

The Affordances of MacKinnon Ravine: Fighting Freeways and Pursuing Government Reform in Edmonton, Alberta

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Article abstract

This article examines the disputes that erupted in the second half of the twentieth century over the proposal to build a freeway through Edmonton's MacKinnon Ravine, a landscape some saw as fundamental to the city's network of recreational lands along the North Saskatchewan River and its extensive ravine system. MacKinnon Ravine, as a possibility-rich landscape, helped successive waves of urban activists articulate opposition to freeway development by serving as the keystone in a multi-decadal arc of civic activism. An orientation to the ravine allowed a series of distinct advocacy efforts to build on each other both in methods and in goals. These successive waves of activism not only altered MacKinnon Ravine's future but also helped reshape civic governance in Edmonton.

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This article examines the disputes that erupted in the second half of the twentieth century over the proposal to build a freeway through Edmonton's MacKinnon Ravine, a landscape some saw as fundamental to the city's network of recreational lands along the North Saskatchewan River and its extensive ravine system. MacKinnon Ravine, as a possibility-rich landscape, helped successive waves of urban activists articulate opposition to freeway development by serving as the keystone in a multi-decadal arc of civic activism. An orientation to the ravine allowed a series of distinct advocacy efforts to build on each other both in methods and in goals. These successive waves of activism not only altered MacKinnon Ravine's future but also helped reshape civic governance in Edmonton.

Cet article étudie les conflits survenus au cours de la seconde moitié du XX^e siècle entourant le projet de construction d'une autoroute traversant le ravin MacKinnon à Edmonton, paysage jugé essentiel au réseau municipal d'espaces récréatifs longeant la rivière Saskatchewan Nord et son vaste système de ravins. Le riche potentiel du ravin MacKinnon a été la pierre angulaire d'une période pluridécennale d'activisme civique permettant à des vagues successives d'activistes urbains de s'opposer à l'aménagement de nouvelles autoroutes. Une orientation vers le ravin a permis à une série d'efforts de sensibilisation distincts de tirer parti de leurs méthodes et objectifs respectifs. Ces vagues successives d'activisme ont non seulement modifié l'avenir du ravin, mais aussi contribué à remodeler la gouvernance civique à Edmonton.

Introduction

MacKinnon Ravine is one component in the urban parks system that characterizes the city of Edmonton, capital of the Canadian province of Alberta. While widely touted as the largest contiguous parks system in North America, Edmonton's contemporary river valley is less the realization of a grand coherent vision for the region and more the outcome of a number of distinct, if sometimes interconnected, processes bearing on smaller geographic areas. This article examines one of these processes, which resulted in the making of MacKinnon Ravine Park.

MacKinnon Ravine was a key site in Edmonton's version of the freeway revolts that took place across Canada and internationally in the late 1960s and 1970s. Seen as a reaction to post-Second World War modernist road-building efforts that emphasized engineering expertise, relied on enabling government legislation, and produced automobile-centric infrastructure, freeway revolts in the United States have been subject to significant scholarship focused on specific neighbourhoods and cities,¹ as well as broader examinations that emphasize elements common to revolts across the United States.² Important recent developments in scholarship on freeway revolts include Christopher Klemek's focus on the transatlantic context,³ as well as Eric Avila's sustained attention to racialized aspects.⁴

Valérie Poirier recently observed that scholarly work focused on freeway revolts in Canada remains thin.⁵ A few decades-old studies have been supplemented with work by Poirier on Montreal, by Ian Milligan on Toronto, and by Danielle Robinson, who has undertaken a study comparing revolts in multiple Canadian cities and published an article on Toronto.⁶ The dearth of studies on Canadian freeway revolts, at least in comparison with the robust literature on American episodes, may be attributable partly to differences in federal government involvement. While the United States government set the stage for freeway fights with federal road-building legislation, the Canadian government played a far more limited role, and this may have made the topic less appealing for scholars looking to produce works of national significance.⁷

This article aims to add to the literature on freeway fights in Canada by borrowing a strategy from much scholarship in the subfield of urban environmental history in following a key landscape feature—MacKinnon Ravine, in this case—through time.⁸ By narrowing the geographic focus while expanding the temporal frame, this approach makes it possible to understand how a successful freeway revolt emerged out of an earlier failure and contributed to urban reform that went beyond changed road plans. MacKinnon Ravine, as a possibility-rich landscape, helped successive waves of activists articulate opposition to freeway development by serving as the keystone in



Map 1: Central section of Edmonton's river valley and ravine system. Adapted from City of Edmonton, Planning Department, Research and Long Range Planning Branch, *River Valley Study*, research report 12, March 1974.

a multi-decadal arc of civic activism. An orientation to the ravine helped a series of advocacy efforts build on each other, both in methods and in goals. These successive waves of activism not only altered MacKinnon Ravine's future but also helped reshape civic governance in Edmonton.

Edmonton's freeway fight took place in the context of a broader urban reform movement active within the city, as well as parallel reform movements playing out in other Canadian urban centres.⁹ Urban reform in Canada has been understood by scholars such as Richard Harris, David Ley, and Jon Caulfield primarily in relation to its class dimensions.¹⁰ Consistent with these interpretations, the drive amidst Edmonton urban reformers to prevent the paving of MacKinnon Ravine was fundamentally class-based, motivated by the goal of safeguarding and expanding opportunities most accessible to middle-class, white-collar property-owners. Edmonton reformers pursued goals with potential significance to broad swaths of the population, goals such as democratizing government decision-making and increasing citizen power, in ways that reflected their privileged

positioning. Particularly considering how studies of urban reform that take account of Edmonton often have been comparative in orientation,¹¹ there is value in locating the city's urban reform movement in the robust local perspective mandated by sustained analytical attention to MacKinnon Ravine.

Edmonton's River Valley and Ravines

Edmonton's river valley and ravine system is the city's most notable geographic feature. The valley varies from 800 to 1,600 metres (half to one mile) in width and from 30 to 60 metres (100 to 200 feet) in depth, totalling some 8,000 acres within the city of Edmonton. Fifteen major ravines extend into the river valley, comprising approximately 3,200 hectares (3,000 acres) of ravine lands. No part of the city is more than five kilometres (three miles) from the valley or one of the ravines.¹² The river valley has been compared to "a 'backbone'; a central spine, to which metropolitan and area planning can be related."¹³

In the early years of the twentieth century, the city of Edmonton was visited by renowned landscape architect Frederick Todd.



Figure 1: *The Capital Hill area along MacKinnon Ravine, 1913. Image courtesy of Peel's Prairie Provinces (peel.library.ualberta.ca), a digital initiative of the University of Alberta Libraries.*

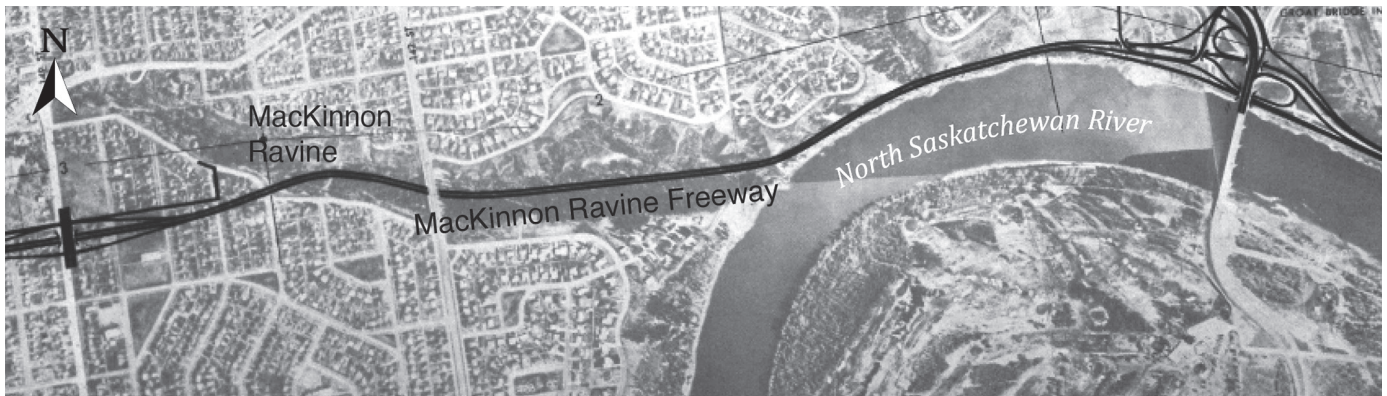
An apprentice of Frederick Law Olmstead, Todd favoured working with natural systems rather than imposing artificial order and followed this principle in his work in key Canadian urban sites such as Mount Royal Park in Montreal, Assiniboine Park in Winnipeg, and Bowering Park in St. John's.¹⁴ Todd's visit to Edmonton had been sought by the City, which desired advice on the development of a plan for urban parks.

One of the themes to emerge in Todd's reports following his visit was the value of lands that are difficult to integrate into an urban grid that prioritizes linear streets, cross-streets at right angles, and regularly shaped lots. Because of changes in elevation, slope instability, and the presence of water in many areas through at least part of the year, the river valley and ravines seemed like areas to avoid for builders of early roads, houses, and buildings. As Todd saw it, Edmonton's river valley and ravines system were to be valued not only for the recreational land they represented, but also for what their difficult geographies forestalled: straightforward assimilation into the urban landscape.¹⁵

A few years later, a 1910 report by engineer Alexander Potter focused on the management of sewage, a pressing issue in many

early twentieth-century Canadian cities, pointed to another potential value of Edmonton's distinct topography. In Potter's view, the city's ravines "can be utilized immediately as dumping places for stable manure and street refuse."¹⁶ However, this was not a vision that condemned ravines to becoming receptacles for undesirables.¹⁷ Rather, these "dumps" would "prove valuable assets to the City as the need for fertilizer increases."¹⁸ Potter's vision of ravines as a resource to be used, though more pragmatic than Todd's aesthetic vision, extended the view of the ravine landscape as a public resource.

Named after Edmonton Liberal member of Parliament and Cabinet minister James Angus MacKinnon, MacKinnon Ravine was one of a group of three ravines located directly to the west of Edmonton's city centre. From east to west, these ravines were northward-oriented Groat, small and forked Ramsay, and westward-oriented MacKinnon. All three extended back from one of the North Saskatchewan's most pronounced bends within city limits. MacKinnon Ravine varies between 800 and 1,600 metres (between half a mile and a mile) in width, with walls of about 60 metres (200 feet) in height, in places forming "unclimbable cliffs."¹⁹ MacKinnon bisected the urban street



Map 2: MacKinnon Ravine Freeway. Adapted from Edmonton District Planning Commission, *Metropolitan Edmonton Transportation Study*, Edmonton, 1963.

grid from where it angled away from the river valley proper near 137th Street until about 149th Street, which from the early 1920s to the late 1960s represented the city's western boundary.

Before 1945, a portion of MacKinnon Ravine had been privately developed by land speculator John B. Gardiner, who owned a home at the top of the bank in an area dubbed Capital Hill.²⁰ Gardiner's landscaping efforts included the construction of bridges, the creation of waterfalls, and the installation of steps leading down into the ravine. These were notable features in what otherwise remained a heavily treed landscape favoured by wildlife.²¹ The ravine was described as quite "well used" at this stage by "picnickers, horseback riders and bicycles" and particularly by children.²² MacKinnon was also a place of residence for those of modest means, with unemployed men living in dugouts and small cabins in the ravine.²³

Already by the middle years of the twentieth century, a pattern had emerged in which MacKinnon Ravine was understood as an available resource, an area that could support or accommodate various visions for the developing city of Edmonton and its residents.

Edmonton and the Freeway Imperative

In many North American cities, the years following the Second World War saw a burgeoning demand for automobile infrastructure. Postwar catch-up consumption, combined with an emerging view of the suburb as the ideal setting for middle-class family life, drove demand for the road infrastructure to accommodate the automobiles that were both symbolic of and necessary to prevailing conceptions of the good life.²⁴

Among Canadian cities, Edmonton emerged out of the Second World War in a distinctive position. Between 1941 and 1951, the city saw ballooning population growth. At 76.9 per cent, Edmonton's rate of increase ranked first among all census metropolitan areas, compared with second-ranked Calgary's 49.5 per cent increase, and third-ranked Vancouver's 40.6 per cent.

By 1958, the city had reached a population of 252,000, which represented growth of more than 180 per cent since 1939.²⁵

Driven by the city's role in supplying northern construction during the Second World War as well as the discovery of petroleum immediately south of the city, these astonishing rates of population increase transformed Edmonton. Rising costs drove many would-be Edmontonians to outlying areas, fuelling development of suburbs and municipalities beyond the city limits. The Edmonton Regional Planning Commission, created under the authority of revisions undertaken in 1950 to Alberta's Town Planning Act, reflected recognition by both the province and its municipalities that unmanaged growth posed significant risks.²⁶ In the context of Edmonton's postwar boom, mutually beneficial relationships were strengthened between developers looking to capitalize on seemingly insatiable demand and city officials (both administrators and elected officials) pleased to facilitate the activities of an industry on which they depended for satisfaction of resident demand for infrastructure and with which they were closely linked through personal and professional ties.

Significant development beyond Edmonton city limits was concentrated in the Town of Jasper Place, which was located to the west of Edmonton, right where MacKinnon Ravine intersected with the city boundary. The population of Jasper Place grew during the Great Depression, when taxation and costs of living were lower there than in Edmonton.²⁷ Population grew further with the oil boom in central Alberta, with the town almost doubling from 7,100 in 1950 to 13,594 in 1955. By then, Jasper Place was not only the largest town in Alberta, but also was bigger than eight of the province's cities. Town officials were hard-pressed to meet residents' demands for improved and extended services.²⁸

Following on the recommendations of the 1956 Royal Commission on the Metropolitan Development of Calgary and Edmonton, in the early 1960s Jasper Place officials undertook to incorporate their 30,530 residents into the City of Edmonton, which then had a population of 276,018.²⁹ What looked from

one perspective like a solution appeared from another like the seeds of a new problem, as the City of Edmonton was then faced with the task of providing the transportation infrastructure to knit Jasper Place into the larger municipal fabric.

One approach to this problem was to take advantage of the geographical features that could facilitate the construction of necessary infrastructure. If Frederick Todd saw in the valley and ravines lands that had been, as a corollary of their verticality, preserved as park, others would see ideal locations for the transportation corridors that were thought to be essential to Edmonton's continued prosperity. By the mid-twentieth century, advocates of freeway development were making as fervent a case for ravines as ideal locations for roadways as Todd had for them as parks. Freeways were the ultimate incarnation of what Christopher Klemek has called the urban renewal order, an international movement in the postwar period to remake the city involving modernist urban planning, the increasing influence of a technocratic elite, and local advocacy by groups positioned to benefit.³⁰

A notable early instance of in-ravine freeway development was the mid-1950s paving of Groat Ravine, which had been a park from the early 1910s.³¹ The creek that had run through the ravine was now enclosed in a culvert and a four-lane road was created.³² The project also involved construction of a bridge across the North Saskatchewan River that funnelled traffic up the newly created Groat Road, toward Westmount Shopping Centre, the city's first mall that opened in August 1955.³³ These two projects created a steady stream of north-south traffic near where MacKinnon Ravine turned westward, away from the North Saskatchewan River valley. They also reflected the idealization of a middle-class lifestyle increasingly characterized by automobile use and consumerism.

A few years later, the City of Edmonton released the Metropolitan Edmonton Transportation Study (METS). This 1963 document was of fundamental importance in the debates over the fate of MacKinnon Ravine that developed and persisted over the following two decades. Produced by the Edmonton Regional Planning Commission and prepared by a collection of expert consultants with input from both the provincial and municipal governments, this two-volume report proposed an ambitious remaking of transportation patterns in Edmonton.³⁴ It reflected a powerful local expression of the international freeway imperative.

The METS plan took advantage of Edmonton's physical geography. As demonstrated by Groat Road, Edmonton's river valley and ravine system could be utilized to minimize the disruption and cost associated with the construction of freeways. The METS plan indicated that, as one contemporary critic saw it, "all traffic into, out of, through, and around the city ought to be funneled into the downtown riverside area."³⁵ MacKinnon Ravine was among the areas to be affected, with a freeway projected to run along its entire length. When city council approved a suite of works based on the METS plan, including the MacKinnon

Ravine Freeway, the fate of MacKinnon seemed settled.³⁶ It, along with other Edmonton ravines such as Mill Creek and Capilano, was to go the way of paved Groat Ravine.

The METS plan was approved in the context of the alliance between Edmonton city decision-makers and the local development industry that favoured further expansion of the city's automobile infrastructure.³⁷ This alliance was stable in part because of Edmonton's prevailing system of council-commission government, which empowered certain administrators and disadvantaged elected officials.³⁸ The role of alderman was part-time and paid as such, with aldermen facing the electorate every three years. In a context where municipal politicians were expected to maintain private employment while also considering their prospects in the next election, a significant amount of decision-making power rested on the city commissioners, a small group of officials responsible for overseeing the major functions of city government. While these officials were appointed by city council, in practice many aldermen relied heavily on the commissioners to guide them through major decisions. The development industry, with its established relationships to powerful city commissioners, was well-positioned to make its case. In contrast, citizens, with their views represented primarily through the democratic process that elected aldermen, were largely unable to foreground alternative perspectives.³⁹ The result was that the desires of the development industry often crowded out other management objectives—such as the careful husbanding of Edmonton's ravine landscape as Frederick Todd had proposed in his 1907 report to the city.

Alternative Visions

Frederick Todd was not, however, entirely without intellectual heirs. Alternative visions for the river valley were evident even as city council voted its support for the METS plan. In the second half of the twentieth century, at least partially in response to the freeway threat, the range of alternative possibilities for MacKinnon narrowed, coalescing around the idea of a recreational landscape.

Some of the voices making the case for a recreational landscape came from factions within the City of Edmonton. For instance, the Metropolitan River Valleys report, which, like METS, was put out in 1963 by the Edmonton Regional Planning Commission but which, unlike METS, focused on parks and recreation, underlined the value of the North Saskatchewan River Valley as a recreational landscape.⁴⁰ The study argued that river valleys should be maintained in such condition that could accommodate growing demand for recreational opportunities.⁴¹ Superintendent Jack R. Wright, head of Parks and Recreation for the City of Edmonton in the mid-1960s, was outspoken in his concerns over the sacrifice of potential parkland for transportation infrastructure. In November 1962, he went on the record with his apprehension about coming pressures on the river valley.⁴² While city council was quite willing to pass motions to reserve valley land as parkland, Wright seems to have become increasingly convinced that no real action would follow.⁴³ When

it became clear that the city was moving ahead with the METS plan, Wright became a public critic of the mentality he saw underlying the plan. In early 1965, Wright was quoted in the *Edmonton Journal* as saying that automobiles “have been given an inflated social and psychological value that has no connection with their utility as a transportation machine.”⁴⁴ So profound were Wright’s concerns that the matter seems to have figured in his decision to resign his position with the city.⁴⁵

The loudest and most persistent voice against the METS plan emerged from a citizens group that dubbed itself the Save Our Parks Association (SOPA).⁴⁶ Formed in spring 1965 in opposition to what they perceived as METS’s incursions on the river valley, the organization orchestrated significant and sustained actions on areas that were threatened by the initial stages of the METS plan. SOPA activism principally took two forms: protesting and petitioning. Protests typically took place in what were perceived as vulnerable areas such as MacKinnon Ravine but they targeted the broader freeway plan, with protestors’ signs bearing phrases such as “Treeways Not Freeways.”⁴⁷ As Save Our Parks member Ann Packer wrote, “What happens in the MacKinnon Ravine is crucial to all of Edmonton’s future transportation development plans.”⁴⁸ SOPA activists gathered enough signatures to force a plebiscite on the 1965 city council decision to proceed with the construction of Capilano Bridge, which was to stretch across the North Saskatchewan River within Capilano Ravine to the east of the city centre.⁴⁹ SOPA also coordinated a petition against the plan to put a freeway down Mill Creek Ravine, recording some 1,400 signatures.⁵⁰

SOPA positioned its arguments in opposition to what it saw as the engineering mentality reflected in the METS plan. While acknowledging that engineers may be qualified to plan “the building of freeways at the lowest possible cost,” SOPA argued that engineers “are not professionally qualified to assess” the “human values” that “cannot be measured by means of a slide rule and calculator.”⁵¹ It was these human values that should guide decisions on new infrastructure projects and that would, in SOPA’s view, rank recreational landscapes higher than transportation infrastructure. SOPA’s emphasis on recreation and leisure connects it to the broader urban reform movement emerging in this period that was characterized by middle-class efforts to protect favoured areas within the urban landscape.

The *Edmonton Journal*, the city’s major newspaper, was generally supportive of the development industry that stood to benefit from the car-oriented plan put forward in METS. Coverage of SOPA tended to dismiss the activists as “housewives” and “homeowners.”⁵² In at least one instance, a SOPA supporter wrote the *Edmonton Journal* in an attempt to correct the coverage, arguing that METS opponents were “a cross section” from all city areas and walks of life that included “as many men as women.”⁵³ On other occasions, the *Journal* refused to print articles that made the case against METS.⁵⁴ The *Edmonton Journal*’s coverage, which portrayed SOPA activists as self-interested individuals with time on their hands, reflects the paper’s sympathies toward the development industry, even as it

captures, albeit unsympathetically, the goal of SOPA activists to save landscapes they valued.

Whether or not SOPA included as many men as women, the group’s operating norms shared much in with other women-dominated activist groups of the era. Among the best known of such groups was one led by well-known author and activist Jane Jacobs in her New York period. Jacobs skewered freeway proponents as representing a fraternity of planners and engineers, rooting her critical perspective partly in her role as a mother.⁵⁵ The needs of children were at the fore of the arguments levelled by Edmonton’s activists. Both male and female SOPA activists argued that parkland was necessary to provide “recreation and character building zones for our younger generations.”⁵⁶ SOPA demonstrators carried signs reading “Roads in the Valley, Kids in the Alley,” a phrase that underlines a parent’s view not just on the necessity of parkland but also the risks of roadways.⁵⁷

By spring 1966, Edmonton hired a new Parks and Recreation superintendent to replace Jack Wright. The incumbent was John Janzen, an import from Ontario who would develop a formidable reputation as an advocate for Edmonton’s parks system. One of Janzen’s first actions was to suggest that the SOPA group should be reasonable. Despite his commitment to parks and parkland, he felt it clear that, in some situations, parkland might indeed need to be sacrificed.⁵⁸ The October 1966 vote in favour of the first METS structure in the plebiscite that SOPA worked so hard to force suggested that Janzen’s perspective found favour among a significant number of Edmontonians.⁵⁹ For many, the automobile imperative remained the standard accepted view in Edmonton through the 1960s and into the early 1970s. This was evident on the landscape, as work went ahead in MacKinnon Ravine. Much to the chagrin of SOPA activists, 1971 saw the removal of trees, the laying of a drainage system, and the creation of a roadbed through what was described as once “a canyon of spruce.”⁶⁰

Constructing Alternatives

In the early 1970s, even as road-building went ahead in MacKinnon, a series of projects emerged from the University of Alberta’s Department of Extension that helped reshape the context of decisions on the fate of the ravine. Headed by faculty member Gerald Wright (no apparent relation to former City of Edmonton employee Jack Wright), these projects gradually moved from presenting arguments relatively similar to SOPA’s to offering a distinct way of thinking about transportation in Edmonton. Further, the way these projects were produced—as cooperative undertakings involving engaged citizens, university-employed academics, professional experts, and even employees with the City of Edmonton—illustrated a new model for urban decision-making. Efforts to forestall the paving of MacKinnon Ravine took on greater power when they became wedded to a more ambitious vision for urban reform.

In 1963, Gerry Wright had moved to Edmonton from Montreal to join the University of Alberta, leaving behind a career in public

relations in order to become assistant professor of Community Development and Public Affairs.⁶¹ Wright conceptualized his professional activities in the model of a social animateur, a concept emerging from community development in Quebec. An animateur was a change agent who sought to catalyze community action. One of Wright's first steps in Edmonton was to join the Edmonton Welfare Council, which in 1967 was renamed the Edmonton Social Planning Council (ESPC). Founded in 1940, the agency spent its early years coordinating social services. Over time, it took on a broader mandate, working to empower disadvantaged social groups and give voice to critical perspectives on key urban issues. Wright remained a leader in the ESPC for many years, occupying a variety of roles including president.⁶²

Within a decade of his arrival in Edmonton, Wright was in his university work pursuing objectives in line with those of the ESPC. In the fall of 1970, Wright created a night school program called the Practicum in Community Analysis. Over following years, this program helped interested citizens and professional experts jointly publish materials intended to enrich discussion of public interest issues. These issues often related to transportation planning. Wright saw his efforts with the Practicum in Community Analysis as eminently complementary to the ongoing work of the ESPC. In a retrospective analysis undertaken collaboratively with James Lightbody in the late 1980s, Wright identified the practicum and the ESPC as two driving forces in Edmonton's burgeoning urban reform movement.⁶³

Wright was working amidst a variety of factors operating internationally and locally that were shifting the context for transportation planning. Concerns about oil pricing, which were redoubled by the first oil shock of 1973, illustrated the risks of car-oriented development. They gave new significance to the comments of people such as Professor G. Rostaker, who, on behalf of the University of Alberta's Interdisciplinary Committee for Environmental Quality, asked city council why Edmonton should "construct a massive labyrinth of roadways that we shall have little use for in the future."⁶⁴

The early 1970s also saw the emergence of Save Tomorrow, Oppose Pollution (STOP), an environmental advocacy group based in Edmonton. Like Toronto's Pollution Probe, STOP was concerned primarily with pollution.⁶⁵ The group focused attention on the degradation of Mill Creek Ravine, which helped build public sympathy for the protection of ravine landscapes. STOP also publicly supported the work of the Practicum in Community Analysis, arguing for the environmental benefits of moving away from car-oriented development in a manner that complemented the practicum's focus on the preservation of recreational lands.⁶⁶ Both the Interdisciplinary Committee for Environmental Quality and STOP are examples of the urban reform imperative expressed through the formation of social groups. Coalescing primarily around key issues or urban neighbourhoods, the activities of these groups, while often distinct in methods and aims, were complementary, part because their memberships overlapped significantly. According to Lightbody and Wright's

calculations, Edmonton's 1970s-era active citizens were very active, with over half of those involved in urban reform participating in at least three parallel organizations.⁶⁷

A further factor that changed the dialogue about transportation planning in Edmonton was the emergence of new population realities. While Edmonton was still growing, the population distribution was shifting. Density was increasing in northeast and south areas of the city, making routes west, whether roadways or transit lines, seem like highways to nowhere.⁶⁸ Combined with new concerns about slope instability through MacKinnon Ravine, shifting population distribution contributed to changes in the context for transportation planning in general and for road construction within MacKinnon in particular.⁶⁹

This new context proved fertile ground for Gerry Wright and his associates. The first Practicum in Community Analysis took place in November 1970. It was an opportunity for Edmontonians to explore the proposed bylaw that would authorize the city to proceed with additional construction work in keeping with the METS plan. The materials generated through the practicum were released as a slim volume in 1971.

The volume introduced concepts that would feature large in the work of the practicum over years to come. One was the desirability of a transportation system described as "balanced" between private automobiles and public transportation. The argument was that Edmonton's current infrastructure was off-kilter, with too large an emphasis on cars, and that further development in line with the METS plan would only worsen the situation. Another key concept was what was called "rationality," with rationality defined in economic terms. The costs and benefits of increased car reliance were compared against those of increased public transportation, with the results deemed unfavourable to automobile infrastructure.

Beyond these key concepts were questions of style. In contrast with the sophisticated engineering diagrams and data tables of the city's planning documents, the practicum's first release included line drawings that enhanced the readability and accessibility of the document. Many drawings were visual jokes illustrating the arguments being made, which made clear who the intended audience was: engaged citizens, not engineering professionals. Other drawings suggested a range of leisure activities in the ravine that would presumably be rendered impossible by freeway construction.

The bylaw that was the focus of the practicum's first release came before council for third reading on 5 April 1971. As the *Edmonton Journal* describes the scene, council listened for more than three hours to opposing viewpoints and then voted down the bylaw.⁷⁰ A city engineer called it a stunning outcome.⁷¹ Further, in the following month, when the issue of a freeway through Mill Creek came before council, the vote was in favour of sparing the ravine. There is a striking contrast between this decision on Mill Creek and council's earlier decision to move ahead with the paving of Capilano Ravine. Notably, Edmonton city council's decision to spare Mill Creek came weeks before

the 3 June decision by Bill Davis, new premier of Ontario, to halt the construction of the Spadina Expressway, a controversial freeway project running through central Toronto.⁷² If SOPA in some respects resembled the group Jane Jacobs had led in New York, Edmonton's anti-freeway activists scored a major victory prior to the better-known triumph of the protest effort Jacobs supported in her new city of Toronto.

The first release of Gerry Wright's practicum helped to derail unwanted council actions, and subsequent efforts would be targeted at moving council in desired directions. Wright's third undertaking was the most significant in this way. It involved the release of a substantial and data-heavy document that laid out the case to develop a system of light rapid transit (LRT) as an alternative to continued freeway development in line with the METS plan. LRT was relatively new, and not just within Edmonton. At the time of the practicum, LRT was operating in about twenty sites around the world, including Germany, Belgium, Holland, and Sweden.⁷³

Practicum authors—including a planner, an engineer, and an architect—argued that LRT was “ideally suited for improving transit service in small cities.”⁷⁴ They made their case by marshalling an impressive array of data derived from international research on transportation, academic work on the construction of liveable cities, and studies on local transportation in Edmonton. Their work positioned Edmonton as a potential international leader in transportation technology and planning, while asserting that improved transportation would transform Edmonton into a more financially sustainable and pleasant city. LRT was promoted as a system that “will not only go to the core of the major transportation problem in Edmonton, but it will do so in a manner which will help further develop the city fabric, rather than destroy it.”⁷⁵ The document was clearly intended to move discussions beyond the conceptual stage and into the realm of design. It proposed a specific LRT alignment for the city, one that built on but did not replicate previous official studies on rapid transit in Edmonton.⁷⁶

At a 1972 city council meeting focused on plans for MacKinnon Ravine, aldermen heard fifty-eight presentations, only two of which supported roadways.⁷⁷ In response, city council not only halted construction in MacKinnon, but also decided that in future only crossings, not alignments, were to affect the river valley or ravine system.⁷⁸ If city council was shifting its viewpoint here, so was the city's major newspaper. In March 1974, the *Edmonton Journal* published a substantial article on light rapid transit, engaging respectfully with the concept in a manner that contrasts with the dismissal of SOPA a decade previously.⁷⁹

At roughly the same time as the practicum on the LRT, there was another undertaken on the river valley. The resulting document includes imaginative and ambitious proposals, such as the MacKinnon Ravine Botanical Garden Park, a year-round indoor tropical park to be located at the bottom of the ravine.⁸⁰ Reading the LRT document and the river valley document together make clear the direct connection being established

between the construction of an LRT system and the preservation of parkland.⁸¹ The LRT was positioned as enhancing “Edmonton's main resource—the North Saskatchewan River Valley and its system of ravines.”⁸² Over following years, the LRT report was re-released in modified form, including one edition that focused attention on exactly what LRT development might mean for MacKinnon Ravine.

The practicum release on the river valley also considered the decision-making process at city hall, which was seen to privilege the perspective of the development industry.⁸³ The second edition of the LRT report, published the following year, explained that the original had been prompted in part by engagement with a City of Edmonton planner seriously concerned about Edmonton's emphasis on automobiles. Planner G.L. Thompson and colleagues believed firmly in the benefits of rapid transit but had been unable to convince intransigent city administrators.⁸⁴ The obstacle was the influence of the development industry, which ultimately ensured the ongoing expansion of the automobile infrastructure, despite interest among citizens and even some city staff in exploring other possibilities.⁸⁵ For the indefatigable Wright, a new problem was coming into focus: a city government that seemed both impenetrable to concerned citizens and unwilling to consider new perspectives put forward by internal experts.

Remaking the City

Advocacy on behalf of robust and meaningful citizen participation in governance was an emerging phenomenon in the 1960s and 1970s. Both within and beyond urban reform movements, activists were demanding that government decision-making be made at least more transparent, at best more inclusive of perspectives from citizens.⁸⁶ By the mid-1970s, governments were responding. At the federal level, Liberal leader Pierre Trudeau made participatory democracy a plank in his election campaign; at the provincial level, Alberta's Environment Conservation Authority hosted public hearings on land use and resource development on the eastern slopes of the province's mountains.⁸⁷ Within the City of Edmonton, transportation plans developed in the 1970s not only expressed commitment to public consultation, but also were themselves the subject of public hearings.⁸⁸ Clearly, much had changed from the mid-1950s, when the report of the Royal Commission on the Metropolitan Development of Calgary and Edmonton argued that the creation of a city plan “is certainly much better done if it is left to a technical planning board.”⁸⁹

Many groups and individuals were unsatisfied, however, with Edmonton's initial attempts at public participation.⁹⁰ The Edmonton Social Planning Council, for instance, pointed out in 1974 that public hearings “often come after a decision has been virtually made—forcing the public into a position where they can only react to Council's decision or action.”⁹¹ Rather than a genuine attempt at consultation, the ESPC described the current process as a “sham on you.”⁹²

Dissatisfaction with citizens' inability to meaningfully influence civic decision-making was key to the formation of the Urban

Reform Group of Edmonton, known as URGE. This organization was founded in late 1973 to "reform the city government in Edmonton."⁹³ Over its ten years of operation, URGE worked on civic issues that ranged from preservation of older neighbourhoods to reform of the ward system. While in tune with urban reform movements nationally, URGE was also fundamentally engaged with issues particular to Edmonton, such as management of the city's river valley and ravines. URGE became active on the MacKinnon issue, and the organization's commitment to forestall paving of the ravine both grounded URGE in earlier urban activism and helped fuel more ambitious reform efforts by exposing what were seen as fundamental flaws in civic decision-making processes.

Gerry Wright took a substantial role within URGE, and the organization built on the work done by the practicums hosted by the University of Alberta's Extension Department. For instance, URGE adopted the principles put forward by the practicum on transportation and valley and ravine protection, arguing that increased public transport and diminished reliance on the automobile would lessen the need for roads and so allow ravines such as MacKinnon to go unpaved.⁹⁴ The organization also channelled urban reform energy injected into the local scene by newcomers ("urban gladiators," as Wright put it) experienced with struggles in American cities and knit the Edmonton movement into a broader national urban reform community offering both inspiration and tactics.⁹⁵

The issue of "balance" was important for URGE, as it was for the practicum, but it was defined more broadly, pertaining not to the city's transportation infrastructure (as a balance between private automobiles and public transit) but to the influence on city hall of a property development industry that had long been able to define city policy in relation to a citizenry that struggled to even have its needs heard. As URGE saw it, the city was administered and planned "as a piece of real estate" rather than as a built landscape that should be managed so as to maximize the collective well-being of those who lived within it.⁹⁶ The effort to strike this particular balance took the form of a concerted and sustained effort to push the City of Edmonton to democratize civic decision-making and increase citizen power. It also included engagement in the electoral process. Beginning with the 1974 campaign, URGE fielded alderman candidates in each of the coming five elections, winning two seats in 1974 and three in 1977.

URGE was not a radical group. When URGE emerged in late 1973, core roles within the organization came to be held, primarily but not exclusively, by individuals with professional training or technical expertise, including professors, politicians, architects, and lawyers.⁹⁷ While the organization asserted its diversity and positioned itself as working on behalf of all Edmontonians, its vision was ultimately moderate and liberal.⁹⁸ Many of its leaders were middle-class and concerned primarily with remaking city hall so that it would protect urban features they valued and extend democratic rights they desired.⁹⁹ URGE maintained loose ties with the provincial Liberal Party. Labour groups were

involved early on, but soon redirected their energies to formation of the Edmonton Voters' Association (EVA), a civic organization with a more ambitious reform agenda. Despite some talk of cooperation, there was little meaningful or lasting collaboration between EVA and URGE.¹⁰⁰

Confronted with criticism of its initial attempts at public consultation from groups including ESPC and URGE, the City of Edmonton established a committee to examine the matter. The committee identified key areas of concern, including lack of access to information, inadequate mechanisms to allow public input, and insufficient financial and technical supports for citizens.¹⁰¹ Progress within the city on issues such as public consultation was driven in part by back-channel influence exerted by URGE. As Wright described it, the "technocrats, bureaucrats and professionals" leading URGE often made the case for policy innovations in ways that won support from some within the city bureaucracy. This "intentional strategic networking" meant that URGE was pressing its case through relationships both personal and professional, as well as through the political process.¹⁰²

Even as city administration grappled with how to improve public consultation, Mayor Cec Purves launched a separate initiative that dealt directly on the matter: a task force to enquire into transportation in Edmonton's west end. As Purves described it, the task force had two goals. First, he wanted to "get things moving with respect to the west end," recognizing frustration surrounding the stalemate on transportation planning for that area of the city as reflected in the partially constructed road through MacKinnon Ravine. Second, he wanted to know what a process that involved robust and meaningful public hearings in line with the recommendations the city had received "could come up with."¹⁰³ The establishment of this task force makes clear how the fate of MacKinnon Ravine and potential reform of city governance had become linked.

In keeping with its terms of reference, the task force undertook extensive public consultations. A four-month information campaign in newspapers, radio, and television kicked off in November 1979, with community meetings held through November 1978 and January 1979. The vast majority of those who presented to the task force were opposed to paving MacKinnon.

Meantime, the task force was experiencing internal challenges. Three task force members (businessman and former alderman James W. Bateman, engineer and consultant V. Douglas Thierman, and university lecturer and specialist in public hearings Joanne Hedenstrom) had been appointed in early spring 1978. Dissatisfied with the process, Hedenstrom resigned in February 1979, which led to the appointment of two additional task force members.¹⁰⁴ Notably, Gerry Wright, organizer of the Practicum in Community Analysis and activist with URGE, was among the second-round appointments, along with engineer and surveyor David Usher. The personnel shifts did not resolve the task force's internal tensions, and when it came time for task force members to draft a report, the differences were

insurmountable. Bateman and Thierman, the remaining two original members who served as chair and co-chair respectively, wrote individual reports that were bundled together for publication, while Wright and Usher, the two newer members, collaboratively produced a separate report.

In advance of the public hearings, the city's planning department had published a new report on west end transportation that was strongly in favour of paving MacKinnon.¹⁰⁵ This document reflected the enduring influence of the freeway imperative, even as individuals within the city bureaucracy espoused other perspectives. The reports of the two original task force members supported this document, with Bateman preferring a paved transit route and Thierman favouring a regular roadway. Despite Mayor Purves's instructions to deal with both transportation planning and public consultations, these two reports paid far greater attention to the former than the latter. While both authors argued that their undertaking had demonstrated the value of public consultation, the content of their reports flew in the face of those claims.¹⁰⁶

In contrast, the report offered by Wright and Usher began with an extensive analysis of the public hearings process.¹⁰⁷ Wright and Usher dedicated the majority of their report to the public hearings and structured their recommendations on transportation directly on what they had heard from citizens, ultimately building on the contributions of the public to argue that the city should revisit the assumptions that seemed to point to the expansion of automobile-oriented infrastructure.¹⁰⁸

Wright and Usher had the weight of public opinion behind them. In a survey published in 1979 by the University of Alberta's Population Research Laboratory, 85 per cent of Edmontonians indicated they favoured citizen involvement in decision-making.¹⁰⁹ As explained by the Task Force on City Government, a body established to evaluate Edmonton's system of local government and make recommendations for improvements, the public was leading the politicians here, with public pressure causing "public officials to examine the City's planning approach."¹¹⁰

If the public was leading, Mayor Cec Purves was following. In commenting on the set of reports on west end transportation, Purves noted that the reports of the two original task force members were "contrary to the terms of reference" insofar as their suggestions do not flow directly from the public consultation process.¹¹¹ In his view, the other report was superior.¹¹² Purves went on to explain that while in the past he had "always supported an automobile-oriented solution using the MacKinnon Ravine," his observations of the public consultation process "have affected that point of view."¹¹³

As advocacy focused on MacKinnon Ravine fostered the emergence of a broader movement for change in civic governance, so this broader movement reinvigorated advocacy focused particularly on MacKinnon. The call for public participation from the West End Transportation Task force led a group of "concerned west end citizens" to join together to advocate for transportation planning that took a critical perspective on automobile

dependence and saw the current MacKinnon Ravine as a landscape of value. The group dubbed itself Sound Transportation and Environmental Planning (STEP). The substantial written brief submitted by this organization to the West End Transportation Task Force drew heavily on material produced by the university practicums on related topics.

The 1980 municipal election, which took place shortly after the conclusion of the West End Transportation Task Force, saw the election of four URGE candidates, including Gerry Wright. Despite this breakthrough for the forces of municipal reform, the fate of MacKinnon Ravine remained unresolved. While proponents of returning the ravine to a state suitable for recreational use argued that the ravine should be made into a park, the matter remained in abeyance throughout Wright's term at city hall.¹¹⁴

A similar stasis descended over the issue of reform in civic governance. The ambitious public consultation program developed by the West End Transportation Task Force was not being widely emulated. Some two years after the West Edmonton Transportation Task Force completed its work, Edmonton Social Planning Council President Peter Faid explained in a letter to City Hall that citizen involvement at an early stage and access to meaningful information were basic criteria for productive consultation, and neither of these were being fulfilled by the City of Edmonton.¹¹⁵ Further, little had been done to modify the council-commission system of city government that effectively ensured that the input of the development industry would outweigh citizens' contributions or even concerns from within the city bureaucracy.

Things started to move again on both MacKinnon Ravine and civic governance reform with the 1983 civic election, which saw Laurence Decore win the mayor's race in part on a promise to dramatically change city government in favour of greater openness and accountability.¹¹⁶ Decore followed through on this commitment by eliminating the council-commission system.¹¹⁷ And by June 1984, the Sound Transportation and Environmental Planning Society (STEP) was planning a party to celebrate a city council decision that seemed to definitively cancel plans to pave the ravine.¹¹⁸

The 1983 election was not kind to URGE, with only two members elected. The energy of URGE dissipated by the mid-1980s, as it did for municipal reform movements in cities across Canada. The reasons were multiple. Some key reform goals had been realized and become, as Wright put it, "commonplace elements of civic affairs."¹¹⁹ Goals that remained elusive were rendered even less likely through the fiscal constraints that came to bear on municipal governments in the 1980s, with austerity hitting especially hard in petroleum-dependent Alberta.¹²⁰ Wright in 1983 severed his own relationship with URGE, a decision motivated in part by concerns that the neighbourhood activism that had helped power urban reform was becoming unhelpfully obstructionist.¹²¹

Notably, the June 1984 celebration in MacKinnon Ravine also signalled the resolution of the keystone issue that had

connected an intergenerational arc of urban activism. The link between saving MacKinnon and remaking civic governance had afforded to activists a way to bolster their efforts toward each goal. But it also created a situation in which realization of the former could help deflate the perceived necessity for the latter. The resolution of the MacKinnon issue was an additional factor contributing to the period of relative inactivity that preceded the June 1989 decision that URGE should be “gracefully disbanded.”¹²²

Conclusion

In November 1977, as the fate of the ravine still remained undecided, journalist Neil Waugh described the MacKinnon Ravine freeway issue as “the most hotly debated, longest-running, and polarizing issue that City Council has ever had to contend with.”¹²³ If the fate of MacKinnon Ravine is understood as intertwined with the potential overthrow of long-standing power structures and decision-making practices characterizing civic governance in Edmonton, Waugh’s assertion reads less like high-flown rhetoric and more like an appropriate assessment of the situation.

Scholarly literature on freeway fights in particular and urban reform processes more broadly reflects researchers’ efforts to strike appropriate balances between the available analytical scales. The American literature on freeway revolts, as well as the more limited material on their Canadian analogs, emphasizes the neighbourhood, the city, and the nation. Canadian scholarship on urban reform is also structured around these scales. Christopher Klemek’s recent work on freeway fights in the transatlantic context suggests the emergence of a more thoroughly international analytical perspective. My approach, inspired by works of environmental history that focus on key features of the urban environment, points toward another way of understanding urban activism: through attention to a particular landscape element. Focusing on a significant feature of the urban environment—MacKinnon Ravine—through successive waves of social and political change allows connections to emerge that might otherwise be lost amidst the arcs of particular citizens’ groups or swells of activity. Making sense of the freeway fight in Edmonton illustrates the value of paying attention to an analytical scale defined by environments of local significance.

Focusing on MacKinnon Ravine reveals waves of urban reform, each linked to the others by commitment to the ravine, building on one another in methods and in goals. Because of how MacKinnon’s verticality set it apart from the horizontal cityscape, it was a landscape that could be conceptualized in a variety of ways. From parks system, to fertilizer storage, to constructed garden, to shelter for individuals experiencing homelessness, examination of the ravine’s early history reveals how MacKinnon was, from the creation of the city of Edmonton, a landscape of possibility. In light of the freeway threat, the conception of the ravine as a recreational landscape came to the fore, and successive reform efforts were held together by reformers’ willingness to fight for the realization of this conception. Still,

MacKinnon remained a landscape of possibility insofar as it served as a linchpin in successive waves of activism that not only altered the fate of the ravine but also helped transform civic governance in Edmonton.

Notes

- 1 Key examples include William Issel, “‘Land Values, Human Values, and the Preservation of the City’s Treasured Appearance’: Environmentalism, Politics, and the San Francisco Freeway Revolt,” *Pacific Historical Review* 68 (1999): 611–646; Joseph F. C. DiMento, “Stent (or Dagger?) in the Heart of Town: Urban Freeways in Syracuse, 1944–1967,” *Journal of Planning History* 8 (2009): 133–161; Katherine M. Johnson, “Captain Blake versus the Highwaymen: Or, How San Francisco Won the Freeway Revolt,” *Journal of Planning History* 8, no. 1 (2009): 56–83; Christopher W. Wells, “From Freeway to Parkway Federal Law, Grassroots Environmental Protest, and the Evolving Design of Interstate-35E in Saint Paul, Minnesota,” *Journal of Planning History* 11, no. 1 (2012): 8–26.
- 2 Key examples include Raymond A. Mohl, “Stop the Road: Freeway Revolts in American Cities,” *Journal of Urban History* 30 (2004): 674–706; Cliff Ellis, “Interstate Highways, Regional Planning and the Reshaping of Metropolitan America,” *Planning Practice and Research* 16 (2001): 247–269; Mark H. Rose and Raymond A. Mohl, *Interstate: Highway Politics and Policy since 1939*, 3rd ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2012); Raymond A. Mohl, “The Interstates and the Cities: The U.S. Department of Transportation and the Freeway Revolt, 1966–1973,” *Journal of Policy History* 20, no. 2 (2008): 193–226.
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- 4 Eric Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
- 5 Valérie Poirier, “‘L’autoroute est-ouest, c’est pas le progrès!': environnement et mobilisation citoyenne en opposition au projet d’autoroute est-ouest à Montréal en 1971,” *Bulletin d’histoire politique* 23 (2015): 66.
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- 7 Mathieu Turgeon and François Vaillancourt, “The Provision of Highways in Canada and the Federal Government,” *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 32, no. 1 (2002): 161–180.
- 8 Works in this vein are numerous. They include Jennifer L. Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don: An Environmental History of Toronto’s Don River Valley* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014); Arn Keeling, “Urban Waste Sinks as a Natural Resource: The Case of the Fraser River,” *Urban History Review* 34 (2005): 58–70; Sean Kheraj, *Inventing Stanley Park: An Environmental History* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013); Michèle Dagenais, *Montréal et l’eau* (Montreal: Boréal, 2011); Sally Hermansen and Graeme Wynn, “Reflections on the Nature of an Urban Bog,” *Urban History Review* 34 (2005): 9–27.
- 9 James Lightbody, *City Politics, Canada* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2006), 121. Note that Lightbody has identified himself as a participant in

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- 13 Edmonton Regional Planning Commission, *Metropolitan River Valleys: Parks and Recreation Study* (City of Edmonton, 1963), 9.
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- 15 Frederick G. Todd to city clerk, Edmonton, 5 April 1907, box 2, MS 348, Mill Creek Ravine Fonds, MS 348, CEA.
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- 24 Richard Harris, *Creeping Conformity: How Canada Became Suburban, 1900–1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004). For a general introduction to automobility in Canada, see Dimitry Anastakis, *Car Nation: An Illustrated History of Canada's Transformation behind the Wheel* (Toronto: Lorimer, 2008).
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