

Everything in its Right Place: (Sub)urban sprawl and the Canadian segregated city

Living in the sprawl,
Dead shopping malls rise like mountains beyond mountains,
And there's no end in sight
– Arcade Fire, *Sprawl II*

The suburbs, as they are popularly understood, typify the American cultural landscape of the post-war period. But as to the place of suburbanization in Canada, there is a need for deeper analysis. As fundamentally planned spaces, the suburbs exist at the intersection between government interference and individual agency, showing how the values and beliefs we share as a society achieve material expression in the landscape. Ideals of the suburbs as a “bourgeois utopia” have largely been discredited by an awareness of the negative environmental impact of urban sprawl, and by critiques of our unsustainable levels of consumer capitalism. For the majority of Canadians, though, “suburbia” still refers back to stale notions of a culturally homogenous, middle class space. Although this image continues to bear some resemblance to the reality of suburban life, particularly in its emphases on consumer culture and the automobile, it overlooks the complexities and dynamism of the modern-day Canadian city. As more and more immigrants flock to outlying areas of the Greater Toronto Area, a landscape of surprising colour and diversity is taking root – beautifully evoked in Katharine Cizek’s documentary *Highrise*. An analysis of post-war (sub)urban sprawl in Canada brings into focus some of the major themes of modernity, as what it means to live in a city and belong a community undergoes a gradual but decisive shift.

Highly rationalized and artificial, the modern (sub)urban landscape is “an expression of human will...no less than the temples of Greece or the cathedrals of medieval England, [it] informs us about prevailing standards of truth, beauty, and goodness”¹. Packaged to maximize consumer satisfaction, efficiency, and company profits, suburban sprawl across Canada is symptomatic of a growing culture of consumer capitalism. Larry McCann has captured the phrase “suburbs of desire” to describe the sense in which the suburban landscape is intrinsically bound up in the culture of consumption as a way of life, which equates the accumulation of material possessions with personal achievement. As a consuming society that continually seeks status in possessions, “we take pleasure in the new and the modern.”² Central to the evolving post-war consumer culture is an emphasis on the all-importance of homeownership. For newcomers to North America and lower-class citizens living in the inner-city slums, the suburban home constitutes an ideal, the apex of individuals’ and families’ desires. Throughout the 20th century, the average suburban house underwent a series of fluctuations in size and style, in keeping with shifting economic conditions and fashions. While their external facades are an indication of wealth and status, their interiors express attitudes toward family and privacy, making them concrete markers of cultural expression.³

The (sub)urban landscape of the late twentieth century is distinguished from its antecedents in being the by-product of planning: positioned at the intersection between public and private, it is the result of collaboration between corporate developers and government planners. With the end of WWII, there was an urgent need to reconstruct war-

¹ Edward Relph, *The Modern Urban Landscape* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 10

² Larry McCann, “Suburbs of Desire: The Suburban Landscape of Canadian Cities, c. 1900–1950,” In *Changing Suburbs: Foundation, Form, and Function*, ed. Richard Harris and Peter Larkham (New York: Routledge, 1999), 137

³ McCann, “Suburbs of Desire,” 133

damaged cities in Europe, while, in North America, governments were grappling with the administrative difficulties involved in supporting a rapidly expanding population.⁴ Across Europe and North America, municipal planning became “a fact of life” – due in part to a growing preference for centralized administration.⁵ The resulting landscape stands out for its lines of discontinuity, where new developments confront old, historical quarters. Here the dividing line constitutes a “time edge,’ a boundary between two eras as well as between two landscapes...[These] abrupt edges...reveal profound shifts in ideology, in social values.”⁶ In this way, the modern landscape embodies one of the tensions of our age, in its dual impulses towards past and future; nostalgia and progress; tradition and innovation. Promoted both as “the hallmark of traditional values...[and] as the showcase of modernity,” the suburban home has, from its inception, been wound up in a paradox that defines much of contemporary life.⁷

Underlying this trend toward the planned city is a concern with promoting human welfare.

Suburbs were first conceived in the 19th century as “bourgeois utopias.” Such a low-density environment seemed to offer refuge from the discord of city life, and a return to domestic values associated with the traditional nuclear family structure. At the same time, their idyllic, park-like setting represented a return to “unspoiled nature.”⁸ The introduction of zoning bylaws controlling the location of economic activities was among the most revolutionary of these changes. What had previously been dense and heterogeneous living spaces became decidedly more homogenous and middle class, devoted almost exclusively to residential activities. Indeed, developers viewed homogeneity as one of the suburbs’ principal advantages: their uniformly residential appearance allowed for a strict separation between work and home life. As urban planners conceptualized a rational, efficient, and orderly landscape to draw into relief the chaos of the inner city, the urban landscape of the 19th century was transformed into a landscape of imagination – the site of promises, ambitions, and fantasies rooted in the “American Dream.”⁹

‘The segregated city’ describes the tidy division of functions that is the defining the modern suburban landscape. One of the most obvious indications of a planned place is its rigid segregation of activities, such that there is “no overlapping or overflowing at the edges, no mixing or confusions.”¹⁰ The language of contamination seems particularly apt here, suggesting how the entire planning process consisted in a rationalist reaction against the “messiness” of city life. Plans were prepared according to standardized models of design and layout, so that post-war urban planning was reduced to little more than a system of “planning by numbers.”¹¹ As a result, there is a quality of predictable orderliness about suburbia. In its geometrical arrangement, it epitomizes Edward Relph’s claim, “There is an indication of the obsession with orderliness that grips all modern planning.” For Relph, the impulse to suburbanize, to *standardize* betokens “an all too familiar sort of mind [at work] ...a mind seeing only disorder where a most intricate and unique order exists.”¹² In its fascination with the arranged, the segregated landscape disposes of “the idiosyncratic developments and the ‘happy accidents’ which make the older parts of cities so visually

⁴ Relph, *Landscapes*, 131

⁵ *Ibid.*, 139

⁶ *Ibid.*, 262

⁷ McCann, “Suburbs of Desire,” 133

⁸ Dolores Hayden, “The Shapes of Suburbia,” In *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 8

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5

¹⁰ Relph, *Landscapes*, 165

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 141

¹² Relph, *Landscapes*, 165

interesting.”¹³ The city’s spontaneous character, the particularities of *place*, are lost. Mass suburbia had come to reflect a weakening of the identity of places, a kind of “placelessness” where things “not only look alike but feel alike and offer the same bland possibilities for experience.”¹⁴

By about 1975, the optimism that had characterized the early years of urban renewal gave way to doubts about the capacity of large-scale planning to respond to community needs.¹⁵ Its drab results seemed a far cry from the original vision of the happy, egalitarian city of tomorrow: overcrowded, geometrically arranged complexes and highrises have fostered whole range of social and economic problems, from depression to vandalism and crime.¹⁶ Major developers, in collaboration with the government, have mass-marketed ever-larger private developments without adequately addressing the need for infrastructure, or considering the environmental impact of urban sprawl. As much as they have been hyped as ideal neighbourhoods, suburbs often lack the social and economic centres necessary to foster a sense of community. For women, especially, suburbia breeds isolation. While for men the suburban home represented a retreat away from the workplace, for women, especially in the early to mid twentieth century, it was a site where gendered roles prevailed.¹⁷ The more traditional social tenor of the landscape was such that women were usually expected to abandon the well-paying jobs they had held during the war, reassuming prescriptive gender roles relegating them to the status of “homemakers.” In an era of unprecedented mass-production and electronic media, the risk of isolation only increases. As Dolores Hayden observes, “If many activities, such as paid work, exercise, shopping, seeking entertainment, and voting, are able to be done in- house through the various electronic communications systems, reasons for going outside decrease.”¹⁸ Hayden presents us with a dystopian vision of the suburban house functioning as a kind of container for mass-produced goods, cutting off residents from the external world in a landscape where any social or economic neighbourhood context has all but disintegrated.

Because, in America, suburbia has played such a key role in shaping the nation’s identity, the Canadian experience of suburbanization is often overlooked. Urban theorists tend to regard the process of suburbanization as a kind of intrusion of the American cultural landscape upon the North, both in its aesthetic and ideological components. Although this view is not without cogency, it does not account for the particularities and geographical contingencies involved in the Canadian cultural landscape.¹⁹ As Rob Fiedler and Jean-Paul Addie indicate, “political boundaries, governmental infrastructures, and urban territoriality are of fundamental importance in shaping the spatial terrains, cultural patterns, and political-economic relations of city- regions.”²⁰ In Toronto, or what is now known as the Greater Toronto Area, urban sprawl is an issue of ongoing relevance. The creation of Metro (Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto, which included East York, Etobicoke, North York, Scarborough, and York) in 1954 was largely successful in its attempt to grapple with the city’s unbridled growth. In 1998, continued expansion of the 905 area (municipalities outside Metropolitan Toronto) required new political configurations, leading to the amalgamation of

¹³ Ibid., 143

¹⁴ Rob Fiedler and Jean-Paul Addie, “Canadian Cities on the Edge: Reassessing the Canadian Suburb,” 1:1 (2008), 23

¹⁵ Relph, *Landscapes*, 10

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Fiedler and Addie, “Canadian Cities,” 19

¹⁸ Hayden, “Nostalgia and Futurism,” 225

¹⁹ Fiedler and Addie, “Canadian Cities,” 6

²⁰ Fiedler and Addie, “Canadian Cities,” 7

the “old city” of Toronto with its adjacent inner suburban municipalities. The result was the creation of a “megacity” extending from the central city of Toronto to its four surrounding regional municipalities: Durham, Halton, Peel, and York.²¹ Opposition to the proposed amalgamation focused around the movement Citizens for Local Democracy, which voiced fears that amalgamation would “dilute the power of downtown reformists against pro-growth suburbs” and lead to cuts in social programs as well as education.²²

Among the communities affected by the amalgamation was Bronte, Ontario, a former fishing village located in the town of Oakville, which belongs to the Halton municipality. For Bronte residents, the expanding suburban landscape, notable for its plethora of drive-in restaurants and parking lots, jarred with their ideals of the village as a form of country living – safer, more spacious, and relatively inexpensive as compared to its urban counterpart.²³ As valued heritage properties were gradually overtaken by the post-WWII onslaught of industry and car culture, community activists in the late 1960s rallied together under the banner of WORA (West Oakville Residents’ Association) in an effort to curb unwanted development.²⁴ At issue in the controversy were two divergent definitions of “progress”: one centred on a preference for the conveniences afforded by modern industry and technology, the other based on aesthetic concerns, drawing upon the rhetoric of environmentalism and urban reform. In their nostalgic yearning for a peaceful, small-town atmosphere, WORA was at odds with the forces of modern life.

The Bronte controversy underscores one of the major tensions underlying urban development during the 20th century, as increased government intervention in planning decisions was met with resistance on the part of residents who favoured a more vernacular approach to development – one directed at the grassroots level. In 1939, the War Measures Act gave the Canadian government unprecedented power over the economy and the allocation of resources, as well as the ability to legally expropriate private property. This increasingly interventionist federal government, combined with the enormous prosperity following WWII, led to an influx in centrally planned and executed programs that translated normative visions of suburban development into reality. Across all disciplines, there was during this period a growing reliance on expert analysis of both social and private problems. In some cases, notably the establishment of Africville in Halifax, uncontested authority of expertise opinion has had disastrous consequences. In terms of urban planning, 20th century experts proclaimed the spatial form of the suburb the “natural” way to order society. But it is important to remember that suburbs are more than just residential spaces; they also contain huge expanses of industrial and commercial space.²⁵ By facilitating urban sprawl in the GTA (Greater Toronto Area), Bronte’s car culture undermines the population density that is integral to fostering a sense of community, and exacerbates the alienation of modern suburbs and apartment blocks.²⁶

Although density can be effective as a way of alleviating the damaging environmental and psychological effects of urban sprawl, it also has the potential to be tremendously mismanaged. In Toronto’s older, modernist inner suburbs, “child unfriendly high rise dwellings set in barren, frequently unsafe expanses of land” are often lacking in adequate

²¹ Ibid., 9

²² Ibid.

²³ Penfold, Steve, “Are we to go literally to the hot dogs? Parking lots, drive-ins, and the critique of progress in Toronto’s suburbs, 1965-1975.” *Urban History Review* 33:1 (2004): 8-23.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Hayden, “Suburban Space,” 8

²⁶ Fiedler and Addie, “Canadian Cities,” 16

infrastructure and essential services.²⁷ The 1960s apartment boom in Canada produced “a large stock of now low rent apartment blocks...highly localized within large tracts [of land]... creating micro-geographies of acute housing need and poverty.”²⁸ Katarina Cizek’s documentary film project *Highrise* investigates the global phenomenon of the post-war suburban highrise, largely overlooked by politicians and the media, and frequently misrepresented in popular culture. A multimedia, collaborative documentary project, *Highrise* is an experiment in interventionist and participatory approaches to filmmaking. Contrary to Dolores Hayden’s fears of the isolating effects of technology, the project demonstrates how technology can be used to overcome the loss of connectivity, community, and public space associated with (sub)urban sprawl. Cizek’s goal, at least in part, is “to see how the documentary process can drive and participate in social innovation rather than just to document it.”²⁹

The first of the project’s video instalments, *One Thousandth Tower* and *One Millionth Tower*, explore – and engage with – a Rexdale highrise building located on Kipling Avenue in the outskirts of Toronto. Harnessing digital storytelling as a means of actively involving the community in the changes that would affect it, Cizek teamed the Kipling tower residents up with architects to re-imagine the space in and around their building.³⁰

In the process of telling this very personal, local story, *One Thousandth Tower* challenges the stereotype that suburbs are devoid of cultural interest or activity. Indeed, Cizek, along with her team of journalists and filmmakers, taps into the energy and spirit of the residents to uncover a world of surprising vitality. Toronto is growing increasingly segregated as its diversity continues to drift to the fringes. Addressing the urgent need for revitalization of the world’s decrepit highrises, the film exposes the failed infrastructure of the suburbs. At the same time, it marks a new approach to urban renewal and recycling based at both local and international levels, showing how, with some modest investment, existing structures can be transformed into a hub of community growth and activity.

The Kipling tower is an example of an “in-between landscape” – one that does not conform to conventional understandings of suburbia as socially, economically, and politically uniform. In a study of the diversifying characteristics of the Canadian suburban landscape, Rob Fiedler and Jean-Paul Addie argue against a simplistic and uncritical “suburban-city dichotomy...increasingly unsuited to the complex realities of contemporary metropolitan life.”³¹ This outdated mode of representation still predominates in urban discourses and popular media, but the reality today is very different. Suburban sprawl has transformed the dynamic of metropolitan cityscapes. Whereas the suburbs have long been positioned on the “fringes” of society, in fact historic central cities no longer have priority over the landscape; they have gradually been subsumed by sprawling city-regions such as the GTA.³² Meanwhile, the popular definition of suburbia falters in considering spaces on the “urban periphery” – a kind of geographical no-man’s land whose image is obstructed by that of the historical city-core.³³ What is needed is a re-conceptualization of the suburbs that takes into account the presence of these in-between landscapes, “neither fully urban, nor suburban.”³⁴ The continuing prevalence of the city-suburb dichotomy goes hand in hand with a process of de-valorization whereby the day-to-day realities of suburban spaces and lives are

²⁷ Ibid., 15

²⁸ Ibid., 16

²⁹ Cizek, Katarina, *Highrise*, Interactive Video Project (Canada: NFB, 2010)

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Fiedler and Addie, “Canadian Cities,” 3

³² Fiedler and Addie, “Canadian Cities,” 2

³³ Ibid., 22

³⁴ Ibid., 25

overpowered by the myth of “suburbia.”

Complex and multi-faceted, the cultural landscape of the suburbs cannot be fully comprehended by the popular dichotomy of city-suburb which persists in contemporary urban theory, media, and literature. The very expansiveness of suburbia, whose built form reflects the larger-scale afforded by private automobile travel, defies easy access or analysis. Katarina Cizek’s *One Thousandth Tower* offers a portrait of an in-between landscape, one that has been excluded from the prevailing image of the suburbs as socially homogenous, a private bourgeois refuge from the hustle and bustle of the city. At the same time as they house ever-higher numbers of Canadians, the suburbs are diversifying across ethnic, economic, and political lines. As a cultural landscape, they are “increasingly representative of the social geography of Canadian cities.”³⁵ But the pace of urban sprawl so far has exceeded our ability to keep up in understanding with the lived reality of suburban space.

³⁵ Fiedler and Addie, “Canadian Cities,” 21