

Case Study on Emergence in Complex Social Change: East Scarborough Storefront

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Storefront Quick Facts

- Original goal: Provide a one-stop shop for service provision
- Current goal: Facilitate collaboration and help people learn and create together, live healthy lives, find meaningful work, play and thrive
- Location: East Scarborough; high concentration of public housing and residents, including many recent immigrants, living below poverty level
- Launched in 2001; ongoing
- Diverse set of funders: federal, provincial, and city government, and a private foundation
- Currently a project of Tides Canada shared platform
- Website: www.thestorefront.org

Executive summary

Responding to the need for services within an immigrant community outside Toronto, Canada, and motivated by an early crisis that could have closed its doors, The Storefront shifted from a one-stop service hub to a backbone support for community-identified and community-led solutions.

This case describes The Storefront's evolution from one-stop shop to a community-driven resource with a strong emphasis on relationships. This evolution has created the space for community members to take action in support of their own lives—individually and collectively—and The Storefront is starting to produce emergent results.

With The Storefront and other cases, the 4QP research team was testing this hypothesis: If the team responsible for an initiative has clear line of sight and makes it visible to others, and if the agents in the system are activated authentically, given freedom to experiment, and have a way to come together and learn from their experience, then the effort will produce results that are greater, more fit to their environment, and more sustainable than if the initiative had been designed and implemented in a top-down fashion. (*continued*)

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The Storefront exemplified this hypothesis in several interdependent ways:

- Its decision-making process reinforces the primacy of relationships; each major decision becomes an opportunity for members of the community to test and strengthen their line of sight to their goal and learn together about what this goal means and looks like in action.
- The locus of work is not in building an institution but in building the community's ability to voice issues and activate solutions, which places ownership in the hands of the community and creates agency.
- Careful attention to relationship building and power imbalances has also increased agency and has helped build the bench strength of stakeholders, both within and outside the organization. With this, the organization has shifted from relying on the vision and leadership of the founding director to developing ownership and pride across the community.
- By holding high expectations for the people it serves, The Storefront has surfaced a diversity of wisdom throughout its ecosystem, resulting in solutions that could not have been preplanned and results that could not have been anticipated.

These characteristics of The Storefront helped create the conditions that allowed solutions appropriate to the community to emerge and led to results within and outside the organization that could not have been predicted. Today the question is, How will The Storefront community sustain its vision and priorities when its founding executive director leaves?

Origins of The Storefront

By the year 2000, the City of Toronto had placed about eight hundred recent refugees into social housing—old motels along a road strip in the Kingston Galloway / Orton Park (KGO) neighborhood of East Scarborough, a district of Toronto. This neighborhood on the outskirts of Toronto already included the highest concentration of public housing and residents living below poverty level in the city. The percentage of the population living below the poverty level had increased from

13 percent in 1981 to 20 percent in 2001. While a myriad of social-service agencies existed to support this population, these services were largely inaccessible to the intended beneficiaries. The agencies were concentrated in downtown Toronto, far from the Kingston Galloway neighborhood, and there was a lack of sufficient public transportation.

East Scarborough Storefront (The Storefront) was initially conceived to solve these access problems by being a one-stop shop where these agencies could offer such services as youth groups, legal advice, employment help, and settlement support. It quickly became clear that there were other people in the neighborhood, besides the refugees, who needed these services.

Initially funded, in 2001, with \$114,000 from Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), then a department of the Canadian federal government, The Storefront was based in a neighborhood mall and served as an operational hub, or backbone, (with a single overhead) for forty agency partners. The Storefront initially worked with the Boys & Girls Club of East Scarborough as its fiscal agent before becoming a part of Tides Canada's shared platform.¹

"[HRDC] realized that people in marginalized circumstances who want help getting a job may have multiple barriers to getting that job, so funding a one-stop shop made sense," Anne Gloger, The Storefront's initial staff person and now its director, explained. Gloger, who has a background in business, social development studies, and early childhood education, was hired to coordinate services across the forty agencies and engage the community residents.

The Storefront spent its first years bringing together multiple agencies to serve the needs of the community. These agencies were accustomed to working independently with their own work styles and expectations. Gloger spent much of her time building trust, establishing a shared vision, and figuring out with providers the best approach to working across agencies with different work cultures and personalities in a community highly diverse in income, ethnic background, and education level. These elements set a strong foundation for the emergent nature of The Storefront's future work.

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¹ *Fiscal agent* is a term commonly used in the United States but not in Canada. For more information about Tides Canada's shared platform, visit <http://www.tidescanada.org/approach/shared-platform>.

Loss of funding, loss of space

In 2006, after five years in existence, the now-popular Storefront experienced two near-mortal hits: It learned that it would lose its space because the shopping center where it was located was going to be torn down and that HRDC, which provided 90 percent of The Storefront’s funding, had withdrawn its support. HRDC was shifting its funding focus to direct services.

Early in The Storefront’s history, Gloger had launched Community Speaks—dinners at which residents were invited to share their ideas with representatives of the partner social-service agencies. At the dinner after The Storefront learned it would lose its space and most of its funding, residents discussed in small groups ideas for how to respond. When they reflected on the various ideas, they saw two common themes: getting media attention and communicating to funders the importance of The Storefront’s services. Out of this discussion arose the idea to mobilize a march to bring media and public attention to the plight of The Storefront. Gloger explained, “Dip, our volunteer manager, brought people together and brainstormed messages,” which “volunteers later painted on signs and carried during the march.” The effort successfully drew the attention of both print and television media.



It was a new kind of action for this community, and the first taste for residents of organizing on their own behalf. The action also changed the quality of what residents saw as success and what they saw as possible. By providing people with opportunities to engage in collective action and see that they are capable of succeeding (or of working together, even if a project fails), residents increased their sense of agency for taking action in other areas of their lives. This created a

springboard to creating even more action, ideally increasing their own impact as well.

In the meantime, each of the social-service agencies sought support for the hub from their own funders—direct-service grantmakers with little experience supporting the coordinating activities of an intermediary like The Storefront.

At about the same time, the City of Toronto and United Way Toronto published a report on the state of the region’s neighborhoods.² KGO was one of thirteen neighborhoods selected for attention. This report helped motivate five funders—the City of Toronto, United Way Toronto, the Province of Ontario, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, and the George Cedric Metcalf Charitable Foundation—to stretch their funding mandates and commit to supporting The Storefront for five years. “This was an opportunity for the funders at the table to focus on something that was working while addressing a need identified by the city and United Way,” Gloger said.

Meanwhile, the City of Toronto provided The Storefront with a new home in an old police station, at below-market rent. In turn, The Storefront offered space to service providers at a rent of two dollars, in exchange for the providers not charging residents for services. This change eliminated the landlord-tenant power dynamic that could have diluted collaboration.³

The Storefront team convened the community again, this time for a four-hour visioning session with funders, residents, and agencies. “It became really clear that people thought the potential of The Storefront went way beyond service delivery help, but could also incorporate strengthening residents’ ability to lead,” Gloger shared. The Storefront would become more than a collection of agencies delivering services to residents; it would also become the locus for strengthening the ability of residents to identify and address the challenges in their community.

Residents increased their sense of agency for taking action in other areas of their lives.

² City of Toronto, *Toronto Strong Neighborhoods Strategy: Report to Policy and Finance Committee*, October 2005. The initial study is no longer available online. An update from 2012 can be found at <http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2012/cd/bgrd/backgroundfile-45145.pdf>.

³ Cathy Mann, *The Little Community That Could*, (Toronto, Canada: East Scarborough Storefront), 32. Excerpts from this book can be found at <http://www.thestorefront.org/ourbook/>.

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New vision, expanded results

The Storefront began to develop what it later called a “community backbone” model,⁴ with the purpose of amplifying the work and aspirations of many different entities. “We started with social-service organizations,” Gloger said. “But building a strong neighborhood isn’t just about good access to social services. You need to strengthen residents’ capacity to lead and strengthen the network and communication and strategy of work of a myriad of players—not just the agencies within the service hub, but other entities within and serving the neighborhood as well, such as the Boys & Girls Club, libraries, schools, police, Native Family and Child Services, and more.”

The Storefront, in partnership with its community of providers and residents, made a major shift in strategy from being an access point for services to collaboratively building a stronger neighborhood. The Storefront became the place for helping residents to vocalize issues and activate solutions. According to Gloger, discussions at Community Speaks dinners shifted from focusing on what The Storefront should be to what the *neighborhood* needed, what leadership roles *community members* would take and, only then, to how The Storefront could support this. Its support would take the form of linking residents to policymakers, funding opportunities, and similar initiatives in the area.



For example, in 2007, The Storefront supported a community-designed effort, called the Bus 54A Campaign, to petition for improved bus service. The 54A bus, one of only two connecting KGO to downtown Toronto, ran on an unreliable schedule and was not accessible by wheelchair. The bus often turned around before the bridge that entered the neighborhood, abandoning passengers to a long walk home. A petition drive, and the use of The Storefront’s social capital to help residents get in front of decision-makers, led transportation officials to acknowledge the problem and promise improvements. (Gloger reported that ten years later, public transportation has improved, but it remains a problem for the neighborhood.)

By 2016, The Storefront was working with an operating budget of \$1,991,500; supported by a range of public and private funders;⁵ and actively convening, coordinating, and strategizing with institutions, residents, and nonprofit organizations. The Storefront had an impressive diversity of results, including these projects, which were initiated and led by residents:

- The Bridging Project: The bridge on Lawrence Avenue East that connects the Kingston and Galloway neighborhoods has been unpopular due to the high speed of its traffic; its narrow, sometimes dangerous, sidewalks; and its history of suicides. In the summer of 2011, seven community groups, including The Storefront, organized community youth to reclaim the bridge through an art project and community event, which was celebrated by the entire community in September 2011.⁶
- Community. Design. Initiative: This project grew out of an effort to engage community youth in renovating the interior of a former police station into a new home for The Storefront. The project has grown into a skill-building program that links youth with mentors from a variety of professions to plan and implement building and landscape improvements in the community. Many of the youth involved in the renovation of the police station have gone

4 While informed by FSG’s Collective Impact model (which was informed by the work of StriveTogether), The Storefront never formally followed that path. The organization distinguishes its own model, Connected Community Approach, on page 16 of its Theory of Change.

5 For more about funding sources, see East Scarborough Storefront, *Our Story*, 2015, <http://www.thestorefront.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/OurStory2.0.pdf>.

6 To learn more about this event, visit <http://bridgingproject.blogspot.com>.

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on to study social work, architecture, or international development in college.

- **Local economic viability:** The Storefront supports local businesses in working together to tackle issues of economic viability, both for individual enterprises and for the community as a whole. For example, local hospitality industry players support would-be entrepreneurs and youth looking to get into that kind of work. A KGO business network, launched in 2012, provides a platform for local businesses to cross-promote, learn from one other, and advocate for local change. It helps new entrepreneurs with business planning and provides them with financial tools and other services. For example, the network gives culinary entrepreneurs free access to a commercial-grade kitchen, where they can develop and test their products.⁷

There are many lessons to be learned from The Storefront, and much has already been written about it. (See the bibliography at the end of this report.) For the purpose of this case study, we focus on those elements of The Storefront's work that suggest emergence. In writing this study, we were guided by these questions: What sets this initiative apart from other community-based efforts? Why did we select it as an example of emergence? What contributed to The Storefront's success in an environment that would have normally defeated the initiative?

Our overarching hypothesis is this: If an organization's line of sight is clear and visible to others, and if the agents in the system are activated authentically, given the freedom to experiment, and have a way to come together and learn from their experience, then the effort will achieve results that are greater, more fit to their environment, and more sustainable than if they were designed and implemented in a top-down fashion. All of these conditions were not only present in The Storefront but also importantly intertwined with one other, and they formed the foundation for decision-making at many levels.

7 East Scarborough Storefront, internal report to Metcalf Foundation, 2017.

8 What is The Storefront? In general, when we refer to "The Storefront," we are referring not only to a physical space but also to the staff, partners, and volunteers responsible for the day-to-day operations of the organization. That said, we have come to appreciate that The Storefront is more than this and that it includes the funders that support it and the community members it serves.

Strong relationships lay groundwork for emergent results

From its beginnings, The Storefront⁸ sought to engage and build relationships between service providers and local residents. Then it intentionally designed and built ownership from the bottom up to create a pathway for the community to create its own solutions over time, regardless of the challenges it faced. Relationships—among the hub staff, the agencies on site, the community residents, and other stakeholders—became critical to every element of The Storefront's success and work model. Initially, this showed up as Gloger sought to create coherence among the forty social-service agencies and trust between residents and service providers:

[This focus on relationships] taught us so much about what to include in the [Storefront] model, how to engage people, what organizational cultures to seek out and what characteristics to avoid. It taught us when it was okay to compromise and when it was critical to hold our ground.⁹

Gloger extended this focus on relationships to engaging the community to guide all The Storefront's work, from strategy development to hiring decisions. But community engagement is nothing new. What is it about The Storefront's practice of community engagement that has made it so successful?

In our research report, we describe the distinction between top-down and emergent strategy as being akin to the difference between a game of chess and a team sport. In chess, there are only two agents of action—the chess pieces have

no agency of their own. A team sport recognizes the important role of the thinking and experienced agents on the field. The role of the coach is to help the team develop the skills to bring their thinking and experience to the field in order to achieve something larger together. The Storefront's approach to community engagement is akin to a sports team's.¹⁰

Relationships became critical to every element of The Storefront's success and work model.

9 Mann, *Little Community That Could*, 15.

10 See also Tony Bovaird, "Beyond Engagement and Participation: User and Community Coproduction of Public Services," *Public Administration Review*, 67, no. 5 (September/October 2007): 846–60.

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As Paul Dowsett, an architect who has become deeply involved with The Storefront, put it, “From what I’ve seen from [traditional] community engagement, the so-called experts have already made the majority of the decisions and are trying to sell it to the community. They call that community engagement.”

Anne Gloger concurred: “Older, more traditional forms of community development tend to be focused on getting community residents to *do* things, to *change behavior*. Effective, authentic, community engagement focuses on figuring out what community members want to do, want to accomplish, and then supporting them in doing so, all the while paying attention to momentum and opportunity because we’re not trying to get people to *do* things.”

What does this look like in practice?

Resident and steering committee member Colleen Bone described her first Community Speaks dinner: “I just figured it would be like a town hall meeting where people are telling you what they’re doing. I was pleasantly surprised when they involved *all* the people there and we all got a chance to speak. . . . They listened to what the community wanted, looked into it, and most often made it happen.”

Lifetime resident and fellow steering committee member Carol Armstrong was struck by the alignment that was reached through these community conversations. “At the end of the day,” she said, “there was common ground in what everyone in the community saw as important to address.”

Longtime steering committee member Janice Simmons said that The Storefront had a more sophisticated understanding of both community engagement and ownership, and of the relationship between The Storefront staff and the community. “The impact of having high expectations for the community is enormous,” Simmons told us. “Historically, most folks hadn’t expected much from people in this community. But at The Storefront, everyone’s ideas are equal.”

The importance of relationships also shows up in decision-making, according to Simmons. “They’ve never jumped right into something without having a conversation with the staff, having a conversation with the steering committee, having a conversation with the community: Does this idea make sense, and how are we going to continue to support it?”

This practice takes community engagement to a whole new level. Having both respect for, and high expectations of, the residents creates the space for inviting community members to value and contribute their own experiences and priorities to discussions of community problem solving. This has resulted in resident-led projects becoming part of the fabric of the neighborhood and integrated into the work of organizations, faith communities, and resident associations. Many new relationships have developed that have led to reciprocal learning, sharing, and support, and so have relationships that continue to transcend any one specific outside-funded project, or even The Storefront itself.

Gloger stressed that community engagement is more than just engaging *residents*. “So much that’s written about community development focuses only on the residents; and everybody else is other,” she said. “Our ability to be emergent is to look at everybody as partners, whether they’re resident leaders, universities, businesses, and so on. We have relationships in all zones in the neighborhood, and not just with residents. We’ll put residents and university folks in the same place and work with them on the same issues.”

The Storefront does not engage residents and other stakeholders on every decision. Relationships with the community are so solid that staff members have a strong sense of when to bring in the community voice and when the community trusts them to make decisions on their own. “I think that this is a fundamental skill to work in emergence,” Gloger shared, “the ability to know when, how, and who to engage in what, and to design processes so that everyone feels involved and has meaningful input, while not getting bogged down in the need to consult in each decision.” She also pointed out that while there are many resident-led groups, the Residents Rising group consistently engages residents on a variety of topics, pressure testing ideas.

Breaking through a Brick Wall The Storefront approach encourages residents to push past their expectations for themselves. As part of the Neighborhood Trust initiative (small grants given to residents to launch their own projects), one resident sought support for a program to provide breakfast to the neighborhood children. She had passion for the project, but stymied the staff one day by walking away in a huff. She returned a few weeks later, intent to try again. She admitted that because she did not know how to read, the requirement for documentation felt like an impenetrable brick wall. Using imagery and other cues, staff walked her through the proposal and she successfully applied for the funds.

Building the ability of residents to solve community problems

From its inception, The Storefront embedded a principle of co-creation into how it identified problems and designed solutions. Initially, this co-creation was done among the original service organizations, focusing on the question, How can we, in an era of political austerity, deliver a wide range of services to this community without building multiple social-service organizations?

After the 2006 march to save The Storefront, it became clear to all stakeholders—staff, funders, agencies, and several community residents—that developing the ability of residents to design their own solutions to community problems was essential to helping them improve their quality of life and their community. Co-creation shifted to include the residents. “We had an honest desire to build something by the community, for the community,” Gloger said. “Plus, we were also committed to an asset-based approach—really believing that everyone has wisdom to contribute, that residents are active agents not merely service recipients.”

This is now reflected in The Storefront’s theory of change, as part of the impact it wants to see:

People in KGO will have increased freedom, knowledge and opportunities to make meaningful choices concerning their own and their community’s well-being. People and organizations inside and outside KGO will develop new ways of thinking about and working in communities.¹¹

And The Storefront put this into action immediately.

Police station renovation

The Storefront had a new home in a former police station, but there was concern that, in its original form, the space would not be inviting to the people who needed The Storefront’s services.

Zahra Ebrahim, a Toronto designer and self-described “change creative,” received a \$30,000 grant from the city to create an art installation with low-income youth. The city sent her to The Storefront. After a couple of conversations

with Anne Gloger, and after seeing the work of the community, Ebrahim suggested making the renovation of the police station itself the art installation. And youth would design it. Gloger agreed, saying she would veto decisions only if the youth made choices that affected program delivery. Otherwise, she would go along with what the youth designed.

Meanwhile, the designer invited architectural firms to assist in a design charrette with the youth. At the last minute, the chosen firm canceled, and Paul Dowsett, the principal of the replacement firm, SUSTAINABLE.TO Architecture + Building, had no idea what he and his staff were walking into. “We didn’t know anything about The Storefront project but only that it involved a bunch of youth from a marginalized neighborhood on the fringes of the city of Toronto,” Dowsett explained. “We certainly didn’t imagine that we would continue to be involved beyond this one day, and I certainly didn’t expect to still be involved seven years later!”

At the design charrette, Ebrahim spread magazines across the tables and asked the youth to cut out images of what they really liked and what they did not. The likes and dislikes were grouped on different parts of a wall. “We [the architects] noticed there were some commonalities that ran through their choices but that there were also some interesting outlier ideas,” noted Dowsett. The architects found that they could teach design by pointing out the good design reasons behind the youths’ likes and dislikes—how combinations of colors might affect mood or people with visual impairments.

The designers and architects continued to engage the youth in different aspects of the renovation, including managing available resources, not a topic the organizers expected the youth to have much aptitude for. But, as Dowsett explained, “these kids understood budgets in a way that was surprising at the time. They grew up in families where money is tight, and their parents are probably making budget decisions all of the time. So they understood, OK, we have one hundred dollars. How can we best stretch each dollar? Where could they do two things with that dollar, instead of one thing?”

Dowsett noticed that some of the best ideas came when the group was confronted with a challenge. “These kids were mostly newcomers to Canada. They came from all over the

Developing the ability of residents to design their own solutions to community problems was essential to helping them improve their quality of life and their community.

¹¹ The Storefront Theory of Change, p 5.

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world. And they brought what they knew from their original homes. 'In my country, we did things this way,' said one youth. Another: 'In my country, we would do it this other way.' These two came up with a hybrid solution that no one person would ever have come up with. They combined two traditions they knew of and put them together to solve a problem."

Not only did these often-disregarded youth devise a better solution but they also recognized that they had something valuable to contribute in a quasi-professional setting, and that differences in where they came from—often a source of conflict on the streets—could bring surprising benefits.

But would The Storefront leadership approve their contributions? The youth had learned through the design sessions that contrast helps visually impaired people to distinguish a door from a wall. They selected orange and blue paint for the internal walls of the station. Unfortunately, these colors just happened to be the director's least favorite.

"Anne abhorred orange and disliked blue," Dowsett said. "But she knew that she only had the right to veto if a decision the youth made affected functionality in program delivery. Color does not. She vowed that as long as they followed good process, she would go along with it." And she did. Ultimately, she liked the result.

Guidance from the field suggests that community engagement that leads to true agency for participants means sharing power, control, or authority in order to build trust.¹²

Whether it was in choosing colors, addressing challenges, or deciding how to spend limited resources, "the youth learned that their opinions were valid," Dowsett told us. "We didn't make decisions for them, but we gave them the tools they needed to make their own decisions." In the process, the youth also learned leadership, presentation, and negotiation skills—all kinds of soft skills that could be applied to other areas of their lives. "Who really cares about the building being renovated?" Dowsett said. "These kids' lives got renovated, and that's the important thing."

¹² *In Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self-Interest* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1993), Peter Block implies this without specifically naming letting go of control. See also "Chapter 13: Section 11, Collaborative Leadership," Community Tool Box, Work Group for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas, <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/leadership/leadership-ideas/collaborative-leadership/main>



These new abilities show up in changed lives. Lifetime resident of East Scarborough Carol Armstrong shared this: "Our neighborhood is full of high-rise apartments, with many folks in there isolated and afraid to come out because they feel a sense of shame because they're not doing as well as others and can't get a job." Through its people and the way it engages residents, The Storefront communicates that "there is no shame, no moral issue in being poor or not having a job," Armstrong continued. She explained that through workshops and conversations, such residents begin to envision futures and possibilities they had not thought of before. "Look at these people. See the smiles that come on their faces. Even their physical demeanor changes, because now they have a sense of 'I'm really worthy.'"

Pollination

The Storefront is generating results that could not have been predicted: successful advocacy on the part of residents for policy change and funding, increased college attendance for at-risk youth, a stronger local economy, improved literacy and leadership skills. A surprising example of these results came from Paul Dowsett, the architect who worked with youth to renovate the police station. After working with The Storefront, Dowsett changed how he works with other clients, whether they are communities wanting solutions similar to The Storefront's or private clients renovating their kitchens.

Before working with The Storefront, Dowsett had been a partner for fourteen years in a traditional firm, where, as he said, "we did things the usual way" (continued on page 9)

Pollination *(continued)*

—a top-down model in which the architect is the only author. “There was something about that that wasn’t working for me any longer, and I struck out on my own and created my own firm where we vowed we’d do things differently,” Dowsett explained. “I didn’t know exactly what that was going to look like, but I knew the old traditional way of doing things wasn’t working anymore.”

The initial design charette with The Storefront youth helped Dowsett and his colleagues begin to see what a new way of working could look like, and he took this to his next project.

After Dowsett helped The Storefront to renovate the police station, another opportunity to work with a community came along. “We were approached by the St. Stephen’s Community House to solve the problem created by program participants going to smoke in the shaded areas of neighbors’ properties, much to the dislike of the neighbors,” explained Paul Dowsett. “I said no. The people in your program will design it.” Following the model of working with KGO youth on the police station, Dowsett supported program participants in designing their own shaded smoking area on the property of St. Stephen’s Community House.

Dowsett is also an advocate for changing how other firms and stakeholders do their own work—from designing solutions for clients to helping clients discover their own solutions and, in the process, to develop their own design skills.

“We have now successfully applied our learning to work with other stakeholders in other projects, including the Tower Renewal Project,” Dowsett said, “and we’ve opened their eyes to how this way of working can be very successful.”

He continued: “Our entire neighborhood renewal project is based on the lessons learned from the youth-led renovation of the police station. We’re working now with a local landlord who owns the two tower buildings behind [The Storefront] to use the same process.”

Resident action planning

The Storefront took the principle of youth-designed solutions back to the community and now periodically convenes what it calls Resident Action Planning. Between sixty-five and one hundred residents attend a community meal, typically at a restaurant, during which an initial report of The Storefront’s progress is shared. As Anne Gloger explained, “Then, there are three questions each of the tables grapple with and flip chart and report back on: What issues do you see emerging in the neighborhood? Where do you see energy for residents to work on these issues? What role do you want to play in organizing around these issues?” This process leads to the creation of resident-led teams to work on specific issues. The Storefront then plans how it can best support these efforts and what capacity the community will need to be successful.

Gloger continued, “Then we create a document that goes back to various tables and helps The Storefront to inform funders about what is emerging in the community.” Often, a funder will step forward to invest additional funds in one of the resident-led initiatives. Early resident-led initiatives included the following, which are ongoing:

- **Residents Rising:** Volunteers work throughout the community to identify, and engage residents in addressing, neighborhood issues.
- **Healthy Living through Art:** Projects stress healthy lifestyles and encourage children, youth, and their parents to engage in artistic expression.

In 2010, in an effort to further support resident-led solutions, The Storefront set up the Neighbourhood Trust, a platform through which grassroots resident groups received small amounts of funding (no more than \$15,000) for their own initiatives, with The Storefront acting as legal and fiscal agent. This was a new kind of relationship for The Storefront and its community residents.

As described in an unpublished, draft report by The Storefront, which it shared with our research team, “The time was right for the development of Neighbourhood Trust because of a convergence of three things: momentum in our own community among KGO residents to make tangible contributions to their community’s well-being; renewed interest among funders in resourcing resident-led initiatives, and Storefront’s increasing understanding of the opportunities, challenges and pitfalls of using ‘trusteeships’ and shared platform models in a community development context.”

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"We believe that a myriad of connected activities need to be in place in order to intentionally and over time strengthen the community's social fabric," Gloger said. "We also believe that the more the social fabric is created and sustained by residents, the stronger that social fabric will be."

Working closely with United Way Toronto's Action for Neighbourhood Change initiative, The Storefront rolled out and activated a new structure designed to create local change by putting resources from multiple donors into the hands of residents. Toronto Community Housing Corporation and the Ontario Trillium Foundation provided three years of grants to support logistics, networking, administration, and capacity building.

The Storefront staff helped residents to apply for the funding and offered coaching throughout the course of a project.

These are some of the programs residents created:

- A breakfast club that fed fifty-six children each school day for three years, supported by five different funders
- KGO Kicks, an ongoing, after-school soccer club to help youth not only kick a soccer ball but also kick drugs and kick crime out of the neighborhood
- Healthy Living through Art, which helps young people to learn about healthy living and depict their goals and aspirations through artistic expression, bringing color and life to the community
- Reading Parent Partnership, which equips mothers with the skills, tools, and knowledge to teach their children to read
- The East Scarborough Festival Market, where residents not only mingle and socialize but also explore small-business endeavors

The Neighbourhood Trust had many successes, including these:

- A total of \$136,000 supported twenty-one resident-initiated efforts, of which eight continue independently.
- Ten resident leaders earned certifications in areas relevant to their projects, including event planning, first aid/CPR, and safe food handling, through George Brown College.
- Through formal training, residents articulated and demonstrated increased capacity in ten key areas, including child

welfare, partnership development, and dynamics of local leadership.

- Resident leaders reported greatly increased ability and confidence in leading.

Despite this success, the Neighbourhood Trust generated unintended consequences that led to its closing after five years.

One project was so successful in its initial year that it required funding beyond the Trust's \$15,000 ceiling. The Storefront did not have the capacity to support this larger project and could not offer more funding, much to the unhappiness of the resident who had launched the project.

Jillian Witt, who had supported the Neighbourhood Trust, admitted that the Trust created new and unanticipated power imbalances. "Residents started seeing The Storefront as a power gateway, controlling access to resources," she said. According to the unpublished draft report on the initiative,

[although] the Neighbourhood Trust was explicitly designed to shift power away from formalized organizations and into the hands of local residents, the new legal and financial relationship that The Storefront had with residents actually gave us [The Storefront] more power over them than before.

This power imbalance was contrary to the original intent of the Neighbourhood Trust and against the principles of The Storefront's larger vision. From the report:

This is one of the fundamental flaws with the model—not just of Neighbourhood Trust, but with any "trustee" or "shared platform" approach to funding grassroots projects in a community development context—when the resident-led project is funded with government or charitable dollars, a power imbalance is created that makes residents accountable to the organization which, if not handled carefully, can reduce residents' agency and control rather than increasing it.

The Storefront could have tackled this power imbalance as it had tackled so much of its other work. But, ultimately, funders were not willing to support the staffing and indirect costs that would have allowed the Trust to continue in a way that aligned with The Storefront's principles. "Without ongoing, collaborative and sustainable funding," Anne Gloger

A power imbalance is created that makes residents accountable to the organization which, if not handled carefully, can reduce residents' agency and control rather than increasing it.

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explained, “for residents, it feels like opening the door to shared power and control and then slamming it shut again.”

Despite the Neighbourhood Trust’s closing, The Storefront continues to support resident action planning in general and will accept funding for resident-initiated projects. “If someone wants to give money to residents, we work with the resident to make sure that they are able to use the funds for community benefit,” Gloger said. But The Storefront did have to give up the formalized structure of the Trust because, as Gloger explained, “we couldn’t fund really good authentic community-based process [as a re-granter].”

In addition to supporting work led by residents, The Storefront also works with partners in support of the community:

- Through a community/university initiative, the University of Toronto Scarborough meets its community-engagement goals while helping faculty to meaningfully connect with the community.
- SCENE is a network of employment service providers working collaboratively on behalf of the community despite government mandates that promote competition.
- Access to Recreation is a coalition of organizations creating joint initiatives to promote and more meaningfully engage people in recreation activities.

The Storefront continues to emphasize placing agency with the community—to help residents identify, build, and sustain solutions to their own challenges—just not as a regranter/funder. Residents and other community stakeholders continue to create and implement adaptive, innovative solutions. In the process, everyone learns how to identify, design, and lead efforts to solve future challenges.

Making thinking visible through decision-making

In our research report, we propose that the stronger the line of sight to a group’s ultimate goal—including the thinking about how best to get there—and the more that individual agents learn collectively from their experience as they work, the greater their collective impact and the more sustainable the investment.

Holding strong line of sight helps group members respond to opportunities and challenges that might otherwise divert them from their path.

The Storefront case illustrates this benefit. It also shows how holding strong line of sight helps group members respond to opportunities and challenges that might otherwise divert them from their path. From the very beginning, The Storefront team members have been deliberate in how they use decision-making—in everything from day-to-day operational decisions to decisions about high-level strategy development—as an opportunity to make their thinking visible to one another and check current thinking against what they’ve learned from their work.

At one of The Storefront’s earliest community sessions, staff sought not just resident input but also resident-designed policies for the organization. Gloger described the session: “We threw a bunch of organizational policies on the table and asked them to dissect them for what they liked and what they’d like to see changed.”¹³ Residents literally tore the policies apart, choosing desirable elements, tossing out undesirable elements. “The residents really guided how we built this place and how Community Speaks started,” Gloger explained. Out of this, The Storefront’s policies emerged.

The Storefront’s governance includes a steering committee that, from the beginning, has comprised agency staff and community members. At first, “[residents were] reluctant to come to the table where they don’t know for sure their voice is going to be heard,” observed Janice Simmons, of the Boys & Girls Club of East Scarborough. She has served on the committee from its inception.

Two residents—now members of the steering committee—echoed this sentiment. “I looked at all these people—a university president, a business owner, and I thought, What am I doing here?” Carol Armstrong shared. Colleen Bone, another resident, added, “I don’t like sitting in on all the ‘politics’ stuff.” They were both surprised to see that the group turned to them for their experience as community members, as parents. “They listened. They sought my opinion,” Armstrong said. “I came to the realization that I’ve got a heck of a lot to contribute.”

¹³ This may sound similar to the design charette for the police station, and it was. “A design thinking or charette model is pretty indicative of how we facilitate processes to elicit collective wisdom on a subject,” shared Gloger. “We do this kind of thing all the time.”

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The committee initially had a higher agency-to-resident ratio than its 50:50 goal. The Storefront addressed this imbalance by inviting residents to simply sit, listen, and watch, and to contribute if they wanted to. Simmons explained: "I think it became quickly very clear that the way the steering committee operated, everybody's voice was heard and everybody had something to contribute to the conversation, big or small." Residents were also encouraged to start out on subcommittees. "This served as a gateway to involvement at the steering committee level," Simmons said. Over time, the ratio changed. "Now, you have no idea who is a community member and who was an agency member," she pointed out.

The Storefront's decision-making process for staff recruitment and hiring also reflects its principles. For any open position, The Storefront invites any candidate who meets the minimum requirements to a group work activity. "The minimum allows [The Storefront] to consider people who might not have a stellar résumé but can demonstrate their skills and approach more accurately in a community setting," Jillian Witt, former senior project specialist with Tides Canada, explained. Because The Storefront is seeking individuals who can also work well with community members, it invites eight to twenty candidates into a room, where they sit at small tables and are given a problem to solve collectively. Staff members observe how the candidates solve problems; those who pass muster move on to the interview, which is held by a group of three: a community resident, an agency representative, and the hiring lead (a manager or The Storefront director). The decision of who gets hired has to be unanimous. "It's either an absolute yes, or it's no. Otherwise, we re-post the position," Anne Gloger said.

From Gloger's experience, ignoring The Storefront's principles has predictably negative results. She allowed one hiring decision to go through without following the "absolute yes or no/repost the position" rule, because she did not want to admit to one of the internal applicants (who was not a finalist) that the group had to go back to the drawing board. Instead, Gloger withheld her reservations, and the committee hired an outside candidate who did not have unanimous support. As she admitted, "it turned out to be a bad hire in the long run."

Clear line of sight has helped The Storefront to avoid some very common nonprofit mistakes. At one point, The Storefront was approached by a funder about supporting a very

large project to engage residents in identifying priorities for change. Three months in, the funder changed its expectations. "[The potential funder] wanted to know what the outcomes were before they'd commit to the funding," Paul Dowsett explained. "Anne had to say, 'I can't tell you.' Despite the amount of money on the line, she had to stick to her principles about people and process coming before product." The Storefront turned the money down. Gloger said, "The reason we walked away was because we had told the residents that this was *their* process. We couldn't go back to the residents and tell them they had to conform to a new set of constraints." She added, "We figured out a way to continue the project without the funding." Meanwhile, the funder did not just walk away; instead it invested in strengthening the relationship with the grantee. "While we ended that particular funding relationship, they knew they wanted to continue to work with us,"

Gloger explained. "They invested in resources to strengthen the relationship, and they continue to fund other areas of our work today."

At another point in its evolution, The Storefront was offered a grant from Employment Ontario, a public social service available to every community in Ontario. The province wanted The Storefront to be its arm in KGO. This required The Storefront to offer direct services, something that, in its capacity as a connector, it had never pursued; this felt like a threat to The Storefront's mission.

The steering committee, comprising staff, agencies, and community members, engaged in a thoughtful exploration of the benefits and risks, led by its vision (what is now its mission): "We seek to collaborate to support people to live healthy lives, find meaningful work, play and thrive."

Jillian Witt explained that the group found a way to accept the Employment Ontario grant and offer a direct service "only after having grounded themselves in their mission, understanding that they needed to grow, and [seeing that] this grant would allow them to do that." She added, "The Storefront also tied this service to their other economic work, making sure that whatever program Employment Ontario was putting out actually did support [KGO's] local economy."

Over time, through a careful process of building thoughtful reflection into the decision-making process, staff members became more and more confident in their ability to stay on

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track and, therefore, thoughtfully consider opportunities that might previously have felt risky to their mission. Today they follow a checklist when considering new initiatives; it asks, among other things,

- Will this initiative help us to fulfill our vision?
- Does this initiative conflict with any of our values and/or beliefs?
- Who will receive the most benefit if we take on this initiative?
- What will be the impact on agency involvement, community involvement, staff time, resources?
- If we proceed with this initiative, what do we need to put in place to ensure its success and the ongoing success of The Storefront as a whole?
- Who needs to be consulted before we can commit to this initiative?

Even if a decision led to unexpected results, sticking to the process was still worth it, Anne Gloger insisted. “Embedding these kinds of principles back into the working part of the job can never be wrong, even if the monetary or initial outcome doesn’t come to fruition,” she explained.

Because of this very deliberate attention to making decisions and using them to strengthen and test the community’s thinking, The Storefront was able to continue strengthening both the trusted relationships with residents and the agency of the community members to solve their own problems.

Getting smarter over time

The Storefront creates intentional opportunities for staff, residents, and agencies to build their skills in areas they have identified—for example, creating a theory of change or strengthening their communications through storytelling. The Storefront also embeds reflection and learning into its work and then applies what it is learning to future work, through strategy circles, evaluations and, as described earlier, decision-making. Not surprisingly, the organization applies its principles of people before process and product to decision-making, as well.

At the time of this writing, The Storefront is well into a developmental evaluation that began in 2014. “I always struggled with evaluation for The Storefront’s work because it just

didn’t align well with traditional formative and summative evaluation methodologies,” Gloger shared. Reading Michael Quinn Patton’s book *Developmental Evaluation* changed all that, and the organization is now exploring the questions, What value does The Storefront as a community backbone organization bring to the community? What is better because of this work? Two Storefront projects received additional funding to incorporate rigorous developmental evaluation:

- KGO ACT is exploring the questions, How are organizations better able to support youth? How are youth influencing the ecosystem that supports them?
- ESW is exploring how aligning supports and services with employment opportunities in a geographic context improves the ability of people living in poverty to benefit from jobs created through public spending.

The results of these evaluations will feed into the larger organization-wide evaluation. “By the end of 2018, we should have a solid year of data to analyze against these and other questions,” Gloger said.

In the meantime, the developmental evaluation process includes “reflection days” with local youth and organizations, separately and together. “They review the evaluation data and have a data party,” Gloger explained. They explore such questions as, “What do we know about youth, about organization relationships in the neighborhood? What does that tell us about how well they use an organization to support one another? What does that tell us about what we collectively should be doing moving forward?” The groups go back to their own projects and organizations and incorporate the results of these discussions into their forward planning. Elements of their evaluation and learning processes include the following:

- Every month, The Storefront convenes the staff members of each of its five community-impact strategy teams to analyze results and how what they do advances their strategies; to examine how they know what works; and to discuss what could be done differently. “It’s an eclectic group of people who may not regularly work directly together, but they all contribute to a particular community impact area,” Gloger explained. “They are core to the evaluation process.”

Groups go back to their own projects and organizations and incorporate the results of these discussions into their forward planning.

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- A developmental-evaluation committee includes staff, residents, academic partners, and other sector partners.
- Strategy circles, the equivalent of departments, are organized by staff, and members meet when they need to, usually every week or every two weeks. For example, members of the Resident Leadership circle meet to explore how their work advances The Storefront's aspirations for impact, how they work together, and how their work connects with the work of other circles.

The reflection done at these and other meetings is usually a facilitated process "We use storytelling, games, flip-chart brainstorming, and lots of sticky notes and crafts," Gloger explained. "The idea is to reflect on the learning we have done together. . . . We often use a 'What? So what? Now what?' approach."

This approach also builds internal bench strength, growing leadership beyond the director. "I facilitate good process among the staff, hold them accountable to the values and guiding principles," Gloger shared. "Staff all embrace the approach, are eager for constant learning, and take on leadership roles in a variety of ways as and when they are ready." Just one result is that all recruiting for, and the running of Community Speaks dinners, is now done by Gloger's staff.

Throughout all of these learning activities—whether building skills or reflecting on and applying what they have learned from their work to upcoming work and strengthening strategy—The Storefront engages with its community of staff, funders, agencies, and residents, further putting into practice the principles that support, encourage, and even respond to emergence.

Can The Storefront's success be propagated?

The Storefront has won awards, been written about in academic publications,¹⁴ and produced high-impact results, and now funders and communities frequently turn to The Storefront, seeking to replicate the organization's success. But as Janice Simmons, a longtime steering committee member, pointed out, "There is no cookie-cutter approach

The Storefront Theory of Change

Fifteen years into its existence (in about 2015), The Storefront, now a project of Tides Canada's shared platform (<http://tidescanada.org/approach/shared-platform>), knew it was onto something that was really working. But the organization had no systematic evaluation process or capacity to evaluate its work. The Storefront engaged a strategy coach and an evaluation consultant to facilitate the development of its theory of change and evaluation framework. Staff, residents, designers, sociologists, social-service providers, and even botanists participated in an eighteen-month process that resulted in a community-centered approach that places The Storefront at the intersection of three groups:

- Local change makers: anyone within and outside the community intentionally working to make the community a better place
- People who live and work within the community
- Policy and sector: the larger systems influenced by, and influencing the work of, The Storefront.

"The Storefront works across boundaries so that people are connected to the systems that support them, and those systems are better connected to the people they support. People and organizations are encouraged and supported to collaborate and co-create initiatives."¹⁵

Anne Gloger, director of The Storefront, said, "The theory of change informs everything we do. . . . It's all about the autonomy of individuals, agencies, and institutions and what we can do to support, strengthen, align, coordinate, and collectively strategize how to amplify efforts for the good of KGO.

¹⁵ East Scarborough Storefront, "Theory of Change," (undated) p. 13.

¹⁴ Adriana Stark, "Revitalization on the Margins: Exploring 'Revitalization' as a Potentially (Dis)Empowering Process in Toronto's Inner Suburban Communities," *Landmarks: The Undergraduate Geography Journal* 2 (Fall 2016), 14–22, http://geography.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Landmarks_2016_Journal.pdf.

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for replicating The Storefront in other places. Instead, Anne Gloger emphasizes the *principles* that guide all the work of The Storefront.” These are documented in the group’s theory of change:

- We are rooted in past learning, grounded by today’s context, and inspired by future opportunities.
- We put people and process before product.
- We explore possibilities as they emerge.
- We focus on people’s strengths and aspirations.
- We foster innovation that is meaningful and sustainable.

These principles are embedded in The Storefront’s Connected Community Approach and serve to

- leverage and mobilize community assets to increase the social, economic, and environmental well-being of people living in marginalized circumstances; and
- support networks of planners, architects, businesses, residents, academic institutions, and social-service organizations in having meaningful discussions, running programs, organizing events, sharing learning, and participating in a wide range of activities effectively and collectively.

Staff members are also very intentional about embedding the principles in every discussion. For example, two new managers have been engaging the hub staff in facilitated processes

that were designed to surface how their work exemplifies the principle of “people and process before product” and which past learning is shaping their work today.

The Storefront continues to evolve, responding to both opportunities and momentum that emerge through its work. “We’re now working on place-based systems change, policy, and influence in a bigger way,” Gloger said. “Addressing the tension between doing big systems work and neighborhood work is something that has to be navigated very carefully.”

Due to The Storefront’s success and requests from other communities to share what it has learned, Gloger has created the Centre for Connected Communities, and she recently published *A Community Backbone’s Theory of Change*. In addition, Gloger is working on a digital platform for sharing the principles and practices that have contributed to The Storefront’s success. The goal is to help people translate what worked for The Storefront into what would be meaningful and appropriate for their own communities.

What will it take to propagate this success? A key component of The Storefront’s success has been taking care to keep strong line of sight. Keeping the initiative emergent will require not conflating its goals with the strategies it took to reach them.

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Conclusion

The Storefront started as a one-stop service-delivery shop—a technical solution seeking to solve a specific problem of access to needed services. Its evolution exemplifies the potential of emergence to produce results that are greater, more varied, more adaptive, and more sustainable than what would have been possible if the organization had remained focused solely on the technical solution. At The Storefront, the focus shifted from providing services to residents to building their ability to identify their own needs and challenges, and discover new ways to solve them. Now, as the community sees its needs and challenges change, it has the ability to work together to address them.

From the moment the neighborhood marched to save The Storefront, everything about how the organization has operated has helped residents learn to identify and solve their own problems. In a traditionally disempowering environment, The Storefront created the conditions for residents to recognize their expertise and their ability to contribute, and to get beyond the barriers that society has put in place. It created the conditions for residents to overcome the assumptions they had learned to hold for themselves.

What made this possible? From the beginning, The Storefront leadership invested in building relationships among the organization, its agencies, community residents, and a range of often nontraditional players, engaging them all authentically and committing to the principle of “people and process before product.” Embedded in these principles was a strong expectation of what residents can accomplish beyond what society had typically expected for them.

Our biggest questions about The Storefront are, What will it take to sustain it beyond any one person’s leadership? Are the conditions in place to sustain the emergent nature of this work beyond Anne Gloger’s tenure? Gloger understands systems, and she is not shy about confronting complexity. She admits to being energized by the unknown, and she embraces challenges as opportunities to learn, convene, and mobilize collective leadership. She has created the conditions for emergence, including working actively with staff, community residents, and agency representatives. “People and process before product” guides everything The Storefront does.

So what happens when Anne Gloger leaves? To what extent do emergent initiatives survive the departure of such a leader? Even with all the emphasis placed on building trusting relationships, truly engaging the community, and empowering residents to solve their own challenges, Gloger admits that transition could be a challenge. “The managers collectively hold the whole from an on-the-ground perspective . . . but no one manager has all the pieces of all the initiatives,” she admitted. But the supports are in place: “We have a strategy coach, an evaluation consultant, our architect, our business advisor, and several others who are holding enough of the whole that if I disappeared, they could support a transition to a new leader,” Gloger explained. Residents concur. “We may not know everything she knows,” Colleen Bone said. “But she has people in place that would be able to continue on.”

More than anything, the principles that have made The Storefront what it is today are likely to help it sustain and grow over time.

Appendix: Interviews and surveys

Interviews

- Carol Armstrong (community resident and steering committee member, The Storefront), interview with the author, May 19, 2017.
- Colleen Bone (community resident and steering committee member, The Storefront), interview with the author, May 19, 2017.
- Wendy Fanfair (community resident and volunteer, The Storefront), interview with the author, November 10, 2016.
- Paul Dowsett (principal architect, SUSTAINABLE.TO Architecture + Building), interview with the author, November 23, 2016.
- Anne Gloger (principal, The Storefront), interviews with the author, summer 2016 through summer 2017.
- Janice Simmons (manager, early years programs and services, Boys & Girls Club of East Scarborough; member, The Storefront Steering Committee), interview with the author, September 21, 2016.
- Jillian Witt (former senior project specialist, Tides Canada), interview with the author, September 22, 2016. Witt was a liaison between Tides Canada and its projects. She had daily contact with The Storefront and was also involved in the Neighbourhood Trust project (which is no longer in existence).

Survey respondents

- Anne Gloger, Principal, The Storefront
- Tabish Surani, Lead, Program Delivery, Youth Opportunities Fund, Ontario Trillium Foundation
- Lisa Watson, CEO, Strategies for Social Impact