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Literary Review of Canada

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Suburbia Forever

Nothing, it seems, can stop cities from growing ever outwards.

JOE BERRIDGE

Don't Call It Sprawl:

Metropolitan Structure in the 21st Century

William T. Bogart

Cambridge University Press

230 pages

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Toronto Sprawls: A History

Lawrence Solomon

University of Toronto Press

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Places to Grow — Better Places, Brighter Future: Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe

Ontario Ministry of Public Infrastructure
Renewal

<www.pir.gov.on.ca/English/growth/ggh_plan.htm>

Just around the corner from my office on the edge of downtown Toronto is a gnarled old apple tree, last remnant of the orchard that once flourished there at the 19th-century city limits. It still produces some grudging fruit every year, but the green fields in which it was born have long ago fled 20 or 30 kilometres out to the ever-expanding urban edge, where subdivision bulldozers and ribbons of asphalt threaten them still.

What causes urban sprawl, and what to do about it, and whether it really is a problem at all, has been a constant subject of attention in all big cities. With good reason: the world is rapidly urbanizing, Canada no less so. This past census marked a significant moment in the life of the nation when more than half our citizens were listed as residents of the four big urban regions—Greater Vancouver, Calgary/Edmonton, Greater Toronto and Greater Montreal. Their dominance will only increase as domestic demographic growth and immigration focus on the big cities and smaller centres decline. The Toronto

region, biggest and sprawlingest of them all, is projected to grow by some 3.7 million people in the next 25 years, overtaking Chicago as the third biggest urban region in North America—equivalent to adding to Canada's favourite city the current population of Montreal, or the combined populations of all the Atlantic provinces plus Manitoba and the Territories.

How that population is physically added is a legitimate concern. Are the patterns of the past to be repeated, or can a more environmentally sustainable, mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly, transit-supportive, equitable urban form be ordered into being? Surely we can do better than what we see when we drive out to the city edge, past the mindless subdivisions, the huge malls and vast industrial boxes, all separated by snaking concrete expressways, all chewing up farmland and spitting out a formless, featureless, chaotic mess of a vast environmental footprint in which consumerist automatons live meaningless lives. There is quite a culture of such anti-sprawl diatribes that can carry on in this vein—James Howard Kunstler's *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Fall of America's Man-Made Landscape* and the recent movie *The End of Suburbia* come to mind—and there is no question that being anti-sprawl is the correct progressive posture. And on the face of it, so it should be.

William Bogart's *Don't Call It Sprawl: Metropolitan Structure in the 21st Century* is a good place to start if you find those easy dismissals a

flies in the face of majority behaviour? Queen Elizabeth I was stridently anti-sprawl. She passed proclamation after proclamation banning development outside London's city walls, sending out crews to tear down illegal buildings. Yet armed with powers today's city planners could only dream of in their endless fights with developers—beheading, incarceration in the Tower—she was just as unsuccessful. The great urban engine moved relentlessly outward, driven by forces more powerful even than she.

Bogart has written a complicated book, full of grad school graphs and regression equations, but laced with a wry humour and catholic appetite for quotation that makes his essential messages more digestible. First, the current structure of the urban edge is not chaotic, but is the product of millions of individual citizens making informed choices about where they want to live, work and enjoy life, and tens of thousands of businesses determining what part of the city maximizes their returns. One statistic stands out to illustrate the resultant hidden order—the length of time Americans take to commute to work has barely changed in the past half century while the tide of sprawl has been at its height. It is a finding that has resonance in the Toronto region, where the average journey-to-work trip stands at between 10 and 12 kilometres almost regardless of where people live or work. What these kinds of figures reveal is that people respond rationally to the range of choices available about how to operate

within the urban structure, decisions that then collectively direct that structure's growth.

But isn't that collective outcome environmentally harmful, eating up valuable farmland and forcing reliance on private automobiles? Well, only 3 percent of the land area of the United States is consumed by cities and the

amount of land in agricultural use at any one time varies greatly according to much more powerful agro-business forces. (In vast Canada the urbanized area is a paltry 0.3 percent, but there is a more significant proportion of scarce valuable farmland.) Bogart makes the often overlooked point that it is indeed just that urban proximity that adds high-value demand for adjacent agricultural produce. Urban growth makes farmers wealthy. And what about automobile-generated pollution, the seemingly inevitable concomitant of sprawl? A valid argument now, but would it be in the not so distant future were a non-polluting personal movement vehicle to come into general

This past census marked a significant moment in the life of the nation when more than half our citizens were listed as residents of the four big urban regions.

little unsatisfying and want to understand the causes of sprawl. A leading writer in what has become known as the anti-anti-sprawl literature, Bogart provides strong evidence that what we see as edge-city chaos has in fact a strong logic, and that failure to appreciate the economic, social and demographic causes of sprawl will frustrate any attempt to control or direct it.

After all, a preponderance of North Americans now lives in the suburbs. Are they all ignorant suckers conned into anomie, addicted to barbecues, automobiles and shopping? And if we want to do something about it, what exactly would we do? Does any public policy work if it

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use? California emission standards are headed in that direction. So if the conventional arguments against sprawl are shaky, what is wrong with it?

Isn't the urban edge just so unspeakably ugly? Can't sprawl be dismissed on aesthetic grounds alone? Tread carefully here, warns Bogart, do not leave out the factor of time, because what we are seeing is but the first growth of the suburban edge. Remember my apple tree. I have a collection of postcard views of Toronto from the turn of the last century. The just-developed Rosedale sprawls treeless across hill and valley, with huge, bare streets lined by absurd monster homes. It was the Caledon or the Canmore of a hundred years ago. As they mature, they will look a lot more like the familiar city. For Bogart, urban structure is quite simply the logical response to different forms of mobility—the tight Greco-Roman city defined on foot, the close network of medieval settlements connected by horses, the brief early 20th-century moment of streetcar and rail suburbs, followed by the almost universal ownership of the car. The ground you can cover in 20 minutes in each of those modes defines the shape of the city. Don't mess with it. If there are negative externalities, tax them away.

That may be economic logic, we protest, but how can people live out there in the trackless wastes of edge city, what kind of life can it be? Well, there isn't a serious survey in the world that suggests people are any less happy in the suburbs than in the central city, nothing that would confirm the notion that suburbanites have been sold an illusory dream, however much downtown culture represents them as helpless subjects of development and political forces far greater than themselves.

Which is nonetheless just what Lawrence Solomon, author of *Toronto Sprawls: A History*, seems to think. Solomon is an acute writer on urban issues, frequently for the *National Post*, with a welcome contrarianism to the prevailing orthodoxies of urban debate so stiflingly present in Toronto, as in many other big cities. Unfortunately in this monograph his contrarianism gets away from him.

Solomon has written a history of the causes and characters behind Toronto's sprawl over the past century. It was the sprawling ambitions of local politicians who created the city we see today, who relentlessly pursued amalgamation and transit expansion into the farmlands against any economic or municipal management logic. Why? Because they feared cities and their sin and social disorder, immigration and unionization. His evidence? The speeches and actions of the politicians and city managers of the time. Solomon quotes extensively from the major figures of Toronto's municipal history, the big men such as William

Allen and Fred Gardiner who nudged and bullied the city ever outward, and he explores the contorted unfolding of the federal government's post-war resettlement programs and other anti-urban policies. He finds a deliberate hostility to the central city, a desire to cure its moral failings by dilution in the fresh air of ever more annexed countryside. Sprawl is not the consequence of underlying economic logic, or even of rapacious developers, but a willful assault on those forces, which Solomon identifies as being inherently more centripetal than centrifugal. Developers did not want to build houses—they were quite happy building apartments; Toronto's originally privately operated profitable transit system went broke when forced to serve low-density suburbs; municipal amalgamation wrecked the balance sheet of the former city. But cities were dens of iniquity and needed purification: urban density

a physical expression of those majority preferences. Perhaps it is best to start with the facts. Solomon relies for evidence almost entirely on the words of the municipal players of the time, without apparently thinking that they spoke as much nonsense then as now and had an equally exaggerated sense of their own influence. The past century's city bosses were no more in control of the self-impelled, ever metastasizing organism that is a modern city than are today's urban leaders. Indeed, if their intentions were to rid Toronto of immigration, unionization, multi-unit buildings and non-family households—to say nothing of the city's moral shortcomings—they were stunningly unsuccessful. (He also makes the analytical mistake of judging historical expression by today's standards. The past is another country: they spoke differently there, in language laced with moralisms that make contemporary relativists choke. But that's how it was.)

By international standards, Toronto is not a particularly sprawling urban region but substantially more compact in form than the typical North American metropolis. Canadian cities, at about 25 people per hectare, are twice as dense as cities such as Washington, Denver, Chicago and Atlanta and are quite comparable with many European urban regions. So if there was a Toronto conspiracy to dilute density it did not work and municipal moralists south of the border must have been far more effective. Solomon offers no comparisons between Toronto's development patterns and those of similar cities, nor does he assess the facts on the grounds of the city's evolving structure—so often at odds with the statements and policies of those nominally in charge. It is a pity, because he has much more to say about cities than this and could so interestingly have developed themes only sketched at the conclusion of the monograph. Has Toronto in fact benefited from having a publicly funded and operated transit system, or would



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was to be abhorred; life was properly lived in houses, not apartments. So a moral assault launched by politicians and their civil servants forced into being the sprawling structure we see today. Had things been left to themselves we would all be living tightly in central city spaces, with economically viable transit, in richly diverse, walkable neighbourhoods like Manhattan's Upper West Side or Toronto's Annex.

It is hard to know where to begin to unravel what verges on an urban conspiracy theory. I live in the Annex and my wife comes from the Upper West Side, districts with great influence in media and academic culture yet representing only a minority taste. Simple observation confirms that far more people choose big houses and big cars and big malls and that the city around us is

a more market-based movement system have evolved pricing and vehicle solutions to serve our citizens better? Why shouldn't the market system be applied more universally in municipal matters, with proper user fees for road use and land consumption? Has the elaborate structure of planning regulation resulted in a more efficient, sustainable, attractive city, or does it constitute merely an anachronistic defence of the privileged? In the main body of the work it would also have been useful to have seen more fully drawn portraits of the individuals who had so large an influence on Toronto, particularly at a time when the urban opinion pendulum is shifting away from Jane Jacobs toward her nemesis, Robert Moses. How, after all, do you run a big city?

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It is a critical question, because the country's major urban region faces pressures greater than almost any other in North America, and any attempt to limit or redirect such dynamic growth needs to be based on a real understanding of the forces at work. Ontario recently launched an ambitious growth management program for what it has called the "Greater Golden Horseshoe" area. (So great is the denial of urban reality in this country that the name Toronto could not be used as the locator.) "Places to Grow—Better Places, Brighter Future: Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe," as the document is titled, is a model of sprawl management; it sets a clear urban boundary, establishes a very generous greenbelt around the urban region and requires significantly increased levels of urban density and mix in an aggressive attempt to reshape the city. More recently these actions have been supported with a massive \$17 billion program of transit improvements over the next decade. This growth plan was the product of an intense effort, starting with the Mike Harris government and put into law under Dalton McGuinty. It has broad acceptance from environmentalists, local politicians and developers, recently receiving high honours from the American Planning Association as the best plan of its kind on the continent. All good. But will it work?

If you take Solomon's view, the province's plan is another in the long line of statist interventions restraining the city from finding its "natural," more compact form; the transit investment being a testament to special interest inefficiency. He should beware of what he wishes; the more convincing Bogart suggests that the city's natural form would double the rate of sprawl—and that all those transit lines are an expensive irrelevance to the real life of the metropolis.

Bogart's book focuses exclusively on U.S. cities. What is clear is that Toronto and indeed the other major Canadian cities are evolving into a distinct breed. The search for a North American lifestyle and the imperatives of the modern economy have been contained within a set of peculiarly national values about urban life and form, policed by a vast if only marginally effective regulatory apparatus. The statistics on density, income and ethnic mix, transit and travel behaviour all indicate the emergence of a different and, frankly, better city form compared to that typical south of the border, evidence of cities more poised to cope with the challenges of 21st-century demographic, environmental, economic, security and lifestyle demands that could collectively send the city sprawling back in on itself. The simplistic conspiracies of Solomon may be as far from the truth as Bogart's economic reductionism, but both suggest elements of a reality that modern city planners ignore at their peril, although the province's courageous attempt to manage the future of this burgeoning, unruly urban region just might have the necessary balance of pragmatism and ambition.

What is also clear is that the shape of our cities is still not quite that intended by past public policy, nor will it ever be in the future. We make our own cities, but not entirely as we please. ☐