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Extreme Makeover: The Toronto Edition

Ryszard Sliwka

Introduction: metropolitan nature and the politics of sustainability.

John Hartman's painting of Toronto Harbour looking East (2005)¹ [Fig.1] records not only of the geography of a city but communicates something of the central core's iconic presence. Hartman's psychological reading captures the city at a moment when its identity is about to be transformed at a pace and scale never experienced before. The reality of Toronto however, is not just the core but a continuous built up city region of 5.5 million residents, which includes a ring of large powerful municipalities in competition for the same public and private investment. The dynamic pressures on the central core form only one part of a set of sustainability issues that confront the region as a whole.

The role of nature and sustainability in this larger metropolitan discourse has a complex and conflicted character however. In one sense, 'nature' in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), is shaped by the palpable networks of water systems, highways, parks and ecosystems. In another sense, nature also resides in the region's inhabitants, in their own bodies together the complex range of ideologies, mindsets and local politics that ensue from that experience to interpret reality. The encounter between these 'two natures' shapes the urban ecology in a way that is not always beneficial to the sustainability and vitality of the region as a whole. The contributing essays in this special focus on Toronto document a set of responses to the extreme pressure placed on landscape, infrastructure and density in the GTA, outlining the prospects for a more balanced metropolitan sensibility towards nature and the city.

Toronto is considered an alpha city in the global system of finance and trade, yet mixed in with the large corporate financial sector that operates at its core, the city still retains a fine-grained, early 20th century urban fabric that supports mixed land use and neighborhoods populated by small scale and diverse economic activities. This mix of spatial morphologies contributes to the synergistic vitality of the city and supports a range of business both local and global in scale.

The character of the surrounding municipalities on the other hand, has a different formal signature; a patchwork sprawl of car intensive suburbs with anomalous pockets of 60's and 70's hi-rise projects, low density office and industrial estates, strip malls and big box stores, tracts of rural farmland and historic villages, stretching as far as the green belt and beyond.

In recent years, three initiatives initiated by the Provincial government have attempted to deal with these problems. In 2005, the Ontario government passed two landmark laws, the Greenbelt Act and the Places to Grow Act, designed to contain sprawl across the GTA. The former established a 720,000-hectare buffer around the region, making it North America's largest urban greenbelt; the latter created a planning framework meant to encourage GTA municipalities to direct 40 percent of new development into urban areas instead of farmland. Provincial regulations oblige cities to put 40 per cent of new development inside their current borders. As remaining land and development fees that have supported a low-density lifestyle run out, municipalities have to face the reality that without a critical mass of people and jobs, a city cannot support the cultural, social and economic infrastructure necessary for a vibrant city. And yet there exists a stubborn resistance in some quarters. Municipalities such as Mississauga and Brampton are quickly running out of land to grow outward. The journalist Christopher Hume observed that, "Though Brampton and Mississauga have grown enormously, neither has grown up. Both exist in a state of prolonged civic adolescence. Terrified of density but equally frightened by the cost of remaining suburban, each is a municipal Baby Huey², an

¹ Hartman John, Toronto Harbour Looking East, 2005, oil on linen, 46x52inches,

² Baby Huey is a gigantic and naïve duckling cartoon character created for Paramount Pictures' during the 1950s.

oversize baby consuming vastly more than it creates”³ Hume’s observations are critical to understanding the impasse that the city as a region appears mired in, where the parochial disputes reflect sharply at times a different sense of what a city is and whose constituency it is intended to represent.

The laissez-faire attitude to density has had other consequences. Journalist John Lorinc, drawing on a 2011 study by the Canadian Urban Institute observes that while the GTA contains 200 million square feet of office space, making it one of just four such regions in North America, 54 percent of that prime real estate lies far beyond the reach of rapid transit... (whereas)... thirty years ago, almost two-thirds of commercial space was located in the financial district or along subway lines. One major contributor to the problem of gridlock is the reality that many people who now work in these suburban offices own homes in low-density subdivisions, where the absence of public transit forces them to drive wherever they need to go.”⁴

A third initiative by the province in 2007 was the establishment of a regional transit agency called Metrolinx, intended to address this issue and take the politics out of transit planning while developing a long-term, integrated transportation strategy for the GTA and neighboring Hamilton. This initiative was a belated response to the realization that the GTA was “increasingly crippled by some of North America’s nastiest gridlock, costing the region at least \$6 billion a year in lost productivity.”⁵ Metrolinx has developed a \$50-billion ‘Big Move’ strategy to deal with this problem of traffic congestion, calling for more LRT routes, commuter rail, bus rapid transit and high-occupancy vehicle lanes across the region to be built over the next 25 years.

Unlike other agencies however, Metrolinx does not have a guaranteed revenue stream, having to rely on one-time pledges approved by the provincial cabinet. Toronto’s crisis lies in the question of governance for the city region since the Liberal provincial government’s constituency is the province as a whole rather than the GTA and the City and the Federal levels of government are unable or unwilling to intervene. While organizations such as Civic Action attempt to set up a non-partisan consensus to implement these necessary infrastructural measures, the general public sentiment towards government expenditure and fiscal responsibility is one of incredulity and appears to be at an all time low. In an article written in the Toronto Star, journalist Matt Gurney observed; “The problem for funding transit isn’t raising the \$50B needed. It’s trusting the government to spend it right.”

The general inertia however has not suppressed interest in the sustainable potential of the Greater Toronto Area, and the adoption of some important guidelines. **Indeed, Val Rynnimeri’s essay poses the question; *Is There a Green Sustainable Urban Design Narrative (?)* and proceeds to identify how ecological corridors suggested in planning proposals for the new town of Seaton in the 1990’s, have become established within subsequent planning strategies for the region.** Maya Prszybilski and Mathew Spremulli’s essay ‘*Explicit Greenbelt/Implicit Whitebelt: strategies for a transitional landscape*’ examines the potential for sustainable transformation of the peripheral ‘white lands’ located on the margins of the greater Toronto region within the green belt, while Chris Hardwicke and Sean Hertel identify a specific quality and potential of the outlying municipalities in their essay ‘*Planning and density issues in Toronto’s Hyburbia*’

Sustainable City

In a study of 27 municipalities, the Pembina Institute, a national think tank on energy and environmental issues placed the city of Toronto first in terms of ‘community sustainability’ largely as a result of its compact population density and heavy transit use. By comparison its proximate suburban municipalities ranked near the bottom.⁶ The reasons for this are partly historical as the pre-war city of Toronto was more compact and relied more heavily on mass transit, but also because the former industrial lands close to the waterfront became available through the migration of industry (fed by a new network of highways and rail yards) to the periphery of the region (and overseas) and the city has experienced a reversal of the postwar suburban expansion by a new residential intensification of the city core. John Hartman’s painting of Toronto Harbour encapsulates not only the configuration of the central business district but also the vast tracts of rail and industrial lands that separate the central core from the central waterfront. Since 2005, almost all these former industrial lands have been transformed into a new high-rise city. The vision of Rem Koolhaas’ ‘Delirious New York’ has become the default mechanism for any attempts to intensify the public realm and vitality of a city.

The movement towards intensification of the central core runs counter to the trend in many North American cities and appears to have achieved something of a frenzy by 2012 with no less than 184 construction cranes evident on the Toronto skyline. Indeed, the impression of Toronto as a hi-rise city habituated to steroid use, shapes Lorenzo Pignatti’s essay ‘*Condomania*.’ Moreover, the results of this skyward trend of thought are inconclusive and shed doubt at times on the belief that skyscrapers and increased density alone are sufficient to create ‘the place of encounter’ that Koolhaas and other theorists have looked to as a formula for successful and sustainable cities.

³ Hume Christopher, Toronto Star November 1 2013.

⁴ Lorinc John, ‘How Toronto lost its Groove’ Walrus Magazine, November 2011 issue, <http://thewalrus.ca/how-toonto-lost-its-groove>

⁵ Lorinc, p.1

⁶ Pembina Institute, The Ontario Urban sustainability report, 2007, <http://www.pembina.org>.

A case in point would be CityPlace, [Fig.2] which a decade ago was abandoned railway lands, but according to Statistics Canada, saw a 434 per cent rise in population between 2006-2011. The population density is 14,120 per square kilometer, compared to 1,586 per square kilometer in a typical largely single-family suburban neighbourhood in the adjacent municipality of Scarborough where the density is 1,586 per square kilometer.⁷ The density of central Rome sits at a modest 1,814 inhabitants /sq. km yet when compared to the monolithic zoning of the Toronto examples, Rome provides a rich integration of cultural and government institutions, commerce and open space at the same time.

Comments by residents of Cityplace suggest that in spite of the density and central location, the mundane nature of the architecture and the configuration of the development feels somewhat 'dead' and very 'suburban'.⁸ Mark Sterling's essay '*building downtown*,' compares the current situation regarding densification, with the propositions established by 'on building downtown,' an important 1970's planning document and observes a shift from that mindset to a condition of the city as an 'open source 'metropolis.' The Pembina study attempts to establish categories that define sustainability. Using a complex set of variables the study identifies critical factors that contribute to the notion of "smart growth, a premise derived from the assumption that the way in which a place is built up should minimize its impact on the environment". Factors such as economic vitality, relative income equality and low crime rates, to social and cultural infrastructure such as the presence of community centres are weighed up together with other factors such as a high rate of child poverty and lack of subsidized housing for the poorer segments of society.

The enormous intensification of the residential core of the central city has put pressure on all infrastructures and could be conceived as contributing to a reinvention of Toronto's cultural institutions and the urgent desire for open space that is felt by the city's inhabitants. Anne Bordeleau's essay, *Sustainable Perspectives on Culture and Cultural Perspectives on Sustainability*, examines how the renewal of two key components of the city's cultural infrastructure have raised the question of cultural sustainability and the way cities compete for attention in a global arena

At the same time, Federal contributions to social housing are declining across the country and cities have to increasingly make up the difference. Toronto's ombudsman, recently issued an alarming report on how The City of Toronto's Housing Corporation dealt with the evictions of senior citizens, many of them suffering from mental health problems, enumerating in case after case how people were thrown into the street or the shelter system with little or inadequate notice and no personal contact.⁹

One response to this issue by the city has been the reconstruction of Regents Park Social Housing Project. Fulvia Pazzini's essay, *Regent Park South, Toronto*, examines how the city is coming to terms with the blighted nature of Regents Park, one of its urban renewal projects from the 1950's in a new private-public redevelopment partnership and argues for a solution that preserves some of the housing slabs and incorporates them into the re-grafted urban tissue of a new neighborhood.

The final essay on Toronto's waterfront, *Hybrid landscapes and infrastructures of desire*, examines how the pressures brought about by intensification have motivated a need for more green space. It identifies a cultural evolution over time, where changing concepts of technology, landscape and nature embedded in the development of the former industrial lands along the city's waterfront are bringing about a radical revision of the way the city imagines itself.

The Spanish critic Luis Fernandez Galiano observed that there were two things that destroyed cities; too much money and not enough money.¹⁰ Toronto's appears to conform to neither situation or perhaps to both at the same time. With some 1000,000 new arrivals annually, the city is growing rapidly and seems awash in a sea of capital. At the same time it is constrained by its inability to fund the enormous investments required for infrastructure to keep pace with its enormous growth. At times, an intransigent apathy makes the decline of the city seem inevitable, yet the authors in this collection of essays identify moments of hope that restore the possibility of a fully realized urban culture. All that can be said at present moment is that outcome is uncertain.

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⁷ Baskramurty Dakshana, The Globe and Mail, Oct 12 2012, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/density/toronto-infrastructure-and-the-high-cost-of-building-a-vertical-toronto/article4610721/>

⁸ Part of the problem might be the relative isolation created by the remaining rail corridor on the north boundary of the site and the Gardiner Expressway immediately to the south. See the discussion in <http://www.talkcondo.com/blog/cityplace-what-went-wrong>. There have been recent attempts to remedy these criticisms with the introduction of a seasonal organic food market in Canoe Landing Park in <http://urbantoronto.ca/news/2013/06/farmers-market-growing-popularity-concord-cityplace>.

⁹ The current mayor has denied that there is a problem saying, "I don't care if you're two years old, 20 years old, or 200 years old, you're not going to live for free." http://www.thestar.com/news/city_hall/2013/06/13/toronto_ombudsman_rob_ford_got_tchc_facts_wrong_while_angrily_defending_evictions.html

¹⁰ spoken in a symposium at the UIA XV11 Architecture Conference, Montreal, 1990