

## New Research on the History of Canada's Urbanization

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# *New Research on the History of Canada's Urbanization*

*Owen Temby*

Welcome to the fall 2016 issue of *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*. This is the first issue for which I serve as co-editor. Next year one of our associate editors, Harold Bérubé, will join me as the francophone co-editor of the journal. We look forward to guiding *UHR/RUH* into the next era of its long existence (forty-five years and counting!), building on the excellent work of its outgoing editor, Alan Gordon, its recent co-editor, Claire Poitras, and the many others who have strived to make this the preferred outlet for the finest research on Canada's urban history. I want to underscore the point that, although our empirical focus is Canada's past, our orientation is interdisciplinary, and we welcome perspectives on the topic from a variety of scholarly traditions. The study of urban history involves not merely urban areas as sites of activity, but also the historical process of urbanization, which William Solecki and colleagues say is "one of simultaneous transformation of places, populations, economies, and the built environment that creates an urban society."<sup>1</sup> Their call for an "urbanization science" aimed at improving public decision-making encompasses historical research examining the "intersection [of urbanization] with other environmental systems."<sup>2</sup> I think you will find that the content of this issue reflects this interdisciplinary approach to the study of Canada's urban (and urbanization) history.

Brad Cross's article, "Modern Living 'hewn out of the unknown wilderness': Aluminum, City Planning, and Alcan's British Columbian Industrial Town of Kitimat in the 1950s," examines the planning history of a company town in northern British Columbia. Cross meticulously pieces together the confluence of ideas underpinning Kitimat's creation. It was meant to be the city of the future, built in the wilderness, yet plugged into a global production system, of which it would serve a central role. One of the important insights of this article is that it reveals the planners of postwar suburbia as radical modernists seeking to engineer a better way of living. Alcan's industrial product, aluminum, was seen as a futuristic material during the middle of the twentieth century. The company hired a noted American planner to design its workers' utopia from scratch, allowing him to plan urban settings considered quite forward-thinking at the time (for example, houses facing away from roads, segregated foot and automobile traffic). Richard White made similar observations about Toronto's postwar planning in his groundbreaking recent book, *Planning Toronto*.<sup>3</sup> Like Cross, White shows that the

suburbia we've inherited, and sometimes deride as retrograde, was rooted in an era of scientific and social progressivism. Thanks to Cross's account illustrating this phenomenon in a seemingly unlikely setting (a company town in a wilderness) this article is a welcome contribution, not only to Canadian urban history, but also to the more specialized literature on planning history.

Last year Jessica van Horssen and I guest edited a special themed issue of *UHR/RUH* on environmental nuisances and political contestation in Canadian cities.<sup>4</sup> It focused on the environmental challenges posed to governments by urban growth, and the measures taken to address them while continuing to foster the conditions for continued growth. The next two articles in this issue, by Mark Kuhlberg and Joshua MacFadyen and me, continue that theme. In "An Eden that is practically uninhabited by humans': Manipulating Wilderness in Managing Vancouver's Drinking Water, 1880–1930," Kuhlberg explores the ironies and contradictions that arose as Vancouver's leaders sought to preserve and (promote) the quality of the city's drinking water during the early twentieth century. He shows that local politicians and boosters promulgated a myth that, thanks to the region's bounteous watersheds, Vancouver had drinking water of unparalleled quality. Central to the myth was that the water was so pristine it required no treatment. No human should be allowed near the watersheds, lest their purity be undermined. This view was contentious because there was potential harvest value of their timber. To maintain a water supply while the city quickly grew, and to maintain the myth, city leaders requested from the provincial government, and received, control of much of the land in two important river valleys. Their efforts to preserve its ostensibly unsullied condition (while concurrently developing the water distribution infrastructure of these lands) reached absurd proportions when, to prevent the deterioration of one of the river valley's aesthetic appearance due to tree die-off caused by a parasitic insect, city leaders dumped poisonous insecticide on the trees and, unavoidably, in the drinking water supply. Kuhlberg's article is a great example of research focusing on the process of urbanization and "its intersection with other environmental systems" that I would like to see *UHR/RUH* publish more of.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, in "Urban Elites, Energy, and Smoke Policy in Montreal during the Interwar Period," Joshua MacFadyen and I provide

the political history of Canada's first modern air pollution abatement bylaw. We highlight the role of the city's anglophone business association, the Montreal Board of Trade, in placing the issue on the policy agenda and formulating solutions. As we show, the city's business elite sought to manage this undesirable outcome of urban growth and development so that it did not tarnish the city's reputation and hinder further growth. This research has much in common with other recent studies of clean air policy in Canada and the United States focusing on the role of local growth coalitions in pressuring governments for pollution relief, and of abatement technology in enabling economic solutions.<sup>6</sup> Yet the history of air pollution policy and activism in Canada is largely unwritten.<sup>7</sup> The fact that clean policy was formulated by municipalities before the 1960s, and by provinces afterward, means that numerous case studies will be needed to fill the many gaps in our knowledge.

We hope you enjoy this issue of *UHR/RUH*. And we hope you will consider us as a potential outlet for your future research. All submissions are reviewed by the journal's editors and, if they make it to the next step, sent for double-blind review to scholars knowledgeable in the subject. We will strive to ensure all submissions are reviewed promptly and receive the care and consideration they merit.

There is so much work still yet to be done in Canada's urban history. The field is wide open. Occasionally, when colleagues or students tell me that they feel uninspired in their research, I offer some counsel derived from my own experiences: study local history! Your best social research laboratory is your backyard.

Piece together some forgotten or misunderstood stories and think about what it means for the past and present. You will never see your city the same way again, and what you learn will interest others. Canada's urban past, contained in our many public archives, is an endless well of knowledge and inspiration.

#### Notes

- 1 William Solecki, Karen C. Seto, and Peter J. Marcotullio, "It's Time for an Urbanization Science," *Environment* 55, no. 1 (2013): 13.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Richard White, *Planning Toronto: The Planners, the Plans, Their Legacies, 1940–1980* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016). See also Owen Temby, review of *Planning Toronto*, by Richard White, *Ontario History* 109, no. 1 (2017): 141–143.
- 4 See Owen Temby, "Environmental Nuisances and Political Contestation in Canadian Cities: Research on the Regulation of Urban Growth's Unwanted Outcomes," *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine* 44, nos. 1–2 (2015/2016): 5–9.
- 5 Solecki, Seto, and Marcotullio, "It's Time for an Urbanization Science," 13.
- 6 Notably, George Gonzalez, *The Politics of Air Pollution: Urban Growth, Ecological Modernization, and Symbolic Inclusion* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005); Owen Temby and Ryan O'Connor, "Property, Technology, and Environmental Policy: The Politics of Acid Rain in Ontario, 1978–1985," *Journal of Policy History* 27, no. 4 (2015): 636–669; and Don Munton and Owen Temby, "Smelter Fumes, Local Interests, and Political Contestation in Sudbury, Ontario, during the 1910s," *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine* 44, nos. 1–2 (2015/2016): 24–36.
- 7 A notable exception is Ryan O'Connor, "An Ecological Call to Arms: *The Air of Death* and the Origins of Environmental Activism in Ontario," *Ontario History* 105, no. 1 (2013): 19–46.