

RICHARD WHITE

## Toronto's Inner Suburbs Through the Lens of Planning History<sup>1</sup>

---

### Abstract

*This article is a study of the planning ideas that shaped the city of Toronto's 'inner suburbs', a large area of suburban fabric built in the first generation after the Second World War that houses nearly two million residents, some two-thirds of the city's current population. Planning was well established in Toronto at that time, and these suburbs were fully planned, at both a metropolitan and neighbourhood level. Much of this area has undergone a slow decline since the 1970s. The privately owned housing has not received the sort of capital upgrades that housing in the older inner city has and is becoming run-down, and the average income of residents has fallen. The article explores possible connections between this socio-economic decline and their planning.*

### Résumé

*L'article se propose d'étudier les idées d'aménagement selon lesquelles a été conçue « la banlieue intérieure » de Toronto. En fait, il s'agit d'une grande zone de bâtiments suburbains de la première génération de l'après Seconde Guerre mondiale, où habitent presque deux millions de personnes, c'est-à-dire environ deux tiers de l'actuelle population de la ville. L'aménagement de l'espace urbain étant bien établi dans le Toronto de l'époque, ces zones suburbaines ont été entièrement planifiées, à la fois sur le plan métropolitain et celui des quartiers respectifs. Depuis les années 1970, une grande partie de cette « banlieue intérieure » subit un lent déclin. Contrairement aux immeubles plus anciens du centre-ville, les habitations privées de la « banlieue intérieure » n'ont pas été modernisées et sont désormais marquées par une dégradation continue, la moyenne des revenus des résidents ayant baissé. L'article examine les possibles relations de cause à effet entre le déclin et les plans d'aménagement de la « banlieue intérieure ».*

---

1 Acknowledgements: This paper is an expanded version of a keynote address presented to the 2017 conference of the GKS. The author would like to thank the conference organizers for inviting him and the conference participants for their thoughtful questions and comments. Thanks also to the three accomplished Canadian colleagues – Larry Bourne, Richard Harris, and Pierre Filion – who read and commented on the first draft of this written paper, to the anonymous reader from the journal who did the same, and to David Hulchanski and Richard Maارينen of the Neighbourhood Change research project at the University of Toronto for providing up-to-date data and image files for use in this paper.



It is premised not on the idea that these suburbs are typical, or representative of Canadian suburbs generally – although there is evidence of their planning principles being applied in western Canada (Taylor 2010) – but primarily on the belief that as home to nearly two million people in Canada's largest city these suburbs are, at the very least, a significant part of Canadian urban life. Interestingly, however, they are not part of the city's popular image, even the city's own cognoscenti paid them little attention until recently, and the famous urbanist Jane Jacobs, despite spending nearly forty years in Toronto, paid them no heed whatsoever. Yet they are a fascinating urban form: no longer new but not yet old, peripheral at one time but now woven into an extensive urban carpet, and seemingly based more on the older urban function of production than the newer one of consumption. Moreover by virtue of their extent and substantial population they are diverse in built form, economic activity, and ethnic make-up, and as such bear almost no resemblance to the archetypical white, middle-class North American 'suburb' – providing further evidence, if it is needed, of the uselessness of that worn out archetype (Relph, 2014, Chapter 5; Fishman, 1988). How and why they came to have the form they have might be considered significant on its own.

But in recent years they have begun receiving attention for other reasons. Lacking the charm and cachet of the pre-automobile inner city, the larger houses of later suburbs, and the low prices of the distant urban fringe, the inner suburbs are rarely found on lists of where to live in Toronto. In fact the lists they often do appear on are of the city's disadvantaged, underserved districts. Some years ago the academic housing analyst David Hulchanski, after a careful analysis of census data, confirmed that Toronto's inner suburbs, largely middle-class in their first generation, had evolved in the last forty-some years into predominantly low-income areas (Hulchanski 2010). This finding raised considerable alarm. It prompted the City of Toronto to consider new investments and social programs for certain inner-suburb neighbourhoods, and served as the take-off point for a comprehensive new program of research by Hulchanski and several academic colleagues (Neighbourhood Change; Parlette 2012; Cowen/Parlette 2011).<sup>2</sup> Before long the picture of the inner suburbs as sites of disadvantage had become firmly entrenched in the local discourse; a widely-read commercial magazine described them as "spiralling into poverty", and noted that certain inner-suburb neighbourhood names now evoke images of "crumbling postwar apartment blocks, underfunded schools or gang warfare" (Fulford 2015; Burale 2015).<sup>3</sup>

---

2 The City first designated a group of "priority investment neighbourhoods" and, later, a slightly different group of "neighbourhood improvement areas"; details of both are publicly accessible on the City of Toronto website.

3 Fulford's piece introduced a series of residents' profiles entitled "Toronto is Failing Me"; this characterization was immediately challenged by one of the profiled residents, as reported in Burale's blog post.

Heartening as it is to see good empirical research shaping both public discourse and new social programs, this now widely-accepted picture does have some missing pieces. One is what caused it all. Analysts generally connect it to the social polarization brought about by the ascendancy of neo-liberalism, which may be so, but the mechanism by which neo-liberal policies actually caused incomes to decline in these suburbs is not usually identified (Parlette 2012, is an exception).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, declining incomes in specific areas is not quite the same thing as growing overall income disparity; low income people might simply be remaining in or migrating to certain neighbourhoods, for any number of reasons, thus ‘lowering’ aggregate neighbourhood incomes. The matter warrants further investigation. Another missing piece is historical perspective. The data used in Hulchanski’s study go back to 1970 – this is fundamental to the findings – but since most of the inner suburbs were built before 1970 the picture might benefit from a longer timeline that includes their genesis.

Average Individual Income, City of Toronto, 2015

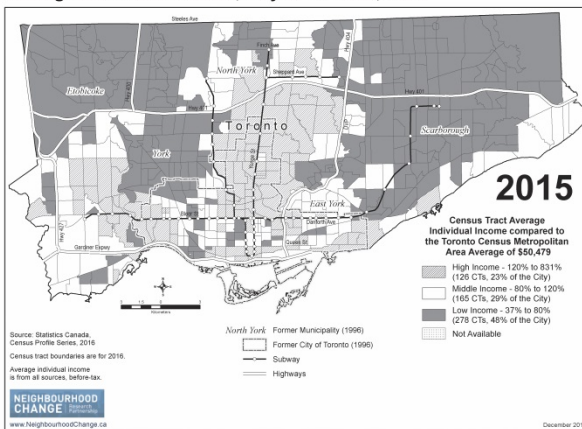


Fig 2: Map from Hulchanski, *The Three Cities*, identifying the affluent inner city (light grey), the shrinking middle-class suburban areas (white), and the lower-income inner suburbs (dark grey). (courtesy of Neighbourhood Change)

The current study makes no effort to challenge the observation that average incomes in nearly all of Toronto’s inner-suburb census tracts are now lower than the average income for the metropolitan area overall (Fig 2) (Hulchanski 2010, Map 3). In fact it has been carried out with this social reality in mind. It simply explores to

4 Parlette’s dissertation, to this liberal-empirical historian, seems overly-influenced by non-Toronto research and rather tendentious in its analysis.

what extent the planning and building of these suburbs, all of which occurred before 1970, might have contributed to that reality. Nor does it challenge the widely accepted notion that neo-liberalism is causing greater social inequality – although it does, admittedly, start from the premise that we do not fully understand the link between advancing neo-liberalism and declining incomes in Toronto's inner suburbs, and that other factors are worth considering. It seeks, all told, to add to our understanding rather than to refute observations and explanations put forward by others.

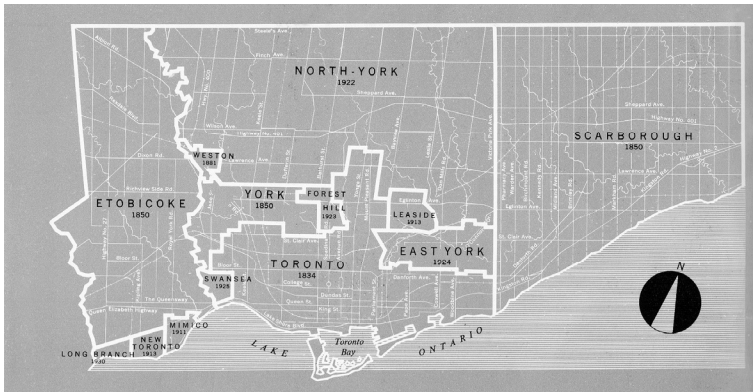


Fig 3: The thirteen municipalities of Metropolitan Toronto, as created by the Government of Ontario, effective 1 January 1954, showing their original incorporation dates. (White, *Planning Toronto*, Fig. 2.3)

Toronto's inner suburbs are examined here through the lens of planning history. They make a fascinating case study for the planning historian: their creation was guided by a set of planning principles, some common at the time and some not, explicitly laid out in major planning reports, and their original form has been so minimally disturbed by renovation and rebuilding that these principles are clearly evident in the landscape today. Identifying and explaining these planning ideas, and showing them having been applied, makes up the main part of this essay. But planning history can contribute to the bigger picture too, and with concerns over the state of Toronto's inner suburbs so prevalent, locally at least, it seemed appropriate, and desirable, to move on to consider any possible connection between the planning and the declining incomes of these areas. The paper thus concludes with some speculative analysis of this matter.

### **Creating the Inner Suburbs**

The part of Toronto now considered the inner suburbs was built in a single generation from about 1950 to 1970. Toronto and its environs had changed very little in

the generation prior to that, urban growth having been curtailed first by the Depression and then by the war (Lemon 1985). The city boundary had been static even longer. Although Toronto had grown rapidly in the 1920s, spilling over its municipal boundary, city council had refused to annex any new territory, largely for reasons of fiscal prudence, so the boundary stayed put and this peripheral growth, forced to remain outside the city, organized itself into separate small municipalities. When the postwar boom began taking hold in the late 1940s, and urbanization of the hinterland picked up, Toronto was surrounded by several small municipalities that, although functionally part of the city, were politically and administratively independent. There was no formal body to control or even co-ordinate the growing urban region – not an efficient or a desirable arrangement.

The solution was Metropolitan Toronto, a federated municipality created by the Province of Ontario in 1954 by partially amalgamating Toronto with its surrounding municipalities (Rose 1972; Frisken 2007). It was only partial in the sense that the thirteen municipalities affected, including Toronto itself, all continued to exist even though they were joined together into a new over-arching metropolitan municipality. (Fig 3) Municipal responsibilities were divided between the two levels of government – some were assigned to one of the two levels and others were shared between the two – according to a scheme set out in the provincial Metropolitan Toronto Act (Ontario 1953).

Metropolitan Toronto included not just the built-up towns and villages outside Toronto's municipal boundary but also three adjacent rural townships in which future large-scale urbanization was expected. The expectation was fulfilled. In the first decade of Metropolitan Toronto's existence, 71K new single-family homes were built in these until-then rural areas, and in the twenty years from 1951 to 1971 their population increased from 50K to 500K (MTPB 1970; MTPB 1963a). This rapid development, which astounded and unsettled many who witnessed it, created Toronto's inner suburbs.<sup>5</sup>

### **Planning the Inner Suburbs**

Planning was one of the responsibilities the two levels of municipal government shared. Metropolitan Toronto planners would plan metropolitan-wide infrastructure and services, and broad-brush land use, while municipal planners would plan local roads and services and site-specific land use. This dual responsibility worked well for the city of Toronto, which already had a planning department, but less well for the smaller municipalities that lacked, and were not always inclined to establish, planning operations. Provincial law required all municipalities to appoint planning

---

5 The amalgamation begun in 1954 was completed in 1998 when the federated municipality of Metropolitan Toronto became the unitary City of Toronto, fully dissolving the individual municipalities that had been retained in 1954.

boards and begin developing official plans, but not all did, and even when they did their boards were not always effective.

The new metropolitan city, however, took its planning responsibility seriously (White 2016, Chapter 2). Soon after Metro, as it was called, was formed it hired several professional planners who then engaged staff to develop an official plan. It took several years, but in 1959 the planners completed a draft metropolitan plan and presented it to council for approval (MTPB 1959). This plan was not and in fact never would be approved, for various reasons, yet it might as well have been because its planning principles served as an unofficial guide for the urbanization of the metropolitan area, especially for the inner suburbs considered here.

The first, and most fundamental, planning principle was that there would be no 'satellite towns' – meaning new, master-planned towns built from scratch on rural land well away from the existing city. Satellite towns (also called New Towns) were the planning orthodoxy of the postwar years, but Metropolitan Toronto would not have them; it would grow simply by expanding its existing urban area. Growth would not be uncontrolled. Urbanization would be permitted only on land designated for that purpose, and the designated urban area would be expanded only as needed. But unlike, say, postwar London, England, growth of which was scattered around the city's hinterland in designated New Towns, Metropolitan Toronto would have what was often called a 'contiguous' urban area. The big city would just grow bigger (Fig 4).



Fig 4: The Metropolitan Toronto Planning Board's proposed form for the urban region – existing urban area in solid grey and projected future urban area, all of it attached to existing urban land, in diagonal hatching. (White, *Planning Toronto*, Fig. 1.23)

There are two reasons for this unusual policy. One is Hans Blumenfeld, an aging (b. 1892) but still vital German-trained architect/planner who, after a long, varied international career, found himself working for the Metropolitan Toronto Planning Board in 1955 as one of its senior planners. Some years earlier Blumenfeld, while working in the United States, had concluded from his extensive experience that new towns were not an effective way to accommodate urban expansion. Appealing as they were to those seeking to avoid the problems of big-city congestion, they simply did not work; "growth by accretion will remain the rule, and growth by procreation the exception" (Blumenfeld 1967, 38) he asserted in a 1948 article. Blumenfeld brought this idea with him to Toronto, and apparently without much opposition made it a guiding principle of the metropolitan plan.

The second reason for avoiding satellite towns is that urban development would have what the planners called "lake-based" piped services, an important planning principle of its own. Municipal water would be drawn from Lake Ontario, treated at a lakefront treatment plant, and piped out to all corners of the urban area; neither groundwater (from wells) nor surface water (from rivers and streams) would be used for municipal supply, and the old public systems that did were to be shut down. Similarly, all water-borne sewage produced in the metropolitan area would be collected in local sewers and piped down, untreated, to large lakefront plants where it would be treated and dispersed far out in the lake; neither septic tanks nor local sewage plants would be acceptable for servicing new urban development (contrast with Rome 2001). A closed system such as this, with lake water piped out from the lake and suburban sewage piped back, made distant satellite towns illogical. The foundation of this policy, one might note, was the provincial public health authority which had concluded, after studying the region in the late 1940s, that large scale urban development that used only local treatment plants, or septic tanks, for sewage treatment would debase the local groundwater so badly that it would threaten public health (White 2016, 60-61; Gore/Storrie 1949).

A corollary of these two principles – that development must be confined to a contiguous urban area and permitted only when lake-based piped services are in place – is that in a rapidly growing area in which private enterprise is building all the housing, which Metropolitan Toronto was, public authorities have an obligation to install those piped services as quickly as possible. And they did. The metropolitan government could not build the entire new system in an instant, but it strove to do so as rapidly as its finances and management capacity allowed.

Another important metropolitan planning principle was that residential densities should be kept relatively high throughout the metropolitan area, an idea that complemented their policy of setting and holding a strict urban boundary. It applied to both the inner city, where, with some minor exceptions, existing densities would be maintained – the planners neither envisioned nor desired a de-populated inner city – and to the newly urbanizing suburban areas, where development would be at



densities higher than typical North American suburbs. The latter meant new suburbs would include townhouses and apartment buildings along with conventional suburban homes. Density was deemed desirable not only because it would make services and businesses viable, but also because, since high-density rental housing generally attracts lower income people, it would promote social mixing, which the planners wanted (White 2016, 127-31; Comay 1983). It is important to note, however, that this multi-unit housing would be created by private developers, not by government; the metropolitan plan encouraged its creation, but neither the planners nor any other public agency would build it (Ontario Housing Corporation, 1984).<sup>6</sup>

In the realm of transportation, Metropolitan Toronto planners called for a "balanced" system, meaning a balance between public (i.e. transit) and private (i.e. cars/roads) modes of travel, but also, for the latter, a balance between expressways and 'arterial' roads – six-lane roads, with minimal residential or commercial development along them, intended to carry heavy traffic, but built on-grade (neither sunken nor raised) and thus with traffic lights at major intersections. Two east-west expressways were planned for the eastern half of the metropolitan city: a major inter-city expressway, then being built across the metropolitan area by the Province of Ontario, and an eastward extension of the lakeshore expressway that had been completed from the west only as far as the downtown. Arterial roads were considered sufficient for the newly-built suburban areas, reflecting the planners' wish to provide mobility for cars, trucks, and public-transit buses without the disruption and expense of expressways. The priority given to public transit might seem surprising for a postwar North American city, but the city of Toronto's existing transit system was being heavily used, and the commission operating it was committed to expanding services across the entire metropolitan area.

One less widely recognized but important planning principle was that substantial land should be designated for industry along railway corridors and major highways throughout new suburban areas. There were two reasons for this. One is that it would provide the local municipalities with a plentiful property tax base. Property tax revenue was shared among the municipalities of Metropolitan Toronto to a degree, but having a good local tax-base was still advantageous. The other more planning-related reason is that it would reduce the need for employees to travel long distances to work and thus lessen the demand for roads and buses.

One final metropolitan planning principle was to use the river valleys, called "ravines" locally, as public parkland; they would be left in a fairly natural state, with minimal landscaping and construction, but they would be made publicly accessible by roads and public transit. This too was a rather novel idea. North American urban parks in the early postwar years tended to be more for recreation and active games, with playing fields and open-air performance venues, than for nature (Cranz 1982,

---

6 Some public housing was also built in the suburbs in these years, and some privately-built, multi-unit, suburban housing was later purchased by public housing authorities.

103-26), but the metropolitan planners fixed on the idea of leaving them largely undeveloped, fully aware, it might be said, of the expense they were avoiding.

Metropolitan planning prescribed broad-brush land use, not detailed land use for individual parcels of land. This finer level of detail was the domain of local municipal planners. But with planning not yet well developed in the local municipalities, especially in the three large municipalities of Etobicoke, North York, and Scarborough that, as rural townships, had had little need to plan, they were in no position to undertake detailed land-use planning. Scarborough, although resistant at first, did engage a permanent Planning Commissioner soon after Metropolitan Toronto was formed, and developed an Official Plan – though its impact is hard to determine. So the main force that shaped the internal design of the inner suburbs was not local municipal planners, or any public authority, but the private development firms that built the suburbs and the planning consultants they hired. For the most part, these firms would assemble tracts of farmland in areas designated for development, engage planners to lay out the streets and lots and engineers to devise the neighbourhood infrastructure, seek and usually obtain approvals for their scheme from government authorities, and then either build houses themselves or, more commonly, sell off lots to smaller-scale builders who would build and sell the housing (White 2016, 91-113).

The chief guiding principle for the consultants planning these suburbs was the “neighbourhood unit”, a concept devised by the American social planner Clarence Perry for the 1929 Regional Plan of New York that by the 1950s had been internationally adopted (Perry 1929; Whittick 1974, 714-16; Silver 1985). Perry believed that a new urban area should foster a sense of community among its residents and that this could best be achieved by emulating traditional neighbourhoods: a population of about 6,000, a public school at the centre alongside other community buildings and open space, a mix of housing types and sizes (including rental apartments), and commercial shops and services that, following the planning principle of separating land uses, were to be on the periphery of the neighbourhood outside the residential areas. Mostly in the interests of safety, Perry also favoured keeping through traffic outside the neighbourhood on wide, large-capacity roadways and having streets inside the neighbourhood, apart from one or two access roads, only for local traffic.

By the time Toronto’s postwar inner suburbs were being designed, Perry’s concept had been enhanced by several additional design novelties, most of them rooted in the celebrated layout of Radburn, New Jersey, which was conceived about the same time as Perry’s neighbourhood unit, and the even better known American greenbelt towns devised under Roosevelt’s New Deal administration in the 1930s (Hall 2002, 132-36; Ward 2002, 117-19). Chief among these were curving residential streets – now such a common marker of suburbia – that looped back to where they began so as to be of no use for anything but local traffic, and public walkways behind and between private yards to facilitate access to public spaces. Both these design elements were intended to keep pedestrians safe from motor vehicles.

### Evidence in the Landscape

Such are the planning ideas, metropolitan and local, that shaped Toronto's inner suburbs. They were widely applied, and are literally everywhere in Toronto's inner suburban landscape. For this study, eleven suburban neighbourhoods were examined, at various levels of detail, across the eastern half of the city, most of them in what is still called Scarborough despite that municipality having been dissolved into the single City of Toronto in 1998. They offer plentiful evidence (City of Toronto, Neighbourhood Profiles).<sup>7</sup> (Fig 5)

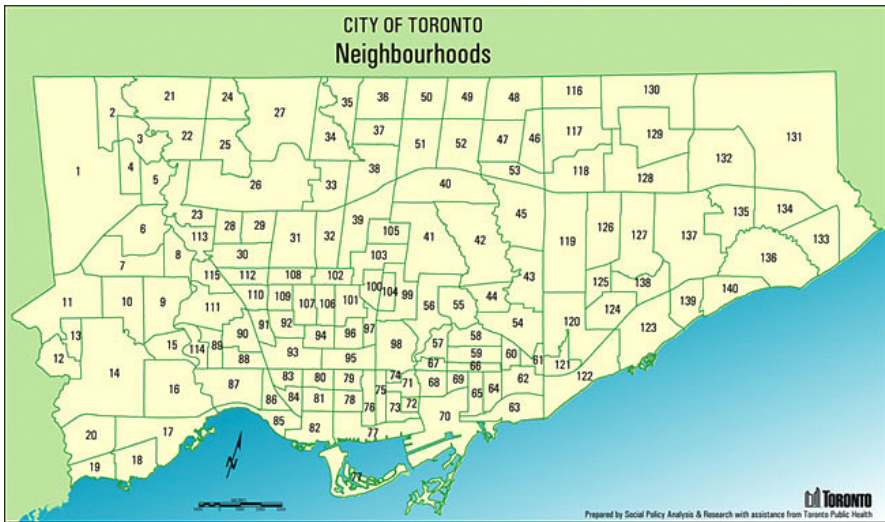


Fig 5: Neighbourhoods observed for this study: Clairlea (120), Oakridge (121), Victoria Village (43), Woburn (137), Knob Hill (part of 127), Midland Park (part of 126), Bridlewood (part of 117), Steeles (116), Milliken (130), Ionview (125), Kennedy Park (124) (City of Toronto, Neighbourhood Profiles)

First, just by looking at a map one can discern several of the metropolitan planning ideas (Fig 6). The principle of lake-based piped services is, of course, not apparent since evidence of it is buried underground; nor, in a sense, can one see the absence of satellite towns insofar as the absence of anything is usually hard to see. But the principle of contiguous urban development that followed from those two is certainly evident in the urbanized areas having no open spaces between them; one neighbourhood runs immediately up against the next. What divides the neighbourhoods are the arterial roads, another key element of the metropolitan plan. Natural

<sup>7</sup> Neighbourhood names and boundaries are not official, and often vary. Mostly for convenience, fieldwork was done largely in Scarborough, an early adopter of planning; these metropolitan planning principles might not have been as widely applied in other parts of Metropolitan Toronto.

ravine parks, running alongside or in some cases through the residential neighbourhoods, are visible, as are the smaller, man-made parks amid the residential neighbourhoods. The style of street layout shows as well: looping residential streets and longer, curving streets to convey cars and buses into and through the neighbourhood.

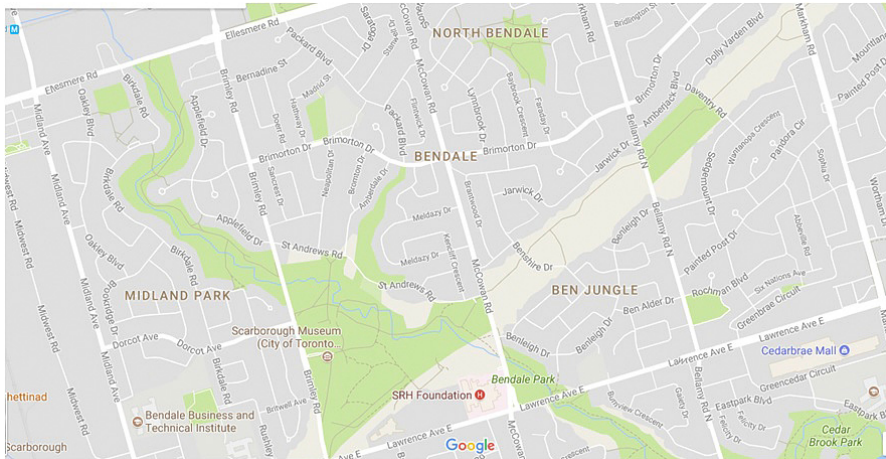


Fig 6: Google map of central Scarborough



Fig 7: Young girls' after-school slow-pitch softball game, schoolyard/park in central core of Milliken neighbourhood, McCowan Road south of Steeles Avenue. (Photo by author)



Fig 8: Small local shopping strip, barely holding on, Victoria Park Avenue, north of Eglinton Avenue, Victoria Village neighbourhood. (Photo by author)

Driving and walking about reveals much more. Residential areas are clearly separate from the arterial roads bordering the neighbourhoods; one senses the roads, especially their noise, but few vehicles enter. Neighbourhoods are islands of residential land use, as they were supposed to be, free not only of vehicles but also of

commercial activities of any sort. One sees plenty of multi-family housing. Every one of the neighbourhoods examined has some, usually townhouses and high-rise apartment buildings; whole complexes of the former were usually part of the original neighbourhood design, while one or two of the latter were generally built a few years later along the peripheral arterial roads on land designated for this purpose. Every neighbourhood has a public school, or two if it is large, usually backing onto or somehow connected to public parkland, as Perry's concept prescribed. Churches are also common, especially in the older, pre-1960, neighbourhoods. (The changing role of Christian churches in suburban neighbourhoods, reflecting both the sudden decline in religious observance among the established middle classes and the influx of non-European Christian sects, warrants its own study.)

The neighbourhoods are well endowed with public open space. Many have stretches of ravine parkland along their borders, usually with multiple pedestrian access points. All have fully-developed neighbourhood parks with a playground and often a playing field (Fig 7), and these parks also have several access points. Some neighbourhoods have public walkways between properties providing pedestrian access to various places and services; not all are well located, but their placement might have made more sense when the neighbourhood was initially built.

The neighbourhoods also, invariably, have commercial strips or malls along their edges, again consistent, basically, with the neighbourhood unit concept though most have evolved and do not function quite as the planning concept envisioned. Small shopping strips now seem to serve a drive-in rather than a walk-in clientele, although they do often include ethnic restaurants and grocery stores that may have local patronage (Fig 8); some of these strips have failed, however, and their land is now slated for residential development – demand for housing being, apparently, greater than demand for local shopping. Most larger shopping malls have survived, but clearly, considering the size of their parking lots, they have not done so by serving a local clientele.

Finally one cannot help but notice the proximity of industrial plants, again as planned. Toronto has experienced some de-industrialization in recent decades, and as a result some of these industrial sites, and even some of the industrial buildings themselves, are being used for commercial storage, exercise gyms, religious institutions, and large-scale retail rather than for industry. As well, some areas have been cleared of industrial buildings and used instead for what is termed 'brownfield' residential development, although proximity to roads and railway lines limits this somewhat. Many industrial buildings and sites, however, still remain industrial.

### **The Legacy of Planning**

There can be no doubt that Toronto's inner suburbs were planned. Virtually every land use, every street, and every amenity is where it is because a plan prescribed it thus, something possible only when urban development occurs *de novo*, as was the case here. Not all the *buildings* in the inner suburbs were planned to be as they are –

an important distinction. Planners prescribed the size and configuration of individual lots, and which land uses would go where, and in doing so influenced what sort of buildings were erected. However, a building's actual design, and how it used its site, was in the hands of the landowner or builder who built it, along with, in some cases, architects hired by them. But the overall design and function of the suburbs was planned.

What then might be the connection between their planning and their declining average incomes? Touring through the inner suburbs today they do indeed, as might be expected, show signs of low income; one is struck immediately by the poorly-maintained houses, suggesting houses that may not be owner-occupied or an owner/occupier who lacks the funds for regular maintenance. Even more striking is the rarity of substantial rebuilds or stylish upgrades – such a contrast to the old inner city where it seems almost every other house has had substantial capital invested in it. Many streets seem almost as-built, unchanged in sixty years. At the same time, however, by no means do the neighbourhoods feel abandoned, or even under-populated. Unoccupied houses are rare. Many residential areas are alive with care-givers and children when school lets out. People are clearly making do. Language like "spiralling into poverty" and "crumbling postwar apartment buildings" seems overly alarmist, verging on the anti-slum panics of years past, yet there is, unmistakably, an absence of affluence. Homeowners with the means and inclination to renovate – the notorious gentrifiers who have overrun the pre-1914 city – are nowhere to be seen. To some this might not be a bad thing, but whether good or bad the absence of affluent in-migrants, so visible in the landscape, so anomalous for Toronto, does begin to look like one of the causes of declining aggregate incomes relative to the rest of the city. How significant a cause, one cannot say; falling incomes among those who remain, whether from individuals aging or from well-paid jobs disappearing, undoubtedly contributes as well. But accepting it as a factor of at least some significance allows the question atop this paragraph to be re-worked into one that is more answerable, or at least about which one can speculate: what role has planning played in making the inner suburbs unappealing to Toronto's gentrifiers?

It must be said, to begin, that some of the declining appeal of the inner suburbs can be attributed to the general turn against 'the suburbs' – any suburbs – by the fashionable middle and upper classes after about 1970, a cultural shift of considerable importance in the evolution of urban form. In Toronto this general drift was likely accentuated by the style of early postwar mass-market housing; with designs rooted largely in the austere prewar world, 1950s housing surely had little appeal to the increasingly affluent, cosmopolitan baby-boomers of the 1970s (Fig 9). Early efforts to accommodate the car, which even in the 1950s Toronto's homebuyers expected a house to do, led to some quite awkward designs. Yet so great was the demand for housing in the early postwar years that literally thousands upon thousands such houses were built in Metropolitan Toronto, with a degree of uniformity

made necessary, one presumes, by the rapidity of their construction. So scarcely a generation after they were built these houses were not what people of means and style wanted to live in, or among. This aspect of the inner suburbs resulted, essentially, from their having been built with great urgency by a massive investment, public and private, in a short period of time amid particular circumstances, bringing to mind Jane Jacobs's fascinating insight that "cataclysmic money" so often yields inferior urban form. (Jacobs 1992, Chapter 16). Planning had nothing to do with this.

Planning has produced some appealing features. Foremost might be the carefully-sited and usually walkable neighbourhood schools, a foundation of neighbourhood planning that families with children no doubt find attractive. Perry's idea of the school serving as the basis for a *community* was, in these suburbs at least, rather fanciful on account of the many childless households and the substantial turnover of population. Changes in the population of school-age children have made some schools under-used and others over-used, creating problems for school board administrators, but the neighbourhood schools themselves were and still are a desirable asset. Moreover, contrary to recent rhetoric these schools are as well-funded as those anywhere else in the city, not because of planning but because the metropolitan government made it a policy to equalize public education revenues. Municipal jurisdictions with low property tax revenues do not have lesser-funded public schools.<sup>8</sup>



Fig 9: Houses in Clairlea, as built in the early 1950s. (Photo by author)



Fig 10: Looking west to former industrial land across Midland Avenue, south of Ellesmere, Midland Park neighbourhood. (Photo by author)

Some might also consider the inner suburbs' plentiful open space to be a desirable feature. Neighbourhood parks have come under criticism for being little-used and larger than necessary,<sup>9</sup> and indeed the designated dog zones now seem to be

8 Schools in non-affluent areas are proving unable to raise as much money in local fund-raising drives, a point of growing significance.

9 Green Space is negatively weighted by the City of Toronto in its quantitative assessment of inner suburb neighbourhoods, apparently because it produces low residential density – City of Toronto, 2014.



the only well used parts of many large parks. Still, some residents likely enjoy them. One wonders, as well, if the principle of the quiet residential island free of through traffic and commercial activity might appeal to some. Planners now criticize this too, especially the strict prohibition of commercial activity from residential areas, and in many new suburban developments planners have brought back the old rectilinear grid of through streets – though to promote mixed uses rather than through traffic. Walking along these calm, curved streets today one wonders why the principle that spawned them has fallen so totally out of favour, and whether residents oppose it as much as planners – who likely live elsewhere – do. All told, these features may have been deterrents to some potential in-migrants but magnets to others.

The planning principle of urban contiguity (absence of satellite towns) and the related principle of building at moderate density might also be judged as having left a mixed legacy. Taken together, the two have produced some desirable features. Plentiful commercial service strips is one. Many of these strips have failed, as noted, but many do survive – often housing well-regarded but low-priced ethnic food shops and restaurants – and although their relation to their immediate neighbourhood may be at odds with their original purpose they do provide useful local services. Another is viable public transit, an aspect of Toronto's inner suburbs considered both unusual, comparatively speaking, and commendable. Had these suburbs been built in the form of satellite towns, the growth option Metropolitan Toronto rejected, they could never have been served by regular public transit – unless all residents worked in the same central location, which would not have happened. Toronto has among the highest rates of transit use in North America and the planning principles of the inner suburbs have helped make it so (van Susteren 2007; Sorensen/Hess 2007). It is true that transit service in the inner suburbs could be much better: existing subway lines barely reach the inner suburbs, densities are not sufficient to support all-day frequent service, and access to transit is difficult in many places. All this may have been, and may still be, a deterrent to affluent in-migrants. That is to say planning principles have allowed viable public transit in the inner suburbs, but perhaps not enough of it to satisfy those who can afford to live in the old, better-served city.

It must also be acknowledged that the planners' desire for density has produced features that some likely find unappealing: major road allowances are rather slim, roads and industries are close to houses, and open space between neighbourhoods is minimal, resulting in an overall compactness that can feel rather unrelenting and, maybe for some, un-suburban. The fact is that these inner suburbs – not as mixed and walkable as old urban neighbourhoods but not as open and spacious as conventional suburbs – are something of an urban hybrid, and as often with such things, many will prefer one of the recognizable progenitors to the ambiguous blending of the two.

The idea of employing a grid of arterial roads to service this entire urban area – a key transportation planning principle – may be a problem of its own. Busy arterial



roads are never far away from anywhere. And while it is true that their continuous heavy traffic is the flip-side of traffic-free residential areas, they produce noise, degrade the air, and, when one has to cross them to reach a grocery store or bus stop, can threaten life and limb. Surely they are carrying far more traffic than ever envisioned, since the number of people and amount of economic activity out beyond them, and thus dependent on them for the movement of people and goods, has probably doubled or tripled in the sixty years since they were built, making them a greater hazard now than when first envisioned as an efficient, low-cost way to service a new suburban area. Here may be a case of a planning idea that although apt when first applied was not well suited to changes that ensued. The alternative would have been fewer but larger roadways, which is to say expressways; they too degrade the environment, although perhaps in a more localized, less pervasive, manner.

The proximity of industrial to residential land may also be a problem of its own. Dispersing industry throughout the metropolitan area seemed like a good idea because it promised to reduce the distances industrial workers had to travel for employment, but one doubts the principle actually provided such benefits. Residents of the inner suburbs did not all work in industry, and even for those who worked in a local plant it is hard to imagine that having their plant just down the street would be desirable. This is just as true today; even where party supply outlets have replaced industrial plants, the proximity of these industrial-looking lands has a way of debasing adjacent residential neighbourhoods (Fig 10).



Fig 11: Townhouse complex in Woburn neighbourhood, laid out and built as part of the original neighbourhood design, early 1960s. (Photo by author)

The planning idea with probably the greatest impact on the inner suburbs is the notion that residential areas should include multi-unit housing, another manifestation of the desire for density. This housing takes two main forms: townhouses, some intended for rental and some for owner/occupation, and rental apartments, both high-rise and low-rise (Fig 11). Several neighbourhoods also have stretches of 'semi-

detached' houses,<sup>10</sup> usually on the streets closest to industrial employment areas. It is hard to say what impact this has had on neighbourhood appeal. Considering the antipathy that better-off inner-city property owners have towards apartment buildings one might think that higher-income people would be deterred by their presence. This is not readily apparent. What little upper-middle-class housing exists in the neighbourhoods observed for this study seems as likely to be in the vicinity of multi-unit housing as not, which is no surprise since the latter is almost everywhere.

Yet this planning idea surely has contributed to the inner suburbs' lower than average incomes in another, more direct way – it has allowed, in fact encouraged, lower-income people to live in the inner suburbs. Through the lens of planning history the presence of lower-income people in Toronto's inner suburbs is, essentially, a successful implementation of the planners' goal of socio-economic diversity. And it begins to seem possible that, since the inner suburbs were devised from the start to include lower-income residents, the demographic phenomenon of the last two generations could actually be the absence, or the departure, of higher-income residents.

Presenting this catalogue of planning ideas that may have lessened the appeal of the inner suburbs to affluent in-migrants is not meant to suggest that social problems in the inner suburbs can, or should, be remedied by somehow making these neighbourhoods more appealing to gentrifiers. Quite the contrary. There is, of course, a similarity between the features just catalogued and the very real shortcomings that current residents of the inner suburbs encounter in their day to day lives and often strive to remedy through their own community actions. Indeed, why would there not be an overlap between qualities that discourage higher-income people from moving in and qualities that burden lower-income people already there? So perhaps these deterrents should be remedied – insofar as they can be – for the sake of those who live with them. Yet a curious irony is brought to light by this overlap: the very features that burden the lower-income residents of the inner suburbs may also be protecting the inner suburbs from gentrification and the rising cost of living that would almost certainly ensue.

### **Immigration and Planning**

One final aspect of the inner suburbs' planning to address briefly is their connection to immigration. Like all major North American cities, Toronto has been a city of immigrants for as long as it has existed, the proportion of immigrants (defined simply as non-Canadian-born) ranging around 40% throughout the twentieth century (Lemon 1985, 196, Table VII). The proportion is somewhat higher now, approaching 50%. The inner suburbs have their share, but not an outsize share. In 1971, the inner suburbs had 52% of the urban region's population and 51% of its

---

10 The common local term, British in origin, for side-by-side duplexes, of which Toronto has tens of thousands.

immigrants; in 2016 they had 33% of the region's population (their population was still increasing, but growth in the outer suburbs was diminishing their share) and 37% of its immigrants, so immigrants are now slightly over-represented in the inner suburbs, but not by much (Canada, 1971 and 2016).

It is the case, however, that several of Toronto's neighbourhoods with the highest proportion of foreign-born are in the inner suburbs. The East York high-rise neighbourhood of Thorncliffe Park, with some 70% non-Canadian-born, is perhaps the best known (Saunders 2010, 311-23). But several neighbourhoods in north-eastern Scarborough show similar demographic profiles (City of Toronto, Neighbourhood Profiles). In Milliken and Agincourt, for example, some 75% of residents are non-Canadian-born, about one-third of which are newly-arrived (since 2001) immigrants, and some 65% of residents do not speak English at home – an obvious challenge for the local school teachers. So clearly the inner suburbs, at least some parts of them, are serving as an entry-point for immigrants to the city, another social reality of considerable significance.

Interestingly, however, unlike Thorncliffe Park the two above-named heavily-immigrant Scarborough neighbourhoods, Milliken and Agincourt, are not among those identified by the City as needing "Neighbourhood Improvement", a classification based on an amalgam of economic, social, and health measures (City of Toronto, 2014). Evidently a high proportion of immigrants is not necessarily correlated with the declining incomes and social distress for which the inner suburbs are now well known. Also worth noting, these two neighbourhoods are not heavily stocked with high-rise apartment buildings (though they do have some, as well as more row houses and duplexes than the Toronto average). In fact 50% of the households in Milliken are single-family homes, well above the proportion in the city overall, so it would appear that high-rise apartments, though an important part of immigrant settlement in Toronto, are not the only form of housing used by immigrants.

As for the role of planning in all this, having the inner suburbs function as an immigrant entry point was not explicitly part of any plan, but the planners did see multi-unit suburban rental housing as potential homes for the immigrants – primarily European at that time – who were arriving in Toronto in large numbers while the inner suburbs were built (Jones 1963). So the current situation is neither entirely unexpected nor in any way contrary to plans.

## **Conclusion**

The prime objective here has been to explore the planning ideas employed in creating Toronto's inner suburbs and to consider whether and how these ideas shaped the inner suburbs of today. Clearly, based on what has been presented here, Toronto's inner suburbs were planned, at both a metropolitan and a neighbourhood scale, and the planning principles employed did indeed shape the physical and, to a degree, social aspects of the inner suburbs. This needs to be said on account of a general, if not always explicitly expressed, sense among critics of suburbs that 'sub-

urbia', as it is still often pejoratively labelled, was more an unintended consequence than a desired outcome, and that the *absence* of planning is, in fact, why it has the form it has. This study reveals just the opposite: Toronto's inner suburbs were planned, and their physical form is what its planners wanted. One might disapprove of their urban form, but whatever shortcomings one sees in them are almost certainly the result of planning, not of its absence.

Has planning contributed to the inner suburbs evolving into areas with lower than average incomes? Using the proxy question of whether it contributed to making the inner suburbs unattractive to affluent in-migrants, the answer is not definitive. Some planning ideas may have lessened their appeal, such as placing industries close to residences, strictly separating uses, relying on arterial roads, and creating excessive local parkland; but others, such as neighbourhood public schools, transit-supportive densities, local shopping options, and plentiful multi-unit housing, could well have done the opposite. But all these may be less important than the planning idea of including at least some lower-cost rental housing in all residential neighbourhoods; this, on its own, ensured the inner suburbs would include a significant number of lower-income residents.

## Bibliography

- Blumenfeld, Hans, 1967, "Alternative Solutions for Metropolitan Development", in: Paul D. Spreiregen (ed.), *The Modern Metropolis: Its Origins, Growth, Characteristics, and Planning*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, (originally published 1948), 194-99.
- Bousfield, John, interviews by author 28 February 2003, 20 March 2007, and 20 April 2009.
- Burale, Idil, 2015, "We Need to Reframe How We Talk About Our City", *Spacing* magazine, 27 January 2015, accessed February 2017 at <http://spacing.ca/toronto/2015/01/27/burale-need-reframe-talk-city/>.
- Canada, 2001, Statistics Canada, Table A.1 Distribution of the population, by type of neighbourhood, at <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2008001/t/10459/4097957-eng.htm>, accessed November 2017.
- , 1971 and 2016, Statistics Canada, Census Profile Series.
- City of Toronto, 2014, "Neighbourhood Improvement Area Profiles", accessed November 2017 at <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/data-research-maps/neighbourhoods-communities/nia-profiles/>.
- , Neighbourhood Profiles, accessed 30 June 2017 at <https://www1.toronto.ca/wps/portal/contentonly?vgnextoid=ae17962c8c3f0410VgnVCM10000071d60f89RCRD>.
- , Staff Report, 4 March 2014, "Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy 2020 – Recommended Neighbourhood Improvement Areas", Neighbourhood Equity Index, Methodological Documentation, Table 3.
- Comay, Eli, 1983, "Looking Backward: From Reality to Plan", in: *Conflict or Co-operation? The Toronto-Centred Region in the 1980s*, Frances Frisken (ed.), Downsview ON: Faculty of Arts, York University, 16-21.
- Cowen, Deborah/Vanessa Parlette, n.d., *Toronto Inner Suburbs: Investing in Social Infrastructure in Scarborough*, Toronto: University of Toronto Cities Centre.

- Cranz, Galen, 1982, *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Fishman, 1988, "The Post-War American Suburb: A New Form, A New City", in Daniel Schaffer, ed., *Two Centuries of American Planning*. London, Mansell, 265-78.
- Friskin, Frances, 2007, *The Public Metropolis: The Political Dynamics of Urban Expansion in the Toronto Region, 1924-2003*, Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Fulford, Sarah, 2015, "Why Toronto Needs to Talk About the Inner Suburbs", *Toronto Life*, 12 January 2015, followed by a series of residents' profiles under the title "Toronto is Failing Me" <http://torontolife.com/city/toronto-is-failing-me-why-toronto-needs-to-talk-about-the-inner-suburbs/> (accessed 30 June 2017).
- Gore/Storrie, 1949, "Toronto and York Planning Board Report on Water Supply and Sewage Disposal for the City of Toronto", unpublished report.
- Hall, Peter, 2002, *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century* 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hulchanski, J. David, 2010, *The Three Cities Within Toronto: Income Polarization Among Toronto's Neighbourhoods, 1970-2005*, Toronto: University of Toronto Cities Centre
- Jacobs, Jane, 1992, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York: Vintage Books (originally published 1961).
- Jones, Murray, 1963, "Metropolitan Man: Some Economic and Social Aspects", *Plan Canada*, 4, 1, 11-23.
- Lemon, James, 1985, *Toronto Since 1918: An Illustrated History*, Toronto: Lorimer.
- Metropolitan Toronto Planning Board (MTPB), 1959, *Official Plan of the Metropolitan Toronto Planning Area*, Toronto: Metropolitan Toronto Planning Department.
- , 1963a, *Key Facts*, Toronto: Metropolitan Toronto Planning Department.
- , 1963b, *10 Years of Progress: Metropolitan Toronto, 1953-1963*, Toronto: Metropolitan Toronto Planning Department.
- , 1970, *Key Facts*, Toronto: Metropolitan Toronto Planning Department.
- Neighbourhood Change, a multi-year program of research and publication centred at the University of Toronto, accessible at <http://neighbourhoodchange.ca/>.
- Ontario, 1953, "Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto Act", c.75, *Statutes of Ontario*.
- Ontario Housing Corporation, 1984, *Ontario Housing Corporation, 1964-1984*, Government of Ontario.
- Parlette, Vanessa Marie, 2012, "On the Margins of Gentrification: The Production and Governance of Suburban 'Decline' in Toronto's Inner Suburbs", Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Geography, University of Toronto.
- Perry, Clarence Arthur, 1929, "The Neighbourhood Unit", in *Neighbourhood and Community Planning*, Vol. 7 of *Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs*, New York: Committee on Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs, 22-132.
- Rome, Adam, 2001, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Rose, Albert, 1972, *Governing Metropolitan Toronto: A Social and Political Analysis, 1953-1971*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Saunders, Doug, 2010, *Arrival City: The Final Migration and Our Next World*, Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf
- Silver, Christopher, 1985, "Neighbourhood Planning in Historical Perspective", *American Planning Association Journal*, 51, 2, 161-74.
- Sorensen, Andre/Paul Hess, 2007, "Metropolitan Indicators Poster", Toronto: Neptis Foundation <http://www.neptis.org/publications/metropolitan-indicators-poster> (accessed 30 June 2017).

- Taylor, Zachary, 2010, "Review of Regional Governance and Planning in the Three Regions", 55-73, in Taylor, ed., *Growing Cities: Comparing Urban Growth Patterns and Regional Growth Policies in Vancouver, Calgary, and Toronto*, Toronto ON: Neptis Foundation.
- Turcotte, Martin, "The City/Suburb Contrast: How Can We Measure It?", *Canadian Social Trends*, No. 85, Summer 2008: 2-19.
- van Susteren, ed., 2007, *Metropolitan World Atlas*, Rotterdam: 010 Publishers.
- Ward, Stephen V., 2002, *Planning the Twentieth-Century City: The Advanced Capitalist World*, Chichester, UK: John Wiley and Sons.
- White, Richard, *Planning Toronto: The Planners, The Plans, Their Legacies, 1940-80*, Vancouver BC: UBC Press, 2016.
- Whittick, Arnold, *Encyclopedia of Urban Planning*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1974.