall. There are existing efforts to build these bridges for cases like Little Jamaica and Chinatown. The context of these projects are significantly different however. Little Jamaica and Chinatown are entire neighbourhoods facing a constellation of displacements in different forms, whereas suburban malls are generally single sites with a single owner leading to quicker displacement timelines.

## Future Pathways For Community Planners

### 3

#### **Emphasize the social, cultural, and heritage value of malls in the City of Toronto's Mall Redevelopment Guide.**

The City of Toronto's Mall Redevelopment Guide was published in 2021. It is intended to provide a design direction allowing for a consistent approach to mall site redevelopments. This guide does not include any reference to the social, cultural, or heritage value of malls, and takes a primarily design focused approach. We have established that a design-centred examination of spaces like malls is reductive and overlooks much of the mall's value. While in the context of Malvern Town Centre the senior planner recognized the social value of the mall and chose to take appropriate actions, this might not be the case for all mall redevelopments. Providing clear and explicit direction in the mall redevelopment guide for planners to respond to the value of malls can ensure more thoughtful redevelopment processes in the future.

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