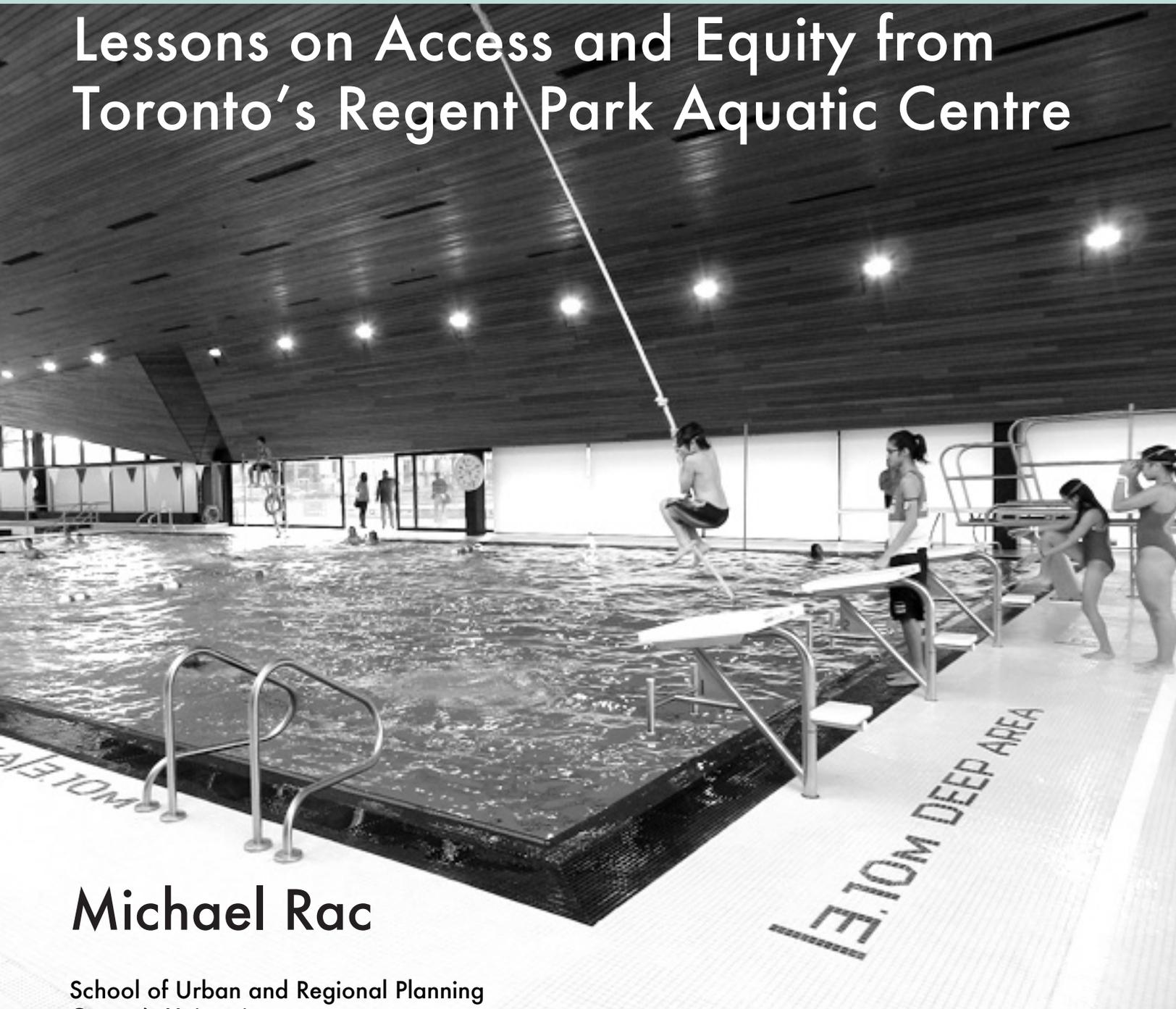


IS EVERYONE IN THE POOL?

Lessons on Access and Equity from Toronto's Regent Park Aquatic Centre



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Aquatic centres offer families and individuals opportunities for physical activity, leisure, and recreation. Additionally, these centres have the potential to improve the overall quality of life of those who participate, while also benefiting neighbourhoods through positive community development (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2008; Boys and Girls Club, 2007; CPRA, 2001; Mulholland, 2008; Totten, 2004). However, many Canadians are unable to fully participate in activities or programming at aquatic centres because of socio-economic or cultural barriers. The architectural and interior design of an aquatic centre, in addition to the programming options offered, as well as the cost of those programs, can all act as barriers to participation for those who wish to make use of the facility (Forsyth, 2001; Tynan, 2005).

Any person regardless of their socio-economic status, culture, religion, age, sexual orientation, or even swimming ability deserves the ability to access and comfortably use public aquatic centres. However, when these aquatic recreation facilities do not incorporate the proper inclusive programming and design accommodations, many Canadians are unable to use them. This is troubling considering that access to recreation, an integral issue with health and social planning, is a critical element in enabling Canadians to become more active and healthy. Aquatic centres that incorporate principles of access and equity for all, can play an important role in fighting Canada's obesity epidemic by empowering individuals to become more active, but also more involved in their communities (Millar & Rappaport, 2009; Robert et al, 2012). Thus, as aquatic centres are built or renovated, it is important that issues relating to access and equity are addressed in the planning, design, and programming of these urban oases.

The Regent Park Aquatic Centre, a recently opened public aquatic centre in Toronto's Regent Park neighbourhood, was selected as the sole case study of this report. The research aims to discover how the Regent Park Aquatic Centre accommodates persons from all socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, and what planners can learn from the process that created this aquatic centre. The exploration of how the centre accommodates all persons was completed using a three-part qualitative research methodology, involving a literature and document review, interviews with key informants, and site visits.

Through this process, it was discovered that the Regent Park Aquatic Centre has been remarkably successful in bringing together numerous groups of residents from various socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. This success has been made possible by a number of programming and design elements that accommodate the various socio-economic and cultural groups present within Regent Park and Toronto. Particularly, the inclusion of universal change rooms, privacy screens, and variation amongst the pools, as well as free programming, female-only programming, and enabling in-person registration all contributes to the accessibility of the Regent Park Aquatic Centre.

This report concludes by putting forward five important lessons from the Regent Park Aquatic Centre that should be considered when building or renovating a public aquatic centre. These lessons are the culmination of existing literature, conversations with key informants, and research site visits to the aquatic centre.

i. the need for extensive public consultation

It is important that extensive public consultation occurs with as many stakeholders and residents as possible in order to discover the needs and wishes of the community. In order for a future aquatic centre to be accessible to everyone, it is extremely important that as many people as possible, from various communities, are given the opportunity to take part in the visioning and planning process of the future centre.

ii. understand the community context

It is imperative that planners understand the community context in which a future aquatic centre will be situated. In order for an aquatic centre to be planned, designed and built so that it does not create any socio-cultural or economic barriers for the public, it is important to understand what those barriers may be in advance.

iii. programming should be free of barriers to participation

Free programming is much more equitable and accessible to economically marginalized individuals and families than waiving fees or offering subsidies. Aquatic centres located within socio-economically marginalized neighbourhoods should have some, if not all, free programming.

iv. inclusive physical design

Design elements such as universal change rooms, privacy screens for female-only programming, and other accommodation features make an aquatic centre much more socio-culturally accessible.

v. the importance of swim culture education

For those with little or no swimming experience, going to an aquatic centre can be an uncomfortable and nerve-wracking event, thus it is imperative that aquatic centres incorporate an educational component to swimming culture into their programming. Furthermore, it should be the goal of those who are responsible for programming at aquatic centres to get out in the community, and to encourage as many people as possible to learn how to swim.

Both planners and municipal decision makers ought to incorporate these lessons into the planning, building, and renovation of municipal aquatic centres, so that social, economic, and cultural barriers are removed. This will enable as many people as possible (if not everyone) to comfortably make use of these public facilities. Every Canadian, including the residents of Regent Park, should be able to access an aquatic centre where people of all backgrounds can engage in aquatic recreation and leisure. However, for everyone to be able to get in the pool, socio-economic and cultural barriers first need to be removed.

