

Introduction

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Introduction

The mode of transportation that has dominated research on the historical development of urban places is the streetcar — a 19th century innovation. By the 1970s the automobile passing by the researcher's window was prompting perhaps the most passionate series of debates concerning the extent to which the city and its neighbourhoods should and could accommodate the car, a debate which helped shape the questions that the historical researchers are now posing. In turn, the focus on city-shaping influences of earlier modes of transportation, their related infrastructure, the tension between private and public ownership of streetcar systems, and the way that streetcar suburbs developed bring the contemporary issues into clearer perspective.

Now, as the 20th century draws to a close, and we are beginning to operate in a post-industrial society, there has been a more concerted effort to take measure of *this* century, and with it, a clearer assessment of the role and impact of the automobile of the city.¹ The form of suburbia, beyond streetcar suburbs, reflects its dependency on the automobile: housing types owe their form to the incorporation of garages; street system layouts have responded to the need for the provision of driveways and the creation of child-safe cul-de-sacs away from road arterials. More broadly, sequences of roads, highways, parkways, expressways and freeways have attempted to provide accessibility to and from downtowns, neighbourhoods, and countryside; and several generations of parking lots and parking garages struggled to store cars when they were not being used.²

The issues raised here go far beyond a question of form and aesthetics. Urban governments have struggled with the tension between public and private agendas for regulating, enabling and allowing cars and road systems. Some interests viewed the automobile and road systems as the best solution for business and commerce, and

wanted better roads, one-way road patterns, traffic lights, left-turn bays, more parking facilities. They were counter-lights, left-turn bays, more parking facilities. They were counter-balanced by others who saw the car and all its attendant urban demands as disruptive and anti-urban, the real cause of congestion and blight. Each of these debates took on different form at different times, and varied across different cities and provinces of Canada. Very often the examples of automobile-related developments in the American city were regarded as either ideal role model or harbinger of doom. Municipal delegations visited American cities; planners and traffic engineers promoted the new orthodoxies of efficiency; and individuals eagerly sought the car, and its attendant apparatus, as symbols for business and social stature.

A Common thread in many studies of the relationship between this new package of technology and the Canadian city has been the conflict between individual and collective worlds, between the merits of private freedom-to-move and the advantages of less flexible and more intermittent public transportation modes. This issue addresses those concerns with four essays that continue to explore traditional issues related to power, decision-making, the built environment and social relations, but sifted through 20th century examples of the car and the city.

Gerald Bloomfield has accumulated an enormous amount of material on roads, automobile registration, and auto-related retailing as part of his long-term research on the place of the automobile in modern society; here, material on London, Ontario pieces together the gradual transformation that ensued from the new locational realities. Many taken-for-granted elements of the current urban landscape are given their historical roots. Stephen Davies fixes those historical roots in the first three decades of the century and chronicles how quickly the needs of the car dominated urban priorities,

changing the relationship of town and country, driver and pedestrian, street and building. For Donald Davis, the fascinating history of the jitney-bus, an early breed of flexible motorized transit that threatened to strip revenues from fixed-route streetcar systems, is an example of a clash between populist aspirations and corporate designs for urban life. Ironically the demise of the jitney and the continued unwieldiness the mass-transit systems prompted a greater and greater shift to private automobile usage for commuting. For all the periodic hopes of mass-transit systems as the savior of the city, the car is undoubtedly the dominant mode of transportation in the 20th century city. So concludes Yves Bussiere in his assessment of cars and transit in Montreal. As long as suburbanization continues, the car and all its needs will continue to dictate form and policy in the modern metropolis. The streetcar suburb had its day, but the automobile city would seem to have its century, and more.

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Notes

- ¹ Among recent assessments, see especially Jon C. Teaford *The Twentieth-Century City: Problem, Promise and Reality*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1986; and Edward Relph, *The Modern Urban Landscape*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1987.
- ² My own interest in the impact of the automobile on the city was crystallized in the process of researching and writing a commissioned history of *The Parking Authority of Toronto 1952-1987* (Toronto: Parking Authority of Toronto, 1987). The intersect of downtown business groups, the private parking industry, municipal politicians, and embryonic traffic engineering and land-use planning officials had to be traced since the 1920s as a precursor of the birth and subsequent development of an agency that has had a considerable impact on land-use and transport policy in the City of Toronto.