

# **Layers of Identity: Understanding Kensington Market's Cultural and Economic Significance**

Nawaf Mahmood

501227884

CGEO 793

Dr. Mohammad Manshouri

November 9, 2025

# Introduction

Kensington Market, nestled in the heart of Toronto and bordered by Spadina Ave, Dundas St W, Bathurst St, and College St, is one of the city's most culturally diverse neighbourhoods. Known for its colourful street art, multicultural food vendors, and multiethnic stores, the area has long served as the symbol of Toronto's growing identity. The essay will explore the question: *What makes Kensington Market such a culturally diverse and significant historical landmark in Toronto?* Drawing from historical, academic, and popular media sources, the argument presented is that Kensington Market represents an ever-changing cultural landscape shaped by immigrant entrepreneurs, community resistance to gentrification, and the protection of local heritage.

Beginning with the Jewish immigrants in the early 20th century, the market became a working hub for families, where families used their own homes as storefronts, selling goods directly to others. Over time, waves of new arrivals from Portuguese, Caribbean, Chinese, and Latin American communities and others brought with them a new set of languages, cuisines, and cultural practices, shaping the market into what it is today.

Together, these factors have allowed the market to function as a resilient ethnic economy, a diverse community, and an economic hub despite growing business and development pressures.

## Literature Review

The academic and media literature surrounding Kensington Market all emphasize that the market is more complex than it appears. In her book, *Kensington Market: Collective Memory, Public History, and Toronto's Urban Landscape*, Na Li (2015) argues that immigrant history and community memory contribute to the market's identity. She believes that the markets' multicultural values are not purely rooted in its structure but rather in the living stories of its occupants, which have been layering on top of each other ever since the markets' birth. Similarly, Shetty (2020) emphasizes that community-driven urban design is crucial for resisting gentrification and believes that affordable housing and creative reuse of space are important steps required to protect the market's identity.

In her 2020 study, Mitchell examines Pedestrian Sundays as a motive in reclaiming public urban environments. Pedestrian Sundays allow the closure of streets to vehicles, allowing street vendors and community members to walk around and use the urban space for themselves. Mitchell further warns that these events that empower the community could, over time, through increasing commercialization, potentially undermine their initial objectives. Collectively, these

articles emphasize the need for constant community involvement and local engagement in maintaining the market's long-term cultural and economic resilience.

Newspaper articles share the same concerns. CBC News (2019) reported that Toronto granted Kensington Market heritage status to preserve its multicultural identity and diversity. However, as the Toronto Star (2024) states, the city's zoning policies and profit-driven urban planning go against the city's efforts to protect Kensington Market and preserve its heritage. The Star argues that the city praises the market for its multicultural and diverse nature, yet its own municipal policies promote uniformity and threaten its uniqueness. Meanwhile, the BBC Travel feature (2010) portrays the market as a "lovable hodgepodge" where different cultures and histories come together in a layered format.

Popular media sources reinforce these ideas. The Kensington Market Historical Society (KMHS) archives and preserves immigrant histories, as well as supports mapping initiatives dedicated to preserving these narratives. On the other hand, the Canadian Encyclopedia documents the market's transformation from its British origins to the present and its diverse identity, but warns that higher rents threaten its identity. Overall, all of these sources present Kensington Market as a symbol of Toronto's multicultural story.

## Research Questions

The research conducted on Kensington Market explored what makes the market so multiethnic and culturally diverse. It also explored why the market is such a historically significant location in Toronto's urban landscape. I explored my research question by delving into the history, culture, economy, and key landmarks that make it unique.

### Main Findings

One of the primary findings is that the market's cultural diversity originated from early immigration. Initially a Jewish neighbourhood, the area slowly became home to Portuguese, Caribbean, Chinese, and Latin American immigrants, each bringing their own culture, religion, traditions, and art. The area's economic successes are deeply rooted in the independently owned businesses of each immigrant. The market's foundation is built upon the food stands, clothing shops, and ethnic stores, which meet the needs of the locals and also the tourists. As Lo (2006) explains, the market is a clear example of an "ethnic economy," which caters to both local communities and a wider customer base, like tourists.

Another finding is the role of local cultural events in fostering a sense of community. One explanation of such an event is Pedestrian Sundays, which closes the market streets to vehicular traffic and opens them up to musical performances, markets, and public gatherings. This event

displays the neighbourhood's commitment to cultural and community-based urbanism. This local approach to urban planning is opposite to the city's development policies, which focus on the businesses and corporate interests over the people. Michell (2020) points out that these cultural exchanges serve as a form of resistance against gentrification, pushing back against the city's selfish interests.

Another key aspect of the market's identity is its environmental well-being. Environmental initiatives have allowed the area to maintain its strong sense of place in spite of the rising rent and litter. Urban gardens, eco-friendly stores, and art pieces make Kensington Market an ideal place for creative expression and eco-conscious living. Despite its rich history and cultural significance, increasing signs of neglect and commercialization are causing difficulties in maintaining its charm.

Finally, symbolic landmarks like St. Stephen-In-The-Fields Church and plaques around Bellevue Square Park reflect the deep historical origins and culture. These markers of history, along with the old-school houses present throughout the market, serve as physical reminders of the market's resistance to gentrification pressures and immigrant history. The city's decision to grant the market the heritage status in 2019 further signifies its cultural importance, though this status is endangered due to commercialization.

#### **Overgrown Car in Kensington Market**



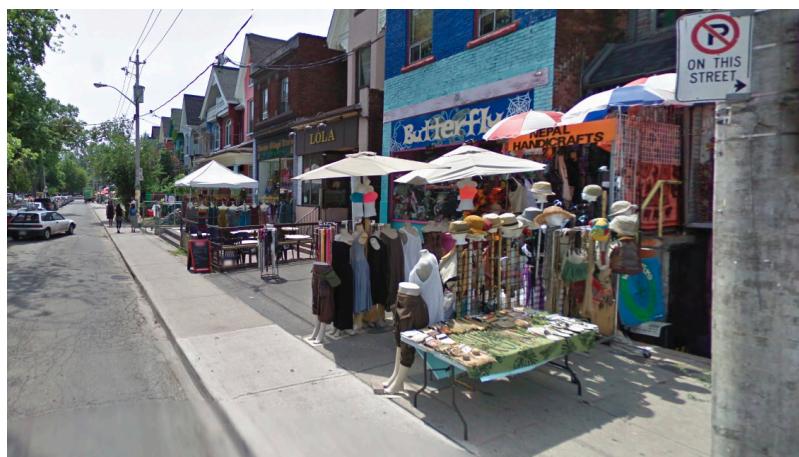
A weathered car surrounded by overgrown plants symbolizes the market's organic, lived-in feel and resistance to the pressures of modernization and gentrification.

#### **St. Stephen-In-The-Fields Church**



A historic church located beside Fire Station 8, this building is a symbol of the long-standing presence of religious and community institutions in Kensington Market. Its architecture and location highlight the neighbourhood's deep-rooted immigrant and working-class history.

### Street Vendors in Kensington Market



A bustling scene of diverse food and retail vendors showcases the multicultural character of the market, from Latin American to Asian cuisines, reflecting the economic activity and cultural diversity of the area.

# The Analysis

My research revealed that Kensington Market is an example of an *ethnic economy*, where immigrant entrepreneurs have created a thriving business selling to their own cultural groups and also a broader, diverse Toronto population. However, this historic, long-standing area is facing challenges caused by the forces of gentrification.

Hackworth and Rekers (2005) discuss the concept of gentrification, explaining how increasing rent and urban development have led to the displacement of businesses and residents. In the case of Kensington Market, the rising rent threatens the affordability of houses and commercial spaces. This is evident as the market has slowly, over the past decade, shifted from a local immigrant-led commercial hub into a tourist-oriented high-end space, in which family businesses are being forced to move. My research found that many local stores are being pushed out to make room for more modern chain stores.

This shift is troubling because it removes the market from its identity as an ethnic enclave, an economic space where businesses are linked to cultural practices and needs of an immigrant community (Lo, 2006). Kensington Market was created by waves of immigrants, beginning with Jewish immigrants in the early twentieth century and later Portuguese, Caribbean, Chinese, and Latin American immigrants. Each of these communities has given Kensington Market its identity and provided an array of cuisines, shops, and traditions, often carried on for generations. They continue to be economic and cultural hubs for these ethnic economies today, despite continuing trends towards commercialization.

Another key point that emerged from my research involves community-driven events like Pedestrian Sundays, which, similar to the business owners and specialty grocers described above, are a response to gentrification, working to reclaim public space from cars and corporations. Mitchell (2020) labels these efforts as significant forms of resistance to gentrification, even if they come from the community level, as they create a space for exchange, local art, and performances, which continue to build the inclusive, dynamic, and vibrant character of the market.

In addition, Kensington Market's environmental health is intrinsically tied to its cultural vitality. The environment-focused practices of sustainable businesses, community gardens, and public art initiatives exemplify the ongoing commitment of the communities to protect the character and ecological context of the market. The movement towards creating a 'greener' market pushes against the force of gentrification, which leads to the replacement of organic, community-rooted places with commercial sites.

# Conclusion

Kensington Market is a lively, culturally relevant neighbourhood in Toronto that encapsulates the city's immigrant diversity. It is one of Toronto's best historical examples of ethnic diversity and acts as an ethnic economy, where immigrants as entrepreneurs established a dynamic marketplace that is ultimately localized in nature. The historical context, cultural representations, and economic practices within a marketplace functionally show the continued presence of immigrant cultures in the city of Toronto and serve as a reflection of the city's identity.

As rents rise and corporate development comes in, Kensington Market is rapidly being transformed from a localized, immigrant-driven place into a commercial area designed for wealthy visitors and tourists. This transformation has significantly forced the removal of many community businesses designed to respond to the cultural and economic needs of immigrant communities. As I discuss in my findings, this process is representative of the diminishing unique identity of an area or community, particularly that of ethnic economies.

However, community-based initiatives like Pedestrian Sundays that reuse public space have allowed community members and business owners to reclaim the public space and continue the cultural vibrancy of Kensington Market from being extinguished. Ultimately, while gentrification poses a substantial threat, Kensington Market remains a symbol of cultural resilience, where community efforts continue to protect its identity and ensure its future as a dynamic, multicultural urban space.

# Bibliography

Hackworth, J., & Rekers, J. (2005). Ethnic packaging and gentrification: The case of four neighborhoods in Toronto. *Urban Affairs Review*, 41(2), 211–236.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087405280859>

Kensington Market. (2017). *The Canadian Encyclopedia*.

<https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/kensington-market>

Li, N. (2015). *Kensington Market*. University of Toronto Press.

MacMillan, S. (2025, February 8). Toronto's Kensington Market gets heritage status to protect its “sense of anarchy, inclusivity.” *CBC*.

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-kensington-market-heritage-designation-1.7454068>

Micallef, S. (2025, January 19). Toronto says it wants to protect Kensington Market. But city laws mean we'll never have another place like it. *Toronto Star*.

[https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/toronto-says-it-wants-to-protect-kensington-market-but-city-laws-mean-well-never-have/article\\_4864b6e0-d4e6-11ef-9fe3-2b1ab9d2a47b.html](https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/toronto-says-it-wants-to-protect-kensington-market-but-city-laws-mean-well-never-have/article_4864b6e0-d4e6-11ef-9fe3-2b1ab9d2a47b.html)

Revisiting the reclaimed street: An analysis of Kensington Market's Pedestrian Sundays' initiative as an exercise in community participation. (n.d.). *ProQuest*.

<https://www.proquest.com/openview/d7abf820225a46dafb329a0f727bdef5/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>

Shetty, K. R. (2025). Subversive social heritage & adaptive infill: The future of Kensington Market. <https://doi.org/10.22215/etd/2025-16577>

Stevenson, R. (2010, November 5). Toronto's Kensington Market: A lovable hodgepodge. *BBC*.

<https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20101104-torontos-kensington-market-a-loveable-hodgepodge>

# Appendix

