

EXPERIENCES DES
COMMUNAUTÉS NOIRES
ENGAGÉES DANS
LA PLANIFICATION
AU CANADA



BLACK
EXPERIENCES
WITH PLANNING
IN CANADA

BLACKHURST CULTURAL CENTRE

PRESERVING BOTH A NEIGHBOURHOOD AND PEOPLE'S HISTORY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THE BLACK PLANNING PROJECT AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCES WITH PLANNING IN CANADA (BEPIC) RESEARCH TEAM EXTEND OUR DEEPEST GRATITUDE TO THOSE WHO SHARED THEIR TIME, KNOWLEDGE, EXPERIENCES, AND RESOURCES THROUGHOUT THIS PROJECT.

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Maison d'Haïti
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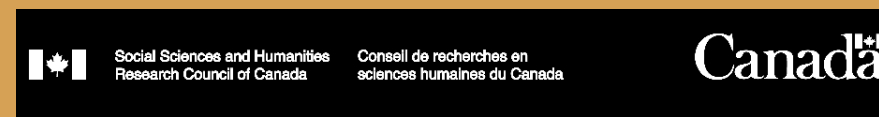




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ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

This booklet is part of a tri-series of case studies showcasing the planning work of three Canadian Black-led organizations operating in cities with the largest Black presence in the country —Blackhurst Cultural Centre (Toronto), Maison d’Haïti (Montreal), and the African Nova Scotian Road to Economic Prosperity (Halifax). The series is one of the outputs of Black Experiences with Planning in Canada (BEPIC). BEPIC is a community-led research project conceptualized and led by the Black Planning Project in collaboration with the School of Urban and Regional Planning at Toronto Metropolitan University (2022-2026), which sought to centre the knowledge and lived experiences of Black communities with/in/against planning across Canada.

This booklet tells the story of Blackhurst Cultural Centre. It explores in detail the history and work of the organization, building on the testimonies of Black individuals to highlight the organization’s diverse experiences. It documents the planning-related work and approaches of Blackhurst and identifies key planning insights from community-led initiatives.

The case study provides concrete examples that illustrate how Black-led organizations address planning priorities affecting Black communities, how their engagement with planning and/ or planning-related work differs from mainstream planning, and what it means to work with Black communities in a way that is informed by Black experiences.

This documentation stems from the recognition that significant gaps exist in planning theory and practice within the Canadian context on how to plan with Black communities. Planning history in Canada is rooted in systemic anti-Black racism, which manifests up to this day in a lack of adequate infrastructure and service provision, discriminatory planning practices, and the displacement and erasure of Black communities, among others. In the face of this, Black communities across the country have long built from their own assets to lead important planning and community-building work. Drawing from community knowledge and cultural practice, they continue to create and sustain spaces of Black identity and belonging, provide culturally relevant services and programming, and develop community engagement and decision-making approaches that advance planning work.

The learnings from this and other case studies have informed the development of Black-informed, Black-centred, and community-based planning tools and resources. We hope these tools will serve Black organizations and professional planners striving to support more inclusive and equitable planning outcomes in Black communities.

ABOUT BEPIC

The Black Experiences with Planning in Canada (BEPIC) project was co-directed by the Black Planning Project and the School of Urban and Regional Planning at Toronto Metropolitan University. Between 2022-2026, BEPIC collaborated with community partners in Toronto, Halifax, and Montreal in order to [I] explore and document the experiences of Black communities and practitioners with/in/against planning; [II] create a framework for community-based, Black-centered, Black-informed planning practices; and [III] pilot framework with Black individuals doing planning work/in historically or predominantly Black communities. Through interviews, focus groups, surveys, and participation in community activities, BEPIC engaged more than 100 individuals – including members of Black-led organizations leading planning work, Black and non-Black planning practitioners, community members, and scholars. Building on the planning work already led by Black individuals, community organizations, planners and other practitioners committed to racial justice, BEPIC's ultimate goal was to visibilize and promote planning practices responsive to the aspirations and needs of Black communities.

The project stems from the recognition that significant gaps exist in planning theory and practice within the Canadian context on how to plan with Black communities. Planning history in Canada is rooted in systemic anti-Black racism, which manifests up to this day in a lack of adequate infrastructure and service provision, discriminatory planning practices, and the displacement and erasure of Black communities, among others. In the face of this, Black communities across

the country have long built from their own assets to lead important planning and community-building work, even when these practices are not recognized as such. Drawing from community knowledge and cultural practices, they continue to create and sustain spaces of Black identity, wellbeing, and belonging under conditions of constraint, providing culturally relevant services and programming, and developing community engagement and decision-making approaches that advance planning work responsive to their community needs.

Exploring and documenting Black planning practices in Canada is a vital step in addressing deep-rooted gaps in practice and education, and in identifying new approaches to planning practice that emerge from and are responsive to Black communities. The organizations presented in this tri-series represent a diversity of settlement histories, lived experiences, ethnicities, and languages, capturing a wide view of Black experiences within planning in Canada. Together, these case studies challenge dominant narratives that have historically excluded Black people, and center Black knowledge and priorities in addressing ongoing anti-Black racism within planning systems. In doing so, they also expand how Black planning is understood and practiced in Canada.

From organizing land and providing housing, to sustaining cultural and social infrastructures, confronting displacement, and creating spaces of belonging, Black planning can be seen both as a tradition of community-led practices that sustain Black life and as an approach that explicitly advances the planning visions and needs of Black communities.

1. The project understands Black communities and geographic locations as those where a higher proportion of the population is Black compared to other local areas and/or where there has been a historical Black population. Black individuals as those with Black African origin or descent, and those who identify as such. Terms such as African Nova Scotian, Black Canadian, Afro-Caribbean, African American, and Afro-Latinx reflect the plurality of Black populations in Canada.

INTRODUCTION

Blackhurst Cultural Centre is a non-profit cultural organization and community space located in Toronto's Bathurst–Bloor neighbourhood. Originally established as A Different Booklist Cultural Centre, the Centre has evolved and expanded its vision beyond literature to encompass cultural preservation, arts-related initiatives, and community events and placemaking. Through its work, it amplifies and educates Canadians and visitors on the cultural contributions of Canadians of African and Caribbean descent. The Centre aims to be a world-class model in:

"PRESERVING BOTH A NEIGHBOURHOOD AND A PEOPLE'S HISTORY" 1

This vision is manifested through cultural tourism initiatives, placekeeping, and place-making efforts that have become a part of Blackhurst's everyday programming as they seek to strengthen and bolster Toronto's African and Caribbean heritage. Through long-term community advocacy and partnerships, Blackhurst has implemented several initiatives, including arts-based youth programming, walking tours, elders' social circles, affordable housing, and street parades. The Centre's new facility, opening in 2027, will occupy a space in the new Mirvish Village redevelopment on the corner of Bathurst and Bloor, hosted within the original address of the famous Honest Ed's.



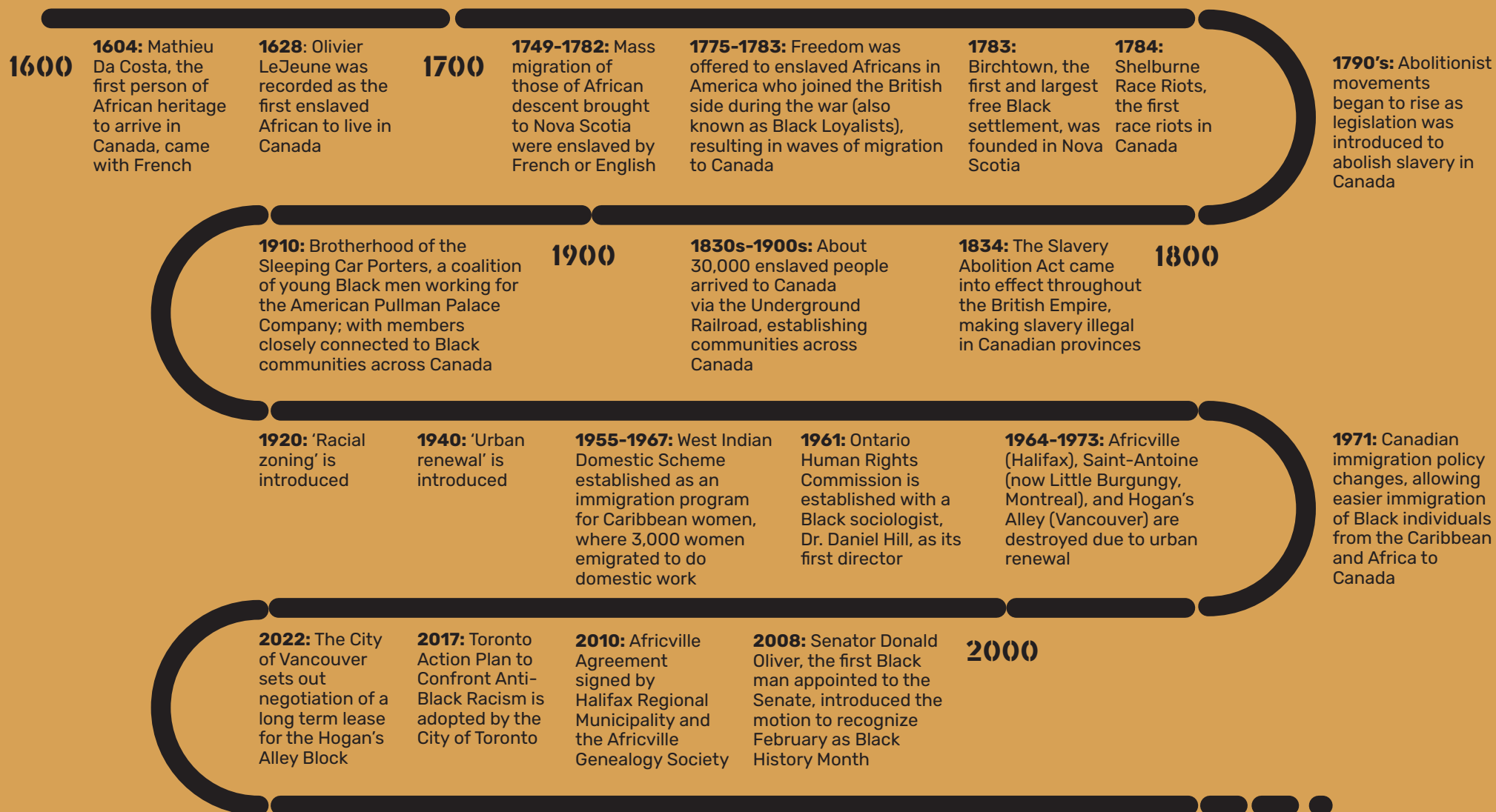
From Bookstore to Cultural Centre (credit: Blackhurst Cultural Centre)

Affordable Housing Announcement (credit: Blackhurst Cultural Centre)



SNAPSHOT OF BLACK HISTORY IN CANADA

CANADA HAS A RICH HISTORY OF BLACK PRESENCE. THE ANNEX AND BLACKHURST HISTORIES ARE EMBEDDED IN THAT TIMELINE.



A HISTORY OF PLACE

THE ANNEX OVER TIME

The Annex neighbourhood, first subdivided in 1886 by land speculator Simeon Janes, was one of the earliest districts north of Toronto to be incorporated into the City by the year 1887, and has since remained an important space for creative arts and culture². The Annex observed one of its most pivotal phases of investment and neighbourhood changes through the Mirvish family's business venture. In 1940, Ed Mirvish, renowned Canadian businessman and philanthropist, purchased a discount women's wear store on the north side of Bloor Street.³ What began as a modest shop in the area grew into one of the city's most established family-run businesses, the legendary Honest Ed's, which generated significant economic opportunities for the neighborhood. Through the influence of the Mirvish family's Honest Ed's, and their family's Matriarch Anne Macklin, an artist and sculptor, transformed the neighbourhood into a vibrant artist colony.⁴ Today, the Annex remains an iconic space defined by its artistic influence and its architectural history. It is also a neighbourhood undergoing redevelopment through the new Mirvish Village project which marks the Bathurst-Bloor intersection.



St. George Street looking south from Harbord Street after widening, October 26, 1949 (credit: City of Toronto Archives, Series 372, s0372_ss0058_it2018)

- 1950: Early Black presence in the area Seaton Village/Annex area created a foundation of community life

1850s-1860s: Arrival of Underground Railroad refugees settling in Toronto and the Annex

1887: Annex incorporated into the City of Toronto

1900

1950-70: The Annex emerges as an artist and cultural hub

1970s: The expansion of Central Technical School. Black residents are forced to relocate

1980s: Decline of Black businesses and community presence in the Annex

1850

1886: Subdivision of the Annex by Simeon Janes

1940s: Honest Ed's opens helps to drive economic growth and change in the neighbourhood

1960 Caribbean and African migration reshapes the neighbourhood's Black community

2000

2010s Mirvish Village redevelopment project

Although the Annex is often associated with the Mirvish family and the ongoing Mirvish Village community development, older (often untold) stories of African-Canadians in this neighborhood have shaped its history and identity, stretching back over 200 years.⁵ The area's long history of Black presence preceded the Mirvish era by more than a century, yet subsequent waves of reinvestment and redevelopment have often overshadowed these narratives and contributed to the erasure of this rich Black history.

The earliest cases of Black settlement in Toronto date all the way back to the American Civil War (1861–1865), when African Americans fleeing slavery and racial violence in the United States sought a better life in Canada.⁶ A large number of whom made their way to the Annex, influencing the neighborhood's identity and establishing a Black space within the city.

Among the earliest recorded residents of the Annex was Deborah Brown, an enslaved woman escaping through the Underground railroad network and settling in Toronto.⁷ At that time, given her advanced age and limited means, she was granted possession of the property that was owned by her husband who died. As documented in her death record and obituary, she was among the first inhabitants of Seaton Village located within the Annex.⁸

Albert Jackson, Canada's first Black letter carrier, also escaped enslavement through the Underground Railroad network. With the help of Quaker abolitionists, the Jackson family crossed into Canada via St. Catharines in November 1858.⁹ His journey into Toronto echoed many struggles but he eventually secured the right to work as a letter carrier.¹⁰ Today, his contributions are honoured in the naming of Albert Jackson Lane, located south of Harbord Street in the Annex¹¹, and the opening and naming of the Albert Jackson Processing Centre in Scarborough, Toronto.¹²

The Annex experienced a second wave of African-Canadian settlement in the late 1950's, following the liberalization of the Canadian Immigration Act in 1967.¹³ This shifted away from explicitly racist criteria that privileged White immigrants of Euro-

pean descent towards a points system based on education and skills. This change reflected Canada's growing reliance on labour from developing nations, which required more open and relaxed migration policies, marking this new migration pattern into Toronto and neighbourhoods like the Annex.¹⁴ Many of these newcomers arrived from the Caribbean in search of economic opportunity and for family reunification.¹⁵ Language played a key role in settlement patterns, with French-speaking Caribbeans settling in Quebec, primarily Montreal, and English-speaking Caribbeans gravitating towards Ontario, primarily Toronto.¹⁶

The Central Technical High School, located south of Bloor Street, played an important role in establishing the neighbourhood as a Black hub in the 1970s. The school attracted students from across Toronto, bringing together a large group of Black students with a shared sense of Black identity. For many, Central Tech was more than just a school; it was a gathering place and a connective thread that brought together generations of people who lived, learned, and interacted in the neighbourhood. However, with the school's redevelopment plans, the City was able to justify the expropriation of surrounding land, which ultimately forced many residents to relocate. This redevelopment placed significant pressure on Black households, compelling them to leave their homes to make way for the expansion. One previous resident, Mr. Raymond Smith, who is a member of the Shakers' Seniors Group (a social group for seniors in the neighbourhood led by Blackhurst), recounted:

“CONCERNING OUR FAMILY HOME AT 272 LIPPINCOTT, THE BOARD OF EDUCATION CAME TO US AND SAID THEY WERE TAKING OVER THE PROPERTY. MY FATHER HAD BOUGHT THAT HOUSE FOR \$4,200 AFTER YEARS OF HARD WORK, ESPECIALLY POST-WAR. THE BOARD CAME TO MY FATHER WITH AN OFFER OF \$15,000, WHICH WASN'T MARKET VALUE AT ALL. THERE WASN'T A RIGHT OF ACTION BACK THEN FOR INDIVIDUALS

TO CHALLENGE SUCH PRICES. THEY CITED A NEED FROM THE EXPROPRIATION ACT FOR THE SCHOOL TO HAVE A FIELD WHERE STUDENTS COULD PLAY FOOTBALL AND RUN TRACK...”

This dilemma became both a blessing and a challenge for the Smith family. After persistently advocating for fair compensation for their home and land, Mr. Smith and his family were eventually offered land up north, where they relocated following the sale of their property, moving away from their existing neighbourhood.

Once a hub for Black settlement, businesses, and hosting a large Black population in the 1980s, the Annex has since experienced a decline and a shift in its population.¹⁷ This is largely due to development pressures that have gentrified the neighbourhood and displaced its Black, African, and Caribbean people. In the face of development pressures, African-Canadians who once lived in the neighbourhood began to explore other areas to settle in the city, as they continued to build families, own businesses, and explore economic and educational opportunities for themselves, demonstrating their resilience despite socio-economic and environmental factors that have tried to work against them. Today, organizations like Blackhurst work to preserve this history, ensuring the stories of African Canadians in the City, remain part of the city's collective memory.

(credit: Magdalena Ugarte)



THE LEGACY OF AFRICAN-CANADIAN SPACES IN THE ANNEX

The Annex neighbourhood is known to have nurtured some of Toronto's first African Canadian-owned businesses and non-profits, laying the foundation for a vibrant local economy, a legacy that Blackhurst continues to carry forward today. For many, this area was more than just a place to live; it was a hub of relationships, friendship, community, and Black identity.

"I CAN SAY THAT I MYSELF, AS A TEENAGER, SPENT A LOT OF TIME IN THAT AREA, AS DID A NUMBER OF MY FRIENDS AND FAMILY. YOU KNOW, THEY'RE IN A GREAT LOCATION, AND THE COMMUNITY HAS CONTINUED TO BUILD AROUND THEM.

DOROTHY ABBOT

Among the emblematic Black-owned businesses was *Contrast*, Toronto's first Black-owned newspaper. Known as the "eyes, ears, and voice"¹⁸ of the African-Canadian community, *Contrast* was far more than a publication and its host building became known as the city's first Black community centre, where residents gathered to share information, organize, and support one another.¹⁹

Another notable business was Mascoll's Beauty Supplies Ltd., founded by Beverly Mascoll. Opening the store at 870 Bathurst Street, the area in which Mascoll's family settled in after arriving from Nova Scotia, the business grew into what is now known as Canada's largest distributor of haircare and beauty products for Black women.²⁰ A graduate of Central Tech High School, Mascoll turned her shop into a safe and welcoming space for Black women. They could find not just products for haircare, but also community advice and affirmation during a time when this was scarce for Black people in Toronto. In her later years, Beverly Mascoll returned to university to continue her education. As her business was family-run, there was no one to take it over after her passing, which ultimately led to its closure.

In 1968, Leonard and Gwendolyn Johnston opened the Third World Bookstore, also known as Third World Books & Crafts. Leonard, a member of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, had been driven to open this bookstore by his deep love of books.²¹ The store also became a cornerstone of Black intellectual life in Toronto and many of Toronto's longstanding Black residents recall the Third World bookstore with reverence: "Third World was invaluable... I discovered booklets and materials that were hard to find elsewhere," one focus group participant recalled and another describing it as "my Mecca. I'd get information about various groups and simplify it so the women could read about each other's cultures." To honor the legacy with a bench that is outside of Bathurst Subway.²²

Over time, the waves of redevelopment in the area began to erode the legacy of the Annex's Black business landscape, displacing many long-standing businesses and residents.²³



Weekend of marching, mourning — pgs. 8, 9



WHERE EVERYTHING BEGAN

BLACKHURST'S ORIGIN STORY

THE STORY OF BLACKHURST CULTURAL CENTRE COULD BEGIN WITH THE GHANAIAN PRINCIPLE SANKOFA, 'GO BACK AND GET IT'.

BLACKHURST—TODAY AN ICONIC CULTURAL DESTINATION FOR AFRICAN CANADIAN HISTORY, SOCIAL PRODUCTIVITY, INTERGENERATIONAL TEACHING, AND DIASPORIC ARTS AND CULTURE—IS A CONCEPT THAT WAS BIRTHED THROUGH THE VERY HISTORY IT CAREFULLY PRESERVES.

- BCC

In 1998, Itah Sadu and Miguel San Vicente bought A Different Booklist from professor, Dr. Wesley Crichlow. Dr. Crichlow owned and operated the bookstore for three years prior, developing the space into a curation of writings focused on critical race theory and Caribbean-Canadian queer identity. This ethos of centring crucial narratives in the Canadian consciousness was woven into the fabric of A Different Booklist. With this foundation, an author-storyteller paired with an active member of Toronto's progressive political scene, were the perfect couple to carry forward A Different Booklist's legacy; Miguel and Itah received the baton, and ran. Bookstores are inherently living spaces of thought. When patrons enter a bookstore and are introduced to new authors, a dialogue forms where bookstore staff, customers, and the author's offerings (and the legacies they imply) engage. In this sense, A Different Booklist was always more than a centre of commerce, but rather a treasured educational and community institution for persons to learn, engage, listen to, and immerse themselves in. For 28 years it operated under Miguel and Itah at 746 Bathurst Street, and later across the street at 777 Bathurst Street in the Mirvish Village.



Blackhurst Cultural Centre Event (credit: Magdalena Ugarte)

In 2013, the Mirvish block, spanning Bathurst from Bloor to Lennox Street, was sold to Westbank Corp. The development opportunity inspired Miguel and Itah to expand their bookstore and formally established the *A Different Booklist Cultural Centre* now known as the *Blackhurst Cultural Centre*. *Blackhurst Cultural Centre* and *A Different Booklist* demonstrate a sustainable development approach to non-profit models that aligns with the neighborhood redevelopment and revitalization. Thus, evolving with the times but still remaining true to its purpose as an important social, cultural, and educational services' institution within the Annex neighborhood serving the City at large.

The Sankofa approach adopted by Blackhurst frames the programs and activities the centre provides, drawing in community, illuminating ancestral practices of cooperative economics, and preserving African-Caribbean diasporic histories. The Annex neighbourhood has set a precedent for the development of Black spaces of cultural and artistic expression.²⁴

ORGANIZATION STRUCTURE AND PROGRAMS

Today, the Blackhurst Cultural Centre is led by Itah Sadu as Executive Director and governed by a Board of seven distinguished community members. Blackhurst has partnerships with various community groups, government entities, and private supporters and the founding patrons, Zanana Akande, Jacqueline Spence & Dr. Dominick Shelton and Dr. Edith & Mike Lorimer continue to be pivotal stewards in the project's success. Sadu's longstanding work within the community has cultivated a vast network of relationships that helps the organization do the work it does. This network has grown organically as a result of shared experiences, neighbourhood conversations, and mutual support. The Centre, in many ways, is also powered by the community that surrounds it. For instance, on moving day, when the Bookstore and the Centre relocated in 2017, nearly 150 volunteers from the Greater Toronto Area came to help move its collection of books, echoing the resilient community relations built by the Centre.²⁵

The Centre's mission and vision reflect a motivation to provide opportunities for Canadians and visitors to celebrate and engage with the rich legacy and history of the Canadian Black diaspora. It aims to serve as a world-class model for preserving both a neighbourhood and a people's history, inviting all Canadian visitors to celebrate the lasting legacy of the Black diaspora. As a Black-led institution, it offers a space where Black individuals feel comfortable sharing their experiences, seeking support, and engaging in community programming.

Historically, the Bathurst-Bloor area has been home to a diverse mix of Black communities, contributing to a vibrant and multifaceted cultural hub. As one individual from the Shakers' recounts, "When you got down to Bathurst and Bloor, that is where you found a more mixed community, people from Caribbean countries, etcetera". Blackhurst embodies legacy, a concept distinct from history. Itah Sadu, managing director of Blackhurst, emphasizes this distinction, recognizing the Centre's role in both preserving and creating history. Legacy is seen as evolving and alive, rooted in the everyday lives of people and as a storyteller, Sadu understands the power of documentation and the importance of recording and sharing these legacies.

Blackhurst offers diverse programming rooted in community engagement and cultural education, guided by the following principles:

- **DISCOVERY & LEARNING:** STRENGTHENING SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE
- **EMPOWERMENT & SOLUTIONS:** BUILDING A TALENT POOL WITH TECHNICAL SKILLS
- **WELLNESS & HEALTH:** PROMOTING MENTAL, SPIRITUAL, AND PHYSICAL WELL-BEING
- **CONNECTION & COMMUNITY:** CREATING NEW CONNECTIONS AND SHARING CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

Each event is carefully curated with one of these principles in mind. In addition to hosting one-time events, the Centre also organizes annual programming that fosters ongoing community involvement and historical reflection.

Blackhurst also operates within the practice of call and response. When there is a call for a community need, Blackhurst responds by providing it. For example, when there is a call to re-imagine history, such as the Underground Railroad, Blackhurst has responded creatively and tangibly through its annual Emancipation Day “Underground Freedom Train” Ride. This event is “a partnership with the Blackhurst Cultural Centre [together with the Toronto Transit Commission²⁶] and celebrates the significance of the Underground Railroad, the largest anti-slavery movement in North America.” Dynamic engagements like this program ensure that Blackhurst remains a space where legacy, community, and cultural expression thrive. To further sustain community engagement, the Centre also employs informal assessments alongside community events. One example is the tea party series held in spring 2025, which unveiled a commemorative plaque from Parks Canada honouring those who arrived through the West Indian Domestic Scheme. Through this ongoing practice of listening and responding, Blackhurst continues to serve as a vital cultural anchor for Black and Afro-Caribbean legacies and as a responsive community institution in Toronto’s ever-changing urban landscape.



High Tea (credit: Blackhurst Cultural Centre)

1968: Opening of Third World Bookstore, which became an early hub of Black intellectual and community life in Toronto

1998: Itah Sadu and Miguel San Vicente purchased A Different Booklist bookstore

2000

2014: Mirvish Village redevelopment was announced by Westbank which would trigger the relocation of A Different Booklist

2020: Blackhurst secures a 49-year lease in the Mirvish Village redevelopment

2024: 14.12 million dollars of joint funding announced for Blackhurst Cultural Centre

1960

2013: Launch of the Emancipation Day “Underground Freedom Train Ride” initiative with the TTC

2020: Land swap proposal advanced with the City of Toronto to secure a permanent cultural space

2022: A Different Booklist’s Cultural Centre was renamed to Blackhurst Cultural Centre

KEY PROJECTS AND INITIATIVES

BLACK PLANNING IN ACTION

THIS SECTION HIGHLIGHTS SOME OF BLACKHURST'S PROGRAMMING, FOCUSING ON HOW THE CENTRE'S COMMUNITY-CENTRED INITIATIVES ADVANCE BLACK ACKNOWLEDGMENT, BLACK PLACE-KEEPING, AND BLACK PLACE-MAKING, AS WELL AS HOW THEY HAVE BEEN ABLE TO PLAN FOR AND WITH THEIR COMMUNITY.

BLACKHURST REDEVELOPMENT PROJECT

In 2017, a significant change was imminent for Blackhurst. Redevelopment plans for the neighbourhood, announced in 2014 by private developer Westbank Corp, prompted relocation plans for the bookstore.²⁷

Westbank had publicly committed to preserving the legacy and history of the area, and Blackhurst's response was to advocate for the longstanding presence and contribution of African Canadians to be recognized.

"IT IS IMPORTANT FOR THE BLACK COMMUNITY TO SEE THAT ITS ROOTS WILL GROW DEEPER IN THIS CITY,"

ITAH SADU

To assert the importance of this cultural legacy, the Centre partnered with City of Toronto councillors and staff to move a motion forward in 2020 proposing a land swap, wherein the City would take ownership of a portion of the new Mirvish Village



Blackhurst Redevelopment Rendering (credit: Judah Mulalu)

as a heritage site dedicated to a Black community cultural space that will now be the new home of the Blackhurst Cultural Centre. Successful in moving the motion forward, the City and Blackhurst then entered into a long negotiation process to determine lease terms. While the Centre originally sought a symbolic 99-year lease, the city initially proposed a 20-year lease. Blackhurst continued to advocate, eventually securing a 49-year lease on the new space. To fund the construction of the new centre, Blackhurst received over \$14.1 million in funding from municipal and federal sources.²⁸ Complementing this funding is grassroots fundraising through their 'Buy-a-Brick' initiative.²⁹ This allows community members and supporters to contribute by purchasing a commemorative brick, with donors' names publicly honoured as a lasting tribute to their contribution. The new centre will be located at 756 Bathurst Street, a site historically recognized as the Blackhurst Corridor.

This development represents a landmark cultural infrastructure initiative for the city, showing how contemporary urban development can merge with cultural preservation and equity-focused planning. The centre will be a purpose-built, multi-use cultural facility integrated with mixed-use redevelopment. It will offer retail space for A Different Booklist, and new public areas. Infrastructure will feature versatile programming spaces, arts facilities, youth zones, a recording studio, a computer lab, and accessible washrooms. Sustainability is a core principle of the project, with the incorporation of low-carbon building materials and energy-efficient systems. The project also promotes walkability by enhancing the pedestrianized laneway at the rear end of the site. Key stakeholders in the project include Blackhurst Cultural Centre, the City of Toronto, ERA Architects, Westbank Corp, Ten-2Four Architecture, EBLA, local residents, and community advocacy groups. Upon completion, the new centre will be a living record of Black presence and cultural contribution in Toronto. Alongside the new Centre, the redevelopment will also include an affordable housing project.³⁰

Through direction from the city council, the Director of Affordable Housing

AFFORDABLE HOUSING INITIATIVE

entered negotiations with Westbank developers to prioritize the construction of 85 affordable housing units which are a part of the City's "Open Door housing program, which gives financial incentives such as tax relief and fee exemptions to developers building affordable housing."³¹ Of the 85, "48 homes are being allocated by community non-profit partners including Blackhurst Cultural Centre in partnership with WoodGreen Community Housing, Community Living Toronto, Kehilla Residential Programme, and Wigwamen."³² As a participating organization, BCC has been allocated 12 rental units, for which "they will provide referrals based on their individual criteria."³³

To support this, the City offered several incentives to Westbank, including relief from planning fees, development charges, and municipal taxes. Additionally, the affordable units were exempt from municipal and school taxation over the 25-year term. To demonstrate the project's feasibility, Westbank submitted a business plan outlining its prior experience in developing, financing, and managing affordable housing projects.

Inspired by Ed Mirvish's Little Bohemia, located on the east side of the redevelopment project along Markham Street, which once housed artist studios and galleries, Blackhurst dedicated the awarded units to Black Professional and emerging artists and cultural creators^{34,35}. Applicants were asked how this opportunity would support their artistic and professional development, as well as how they plan to contribute and engage with the local community through their art. With mentorship from Woodgreen Community Services and support from a five member community selection committee, Blackhurst successfully led the application selection process.

This, combined with the Westbank's corporate financial viability and understanding

of city planning principles, led the Director of Affordable Housing and the City Manager to deem the project satisfactory. Reflecting on this redevelopment project, the partnership between the City, Westbank, Blackhurst, and other non-profits demonstrates how strategic incentives and proven capacity can work hand in hand to bring complex affordable housing projects into operation and demonstrate planning in practice.

EMANCIPATION DAY 'UNDERGROUND FREEDOM TRAIN' RIDE

The Underground Freedom Train Ride, an annual train ride in partnership with Toronto Transit Commission (TTC), is a symbolic subway journey that commemorates the experience of enslaved people who escaped to Canada from the United States via the Underground Railroad. Since its inception in 2013, the event has bridged the past and the present, offering a commemoration of resilience.

"IT IS A RECOGNITION OF A HISTORIC DATE...AND IS A CELEBRATION OF THE POWER AND POTENTIAL OF PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT," ITAH SADU

The Train Ride captures the spirit and significance of the event. With each train ride, a pioneer from the African Canadian community is chosen to serve as the train's conductor. Former conductors have included trailblazers such as former MPP Zanana Akande. Conductors are selected to embody the spirit of Harriet Tubman, who is recognized as a "freedom seeker, Underground Railroad conductor, abolitionist, suffragist, human rights activist, and one of Maryland's most famous daughters".³⁶

The train departs late on the night of July 31st every year, making the transition into Emancipation Day on August 1st. The journey begins in one part of the city

and travels through Toronto, filled with a celebration of music, spoken word, and community gathering. Over the years, the route has varied; in 2025, the event began at Vaughan Metropolitan Centre and concluded at Union Station. Organized in collaboration with community organizations, political offices, and civic leaders, the event's programming often includes ceremonial plaque unveilings and awards recognizing influential community members. Past partners have included the City of Toronto, Black Scarborough TO, Caribbean African Canadian Social Services, and the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. Throughout the years, other cities have participated in the Freedom Train Ride by organizing their own with their local transit, including the Durham Region and Ottawa.^{37,38}



Emancipation Train Ride (credit: Blackhurst Cultural Centre)

WELCOME TO BLACKHURST

Welcome to Blackhurst is a multifaceted initiative dedicated to preserving and sharing the Black history of Toronto's Annex neighbourhood. At its core, it is a year-round cultural tourism program that invites both Black and non-Black audiences to engage with the neighbourhood's legacy through guided walking tours, cultural events, and educational lectures. Walking tours and talks are often led by Blackhurst staff who engage with long-time residents whose family histories in the neighbourhood span decades. They offer personal and intergenerational perspectives on the community's past, sharing stories of Black Canadians whose contributions have shaped the lives of all Canadians.³⁹ This programming is especially aimed at students, with tailored offerings for schools and special interest groups.

The initiative also includes a publication titled *Welcome to Blackhurst: An Iconic Toronto Neighbourhood*, produced by Blackhurst. This book features the stories of 30 individuals who lived and owned businesses in the area.⁴⁰ All proceeds from the book sales support the ongoing work of the Centre. In addition to this, the initiative is also realized as a public exhibition commemorating this history through archival materials, photographs, and oral histories.⁴¹ Together, all these efforts ensure that the voices, contributions, and history of this community are preserved and shared for generations to come.



From Bookstore to Cultural Centre (credit: Blackhurst Cultural Centre)

BLACK PLANNING FRAMEWORK

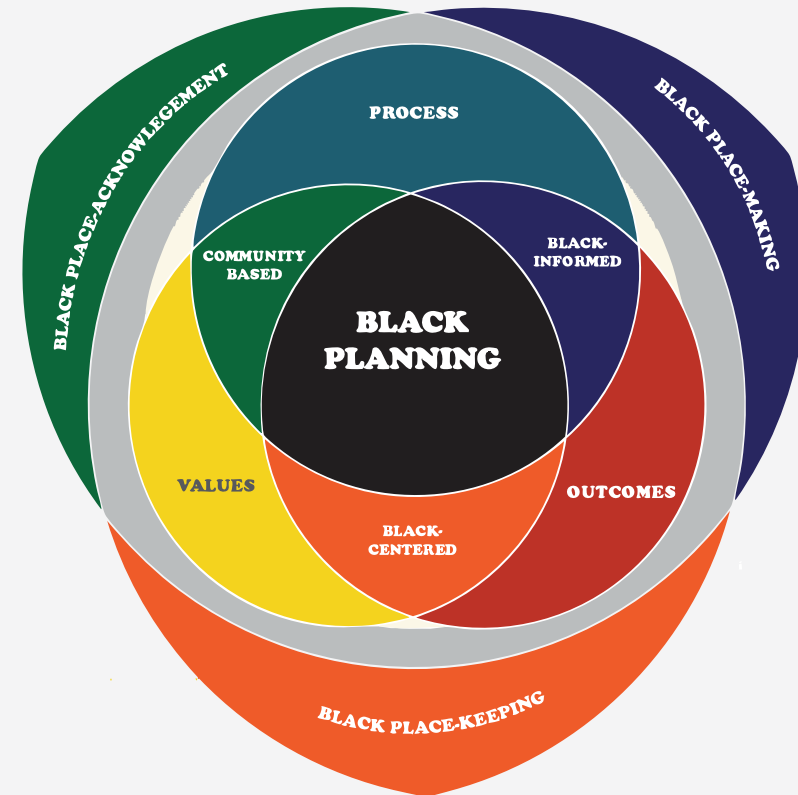
BLACK PLANNING IS BOTH A PRACTICAL (PRACTICE) APPROACH TO PLANNING THAT IS BUILT UPON LIVED EXPERIENCES, TRADITIONS, AND COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE OF BLACK INDIVIDUALS AND POPULATIONS. IT ENCOMPASSES PRACTICES THAT AIM TO HELP ADVANCE THE PLANNING PRIORITIES, NEEDS, AND ASPIRATIONS OF BLACK COMMUNITIES IN CANADA, PRACTICES THAT ARE:

COMMUNITY-BASED: COMMUNITY IDENTIFIES THEIR PLANNING PRIORITIES AND HOW TO ACHIEVE THEM

BLACK-CENTRED: PLANNING ACTION IS RELEVANT AND RESPONSIVE TO THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF BLACK INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES

BLACK-INFORMED: BLACK KNOWLEDGE AND PERSPECTIVES SHAPE PLANNING PROCESSES AND DECISIONS

The Black Planning framework developed by the BEPIC project provides an organizing frame to conceptualize and understand Black Planning. It is structured around three pillars – Black place-acknowledgement, Black place-keeping, and Black place-making – which articulate distinct but interconnected dimensions through which Black communities interpret, sustain, and transform space. Together, these pillars function as both an analytical framework and an expression of Black spatial knowledge and practices that are rooted in historical acknowledgement, spatial preservation, and collective future-making. The framework has been informed by the work of BEPIC's three Black-led community partner organizations, Black planning professionals, and non-Black planners working with Black communities, as well as by the work of Black thinkers and scholars.



BLACK PLACE-ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Black Place-Acknowledgement involves acknowledging the historic and current presence of Black communities, their lived memories and situated identities, as well as the practices that have attempted to disrupt these connections. It is also about acknowledging the planning knowledge and contributions of Black communities, individuals, scholars, and practitioners.

BLACK PLACE-KEEPING

Black Place-Keeping involves grounding Black experiences and reestablishing, strengthening, restoring and celebrating the connections to the past and spaces historically inhabited by Black communities that have been eroded, erased or forgotten. It highlights Black knowledge, intergenerational memory work, and reclamation practices as central to cultural and spatial preservation.

BLACK PLACE-MAKING

Black Place-Making is about creating spaces for Black futures – spaces that are safe and beautiful, spaces of joy, spaces that foster economic opportunities and resist erasure, which facilitate equitable and just environments for Black communities to grow and thrive. It affirms creative and resistant practices that reclaim agency across urban and rural contexts.

BLACK PLANNING

BLACKHURST: PLACEKEEPING AND PLACEMAKING

THE BLACK PLANNING FRAMEWORK IS ROOTED IN THE KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCES OF BLACK COMMUNITIES. IT OUTLINES APPROACHES THAT ARE COMMUNITY-BASED, BLACK-CENTERED AND BLACK-INFORMED.

THIS SECTION HIGHLIGHTS HOW BLACKHURST'S WORK EMBODIES THE FRAMEWORK'S KEY PILLARS: BLACK PLACE-MAKING, PLACE-KEEPING, AND PLACE-ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.

Blackhurst Cultural Centre is deeply engaged in the practice of Black placekeeping. Black placekeeping is a practice committed to preserving, celebrating, and sustaining spaces of cultural and historical significance for the Black diasporic community. The neighbourhood of Bloor and Bathurst in Toronto holds particular historical importance for the Black community in Toronto, with some of its earliest residents escaping slavery through the underground railroad. In the 60s and 70s the area served as a hub for Black immigrants particularly from the Caribbean. Blackhurst's very existence, and its perseverance through decades of change and redevelopment, embodies the ongoing effort to protect and affirm a meaningful place within the city. Blackhurst's approach also reflects principles of Critical Sankofa Planning, a framework that emphasizes learning from the past to inform present and future action. This is woven into its mission and vision, which highlight the importance of preserving and activating spaces with deep resonance for the Black diaspora. Community engagement is an integral part of this work, often facilitated through informal assessments and gatherings. For instance, in spring 2025, the Centre hosted a tea party to unveil a commemorative plaque from



Blackhurst Cultural Centre Event (credit: Magdalena Ugarte)

Parks Canada, honoring domestic workers and participants in the West Indian Domestic Scheme. Several signature initiatives illustrate the Centre's role in Black acknowledgment and education, including the Emancipation Underground Freedom Train Ride, which commemorates the journeys of those who escaped enslavement, and Welcome to Blackhurst, a place-keeping project that celebrates the neighbourhood's Black history and cultural life. These and other efforts underscore the organization's enduring commitment to preserving the legacy of the Black diaspora while contributing to the revitalization and protection of Black spaces rich in meaning and history.

The Centre also exemplifies how planning, when practiced in partnership with Black-led organizations, can move beyond policy frameworks to actively shape spaces, narratives, and cultural futures on the ground. The redevelopment project demonstrates how equity-focused planning and heritage conservation can work in tandem to place Black histories and contributions to city-building at the Centre. As part of this process, the Centre partnered with StreetARToronto to commission Canada's first mural paying tribute to calypso and soca music, which will be installed at the new development.⁴² This mural will be "a tribute to the seminal roles that calypso & soca music, masquerade costumes, and the steelpan have played in Canada's Black and Caribbean community".⁴³

Beyond the built environment, Blackhurst is also deeply invested in cultural storytelling and community engagement. Its podcast, *The People's Podcast*, "serves as a living archive, documenting stories, interviews, and highlights from BCC programs to honour both past and present cultural contribution" and "fosters meaningful connections with audiences in Toronto and beyond"⁴⁴. Similarly, the annual Freedom Train Ride offers a creative example of how cities can partner with Black-led organizations to leverage existing infrastructure in ways that promote cultural tourism for mutual benefit. Taken together, these initiatives demonstrate

Afrofuturism's place in planning, offering a model for how the imagination of Black communities can be harnessed to design futures rooted in justice, belonging, and liberation. In doing so, Blackhurst affirms that planning is not only about physical infrastructure but also about dreaming new spatial realities into being. Furthermore, these initiatives illustrate the significant potential of cultural preservation projects and cultural tourism to attract major investment and attention. The redevelopment project alone secured \$14.1 million in funding supplemented by grassroots fundraising efforts. Similarly, the Underground Freedom Train Ride has drawn participation from the Prime Minister, MPPs, the Mayor, and other high-profile political figures, underscoring the importance of such cultural events.

Alongside these learnings, the Centre has taken away important lessons from its projects and initiatives that will inform future planning strategies. During the redevelopment process, Blackhurst faced constant turnover among City staff and political representatives, forcing the team to repeatedly start from scratch. "Every time we met with the planning department, we faced a new individual," explained Judah Mulalu, lead architect on the project. "This meant starting from square one, educating them, and navigating their distinct checklist and due diligence processes. Consequently, gaps inevitably arose." Compounding these challenges was sustained pushback on construction plans and documentation. The Blackhurst building was originally part of a series of 24 heritage structures on the site. "There were a series of buildings, and now only two remain," Mulalu explained. "At the corner of Leonard, we refurbished the rest, but the mid-block was demolished for the current development." A notable dispute involved the technique of panelization. Although panelization is a widely accepted method, the City's heritage department argued that it amounted to demolition. Blackhurst spent two years negotiating this point, and the disagreement delayed the project by an additional three years. Ultimately, BCC remained resilient and the building is in progress but such experiences serve as a reminder of the barriers Black communities continue to face when advocating for space, recognition, and resources especially within the planning sphere.

LEARNING FROM BLACKHURST

KEY LESSONS AND TAKEAWAYS

THE ORIGINS AND WORK OF BLACKHURST OFFER SEVERAL INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PLANNING PRACTITIONERS COMMITTED TO WORKING WITH BLACK COMMUNITIES IN WAYS THAT ADVANCE THEIR PLANNING PRIORITIES. THESE LESSONS REMIND US THAT PLANNING IS MOST IMPACTFUL WHEN IT IS ROOTED IN COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP, CULTURAL CONTINUITY, AND A SHARED COMMITMENT TO REIMAGINING SPACE THROUGH BLACK HISTORIES, STRUGGLES, AND FUTURES.

THIS SECTION OUTLINES A SET OF RECOMMENDATIONS DRAWN FROM THE INSIGHTS AND BEST PRACTICES OF BLACKHURST CULTURAL CENTRE. BLACK COMMUNITIES CAN ALSO DRAW FROM THESE RECOMMENDATIONS TO INFORM THEIR OWN WORK AND TO GUIDE THEIR APPROACHES WHEN ENGAGING WITH MUNICIPALITIES, COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS, NON-PROFITS, AND STAKEHOLDER GROUPS.

1. DESIGNATE STAFF TO SUSTAIN RELATIONSHIPS WITH BLACK COMMUNITIES AND ORGANIZATIONS

It is essential for municipalities to establish dedicated staff who will work directly with Black communities and organizations. These staff members should be equipped with the expertise and cultural sensitivity required to effectively engage with Black communities. These relationships should not only be initiated but sustained over time, building trust and fostering long-term collaboration. These designated roles should serve as bridges between government entities and community organizations, creating pathways for Black voices to tangibly influence planning decisions.

2. LEVERAGE LONG-TERM LEASE STRUCTURES FOR BLACK LAND OWNERSHIP

A significant challenge in Black communities is securing long-term ownership of land. Drawing from the success of initiatives like Blackhurst's 49-year lease model, municipalities and developers should explore legal and regulatory change in order to navigate system barriers in planning legislation. This could involve revisiting zoning laws, exploring land trust models, and other tools that can facilitate long-term Black land ownership and ensuring Black inclusion into broader planning policies. Through this, Black communities can access economic stability and preserve cultural heritage.

3. ENVISION ALTERNATIVE BLACK FUTURES AND EMBED THOSE VISIONS INTO PLANNING PRACTICE

Afrofuturism provides a powerful lens for reimagining the future of Black communities within urban planning. It encourages Black individuals, planners, and practitioners to envision the possibilities of their environment not just as they are, but as they could be in an equitable, Black-centred way. By incorporating Afrofuturism as a planning principle, cities can centre the dreams, aspirations, and innovations of Black communities to create spaces. It also opens opportunities to integrate technology, art, and culture in ways that represent Black experiences.

CONCLUSION

Blackhurst stands today as one of the last remaining Black spaces in the Bathurst-Bloor neighbourhood, as well as as an example of resilience, creativity, and strategic advocacy. The Centre challenges traditional planning frameworks that prioritize built heritage by emphasizing the value of cultural heritage and storytelling that highlight practices and identities rooted in place. Blackhurst also demonstrates Afrofuturism, offering a model for how the imagination of Black communities can be harnessed to design futures rooted in justice, belonging, and liberation. In doing so, it affirms that planning is not only about physical infrastructure but also about dreaming new spatial realities into being.

Overall, this case study offers a compelling model for how Black communities can reimagine planning, root development in cultural memory, reclaim space, and champion initiatives that preserve and amplify Black histories. The best practices led by Blackhurst Cultural Centre highlight the powerful opportunities for like-minded organizations to advance Black priorities, respond to community needs, and strengthen Black presence through bold and visionary work in Black planning, Black placemaking, and Black placekeeping.

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EXPERIENCES DES
COMMUNAUTÉS NOIRES
ENGAGÉES DANS
LA PLANIFICATION
AU CANADA



BLACK
EXPERIENCES
WITH PLANNING
IN CANADA