



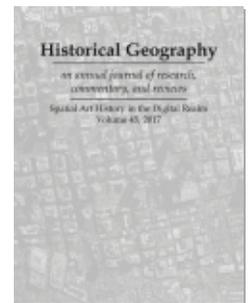
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Canadian Urban Planning at 150

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Canadian Urban Planning at 150

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Observing celebrations of Canada's 150th birthday is, among other things, an experience of vertigo. It produces this feeling because these celebrations partake in a form of nationalism, today's multicultural nationalism, that is extremely foreign to earlier periods of this country's history and that makes it very difficult to refer to this history without a certain awkwardness. In speech after speech, then, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will find himself celebrating Canada's "rich heritage" and "cultural diversity," and then have to concede, at some point and as quickly as possible, that this heritage has sometimes involved great hostility toward the groups of people that presently signify the country's "diversity."¹ In most cases, this means recognizing Canada's historical violence toward Indigenous people, but the message can be adapted, depending on the audience, to include other admissions of historical wrong.²

These strange performances highlight what critical scholars of Canada have often pointed out: that Canadian nationalism, in our time, requires a celebration of diversity that, in the end, it can't quite endure.³ In this brief comment, I would like to trace how this tension between heritage and diversity has played out in the field that I have devoted most of my career to studying: urban planning. My comments will focus on two historical periods and the somewhat different forms of planning they entailed.

One hundred and fifty years ago, urban planning was beginning to adopt a series of objectives related to the condition of human life, a condition it would attempt to improve through spatial means. It was concerned, early on, with something called the "moral and physical health" of city residents; a little later, with something called "convenience"; and eventually, with a complex and cross-cutting objective called "efficiency."⁴ In practice, these concerns with the condition of

human life reinforced and recalibrated existing racial disparities in the city. Efforts to improve moral and physical health, for example, led to the elimination of the last urban Indigenous reserves in cities like Vancouver and Victoria on the rationale that Indigenous-settler commingling was considered to be bad for the moral health of both groups.⁵ It also led to the transfer of health-impairing facilities like waste sites and noxious industries from white neighborhoods to black ones in cities like Montreal and Halifax.⁶

These actions were not a mistake. Indeed, they very successfully improved moral and physical health according to the implicit, race-inflected conception of the latter. They improved *white* health – the only health that mattered at the time. Examining these effects, we can see that urban planning in this period was not just racist, but race-making. It helped to create a set of material differences in people's lives that were indexed to race – race-specific differences in health, convenience, and efficiency.⁷ This race-making form of urban planning provided the dominant form of city-making in Canada for several decades, enduring without significant changes until the 1960s.

In the 1960s, planning was forced to change in response to the social movements of the time. These movements were very diverse. They included the Black United Front's fight for self-determination in Nova Scotia,⁸ as well as the Kahnawake Mohawks' struggle against the modernizing urban projects of Montreal.⁹ The movements with the greatest influence on urban planning in this period, however, were those, often associated with Jane Jacobs, that confronted planning on aesthetic or experiential grounds.¹⁰ Their legacy was a set of planning practices, from mixed-use zoning to urban design, that sought to enhance the pedestrian look and feel of the city. These practices have remained central to planning ever since.

These 1960s movements were seldom racist in the way that planning had been. Indeed, they were much more likely to celebrate cultural diversity, as Canada now does. And yet they ultimately preserved planning's race-making operation by: (1) failing to call into question the race-specific material differences in people's lives that had been created by planning; (2) treating white experiences of the city as a *universal* experience that planning was now expected to enhance; and (3) ignoring the various social practices, including racial discrimination in housing and racist policing, that impacted the urban experiences of racialized people and put certain places off-limits to them.¹¹

These failures shaped the form of planning that emerged in this period and prevails as the dominant form of planning into the present. These failures are perhaps most evident today in the planning of parks and public spaces, where a whole set of aesthetic issues (like the location of trees and benches) are the subject of wide-ranging, participatory deliberation, while the *policing* of parks (an issue most concerning to urban Indigenous people and people of colour) is scarcely discussable. The question of policing, rather than being discussed in a participatory forum, is entrusted instead to the most totalitarian institution in our society. This is just one of the ways that planning, through its omissions and its implicit racialization of concepts, continues to racialize the urban experience in Canada.

What this brief commentary shows, I hope, is something of the heritage we are supposed to be celebrating in 2017 and how a part of this heritage (urban planning) has operated to the detriment of Indigenous people and people of colour – even when the country's diversity is embraced and celebrated. And so, if celebrations of Canada require a celebration of diversity, it might be worth seizing the opening provided. It might be worth asking what parts of Canada's heritage, if any, are actually compatible with the multicultural society that these celebrations envision – and what to do with the elements that are not.

Two things seem clear to me. The first is that, as Sarah Ahmed has argued, whiteness is entirely incompatible with the ideals expressed in the language of diversity.¹² The many practices that, like planning, continue to produce whiteness as a materially distinct form of life need to be eliminated. The second is that efforts to destroy whiteness in this specific sense have existed throughout this country's history. I have mentioned just two of them (the Black United Front and the Mohawk Warriors), but there are obviously many more. This, too, is a kind of heritage, and one well worth celebrating.

NOTES

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8. James Walker, "Black Confrontation in Sixties Halifax," in *Debating Dissent: Canada and the Sixties*, eds. Lara Campbell, Gregory Kealey, and Dominique Clément (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012); Rutland, *Displacing Blackness*.
9. Gerald Alfred, *Heeding the Voices of Our Ancestors: Kahnawake Mohawk Politics and the Rise*

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10. David Ley, "Liberal Ideology and the Postindustrial City," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 70 (1980): 238–258; Christopher Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal: Postwar Urbanism from New York to Berlin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Ted Rutland, "Enjoyable Life: Planning, Amenity, and the Contested Terrain of Urban Biopolitics," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24 (2015): 850–868.
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‘The Wood Needs More Canada’: A Brief Historical Geography of the Liberal Democracy We Think We Are

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In December 2016, then-Vice President Joe Biden made his last official visit to Canada. He brought an unusual message. In the wake of the election of Donald Trump, Biden not only disagreed with the political positions of the Republican President-elect, but feared the deeper problem of Trump’s popular support, the larger consequences for the country, and the likely ripple effects in international relations. According to press reports of Biden’s visit:

“The world is going to spend a lot of time looking to you Mr. Prime Minister. Viva la Canada because we need you very, very badly,” Biden said during a Canadian state dinner held in his honor.

[...]

He also said that there are more challenges to the international liberal order now than there have ever been since the Second World War.

[...]

Biden urged Trudeau, and leaders like Merkel, to step up to the world stage and lead in facing challenges. “The progress is going to be made but it’s going to take men like you Mr. Prime Minister, who understand it has to fit within the context of a liberal economic order, a liberal international order, where there’s basic rules of the road,” he said.¹

A couple of months earlier, Jennifer Welsh, a Canadian and Métis scholar, professor of international relations and the United Nations Secretary-General’s Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect, gave the 2016 Massey lecture: “The Return of History: Conflict, Migration, and Geopolitics in the Twenty-First Century.”² As one might guess from the title, it was (in part) a challenge to Francis Fukuyama’s theory. She begins her argument with the observation that