

## Bird's-Eye Views of Canadian Cities: A Review

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[See table of contents](#)

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## BIRD'S-EYE VIEWS OF CANADIAN CITIES:

## A REVIEW

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*M. F. Fox*

Public Archives of Canada. Bird's-Eye Views of Canadian Cities: An Exhibition of Panoramic Maps (1865-1905). July-November, 1976, Ottawa. Exhibition organized by Edward H. Dahl, National Map Collection.

Bird's-eye views were published for a large number of Canadian towns and cities in the second half of the nineteenth century to provide oblique aerial panoramas of the urban areas and their immediate natural settings. Initially, they were produced as a form of popular cartography, appealing to the visual senses; most of them were detailed, perspective drawings, presenting, for that period, an unusual point of view. They still have their visual appeal today, but, in addition, surviving bird's-eye maps provide the urban researcher with a record of facets of late-nineteenth century townscapes, often not readily available from other sources.

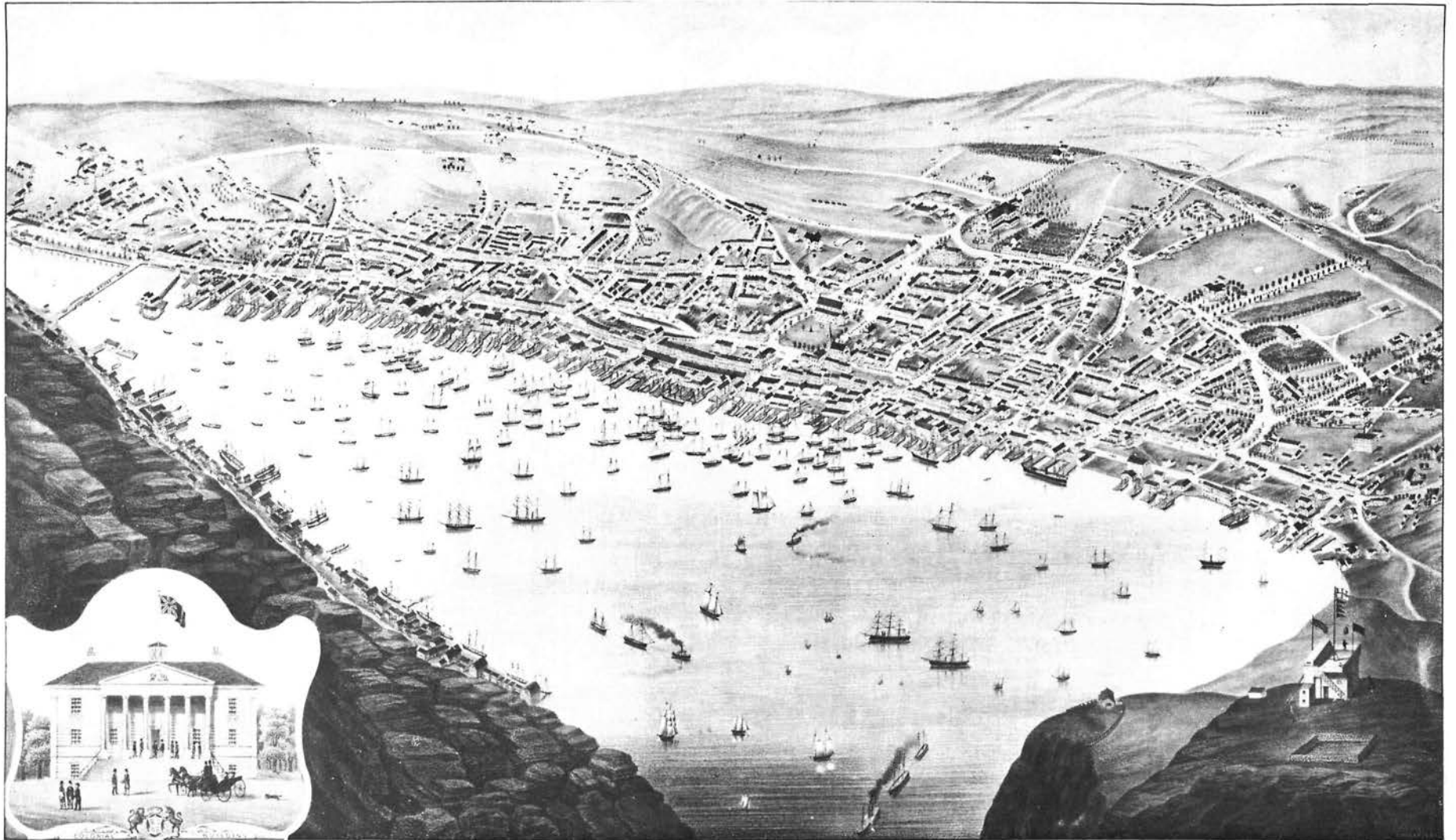
At first glance a bird's-eye map is highly reminiscent of an air photo; both are detailed and both convey an impression of depth. Here, however, the similarity ends. The most fundamental difference between the panoramic map and the air photo is the fidelity of detail representation. Whereas the air photo is largely unbiased (except in technical terms such as photographic resolution), the bird's-eye map is an artist's relatively subjective view of the city. Indeed, artists were commissioned to draw bird's-eye views, which were partly intended to promote the image of the town depicted. Artistic licence was usually employed to emphasise what were considered at the time to be the more desirable urban attributes - grand buildings, thriving industry and bustling commercial areas and transportation facilities.

While the artist's lack of objectivity detracts from the value of panoramic maps in one sense, it adds to their value in another.

Images on air photos have to be deciphered by inference, but the distinguishing marks of urban features on the bird's-eye map have been emphasised for easy recognition. For example, factories are marked by plumes of black smoke being emitted from smoke-stacks, railways by the presence of smoking locomotives and the various sizes of residences are clearly distinguishable one from another. Recognition of features is frequently aided further by the inclusion of a map legend which identifies by number code the main institutional and commercial buildings. On the borders of some maps, larger scale drawings of selected buildings are inset to give greater architectural detail; the owner's name and building function are generally included.

The chief factor to recommend the use of bird's-eye maps over air photos is their availability. The production of bird's-eye views was contemporaneous with the early experimental stage of aerial photography - one of the earliest surviving air photos taken in North America was exposed over Boston in 1860. However, relatively few air photos of urban areas in the late nineteenth century have survived, and those existing now do not afford the clear panoramas of the bird's-eye map.

To this reviewer's knowledge, bird's-eye maps have not been used extensively as sources of data by urban scholars. Yet, in providing commentaries on urban form and life they are potentially valuable historical documents. By way of illustration, cause and effect studies of the spatial organisation of a city can be based on a bird's-eye view. The detail of most maps is such that the main functional areas of the city - industrial, commercial, residential, institutional and recreational - can usually be delineated. Moreover, some of these categories can be subdivided further and mapped. For example, the relative sizes of residences are distinguishable and, from this and the style of building, something of the quality of housing can be inferred. This provides a basis for analysing the distribution of various socio-economic groups in the urban area. Boundaries to relatively homogenous



- |                      |                          |
|----------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Harbour           | 10. St. John's Cathedral |
| 2. Admiralty         | 11. St. John's Hall      |
| 3. Custom House      | 12. St. John's Church    |
| 4. St. John's Church | 13. St. John's Church    |
| 5. St. John's Church | 14. St. John's Church    |
| 6. St. John's Church | 15. St. John's Church    |
| 7. St. John's Church | 16. St. John's Church    |
| 8. St. John's Church | 17. St. John's Church    |
| 9. St. John's Church | 18. St. John's Church    |

PANORAMIC VIEW OF  
**ST. JOHN'S**  
 NEWFOUNDLAND, 1879

- |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 19. Church of England | 28. St. John's Church |
| 20. St. John's Church | 29. St. John's Church |
| 21. St. John's Church | 30. St. John's Church |
| 22. St. John's Church | 31. St. John's Church |
| 23. St. John's Church | 32. St. John's Church |
| 24. St. John's Church | 33. St. John's Church |
| 25. St. John's Church | 34. St. John's Church |
| 26. St. John's Church | 35. St. John's Church |
| 27. St. John's Church | 36. St. John's Church |
| 37. St. John's Church | 38. St. John's Church |
| 39. St. John's Church | 40. St. John's Church |

"Panoramic View of St. John's, Newfoundland, 1879". A. Ruger.  
 Courtesy: National Map Collection, Public Archives of Canada.

areas or "regions" can either be based on visual inspection or, if the number of variables considered is large, a standardized numerical grouping (classification) procedure can be employed. Having isolated the map patterns, inferences can be drawn regarding the underlying forces responsible for this functional differentiation of city areas.

Other possible studies based on data derived from bird's-eye views include urban growth and transportation network analyses. Dating of buildings can often be approached by reference to the building's location and architectural style. Once horizontal growth patterns have been determined they may provide insights into the factors that have influenced urban development. The marking and naming of streets, railways, canals and rivers on panoramic maps allow analysis of intraurban transportation networks. Topological methods involving graph theory can be applied as easily to nineteenth century networks as to contemporary ones. Traffic is usually depicted on the routes of bird's-eye maps, permitting an approximate assessment of at least the relative, if not the absolute, importance of the various route segments.

Panoramic views produced at different dates are available for cities such as Montreal, Ottawa and Winnipeg. From these sequential maps, both city growth - vertically in the CBD as well as laterally at the fringe - and development of the various functional subareas can be identified for a given period. This provides clearer insights into the processes of urban expansion and functional sorting than can be gained simply by inferring process from static patterns recorded at one point in time.

Unquestionably, the bird's-eye map is a useful addition to the list of historical sources used by urban researchers. As the topographical map of today provides a useful overview to those engaged in contemporary area studies, so the panoramic map grants a similar perspective to many late-nineteenth century Canadian cities, in addition to yielding more detailed information. However, it is likely for most



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|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Palais de Justice            | 7. Musée               |
| 2. Prison                       | 8. Banque Hochelaga    |
| 3. Bureau de Poste              | 9. Banque de Québec    |
| 4. Hôtel de Ville               | 10. Banque Union       |
| 5. Bureau des Revenus           | 11. Cathédrale         |
| 6. Station de Police à la Pêche | 12. Église Protestante |

VUE A VOL D'OISEAU DES  
**TROIS RIVIERES, P.Q.**  
 1881.

- |                              |  |
|------------------------------|--|
| 13. Église Anglaise          | 18. Dépôt de U. S. G. à S. H. E.           |
| 14. Église Méthodiste        | 19. Manufacture de Boîtes                  |
| 15. Église Presbytérienne    | 20. Moulins à Vapeur, Ross, Hilditch & Co. |
| 16. Cimetière des Crémations | 21. Caisse à Gâteaux                       |
| 17. Séminaire                | 22. Consulat Américain, F. F. Parquet      |
| 18. Casernes de la Frontière | 23. Consulat de France & de Belgique       |

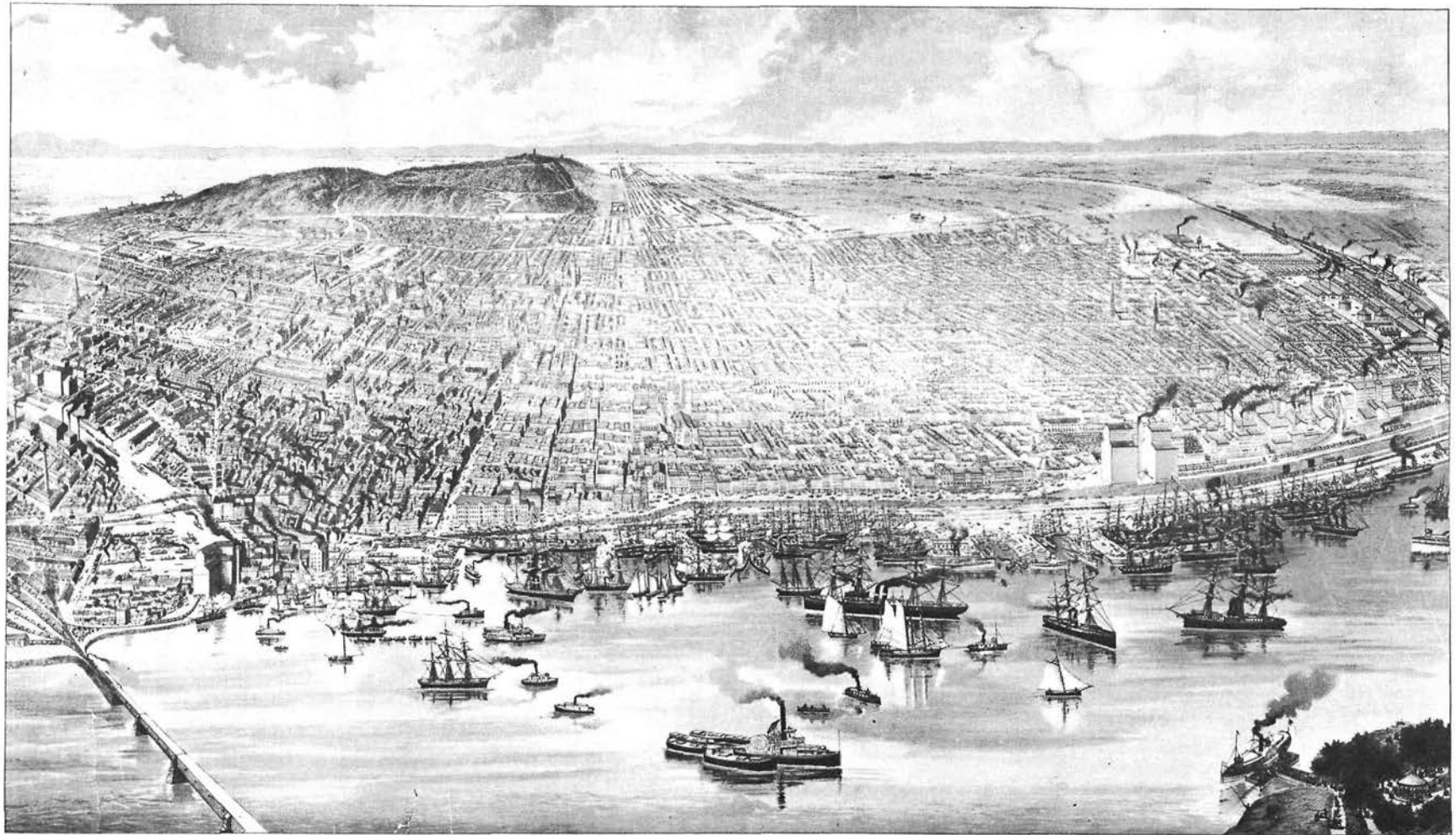
"Vue a vol d'oiseau des Trois Rivières, P.Q., 1881".  
 Courtesy: National Map Collection, Public Archives of Canada.

studies, that the bird's-eye map will not yield all the desired information; other documents - assessment rolls, plans and atlases, census volumes - will undoubtedly have to be consulted. In any case, one can rarely justify ignoring other sources, as the reliability of the information on the bird's-eye map, an artist's subjective interpretation of the townscape, should be cross-checked, where possible.

The Public Archives of Canada exhibition brings together for the first time 78 bird's-eye maps of 75 Canadian cities. As such it represents a considerable achievement in assembly, for exhibits are drawn from a variety of sources - both institutional and private - to supplement the holdings of the National Map Collection.

The characteristics and quality of the maps vary widely. The largest map (Toronto, 1876) is about 36" x 60" contrasting with the Montmagny, P.Q. map at about 10" x 16". The amount of detail varies from map to map, ranging for example, from those showing the bare outlines of buildings to those with considerable architectural detail. A large proportion of the maps are originals and some are in colour. When originals could not be obtained, photographic copies were made. Unfortunately not all the reproductions are of good quality, several being either underexposed or blurred, or both. One must question the judgment of including a small number of inferior copies among otherwise high quality originals and reproductions. Their inclusion cannot be justified on the grounds of the completeness of the collection because the full range of such maps has not survived anyway.

For the exhibition-goer with an inquisitive mind this display of maps may be as much mildly frustrating as it is enlightening; this largely results from the lack of a written commentary. There is only the very briefest of introductions which is inadequate for both layman and researcher alike. Although the technique of constructing these maps is briefly discussed, many other questions are ignored. Does this collection represent the sum total of all bird's-eye views of Canadian



BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE  
CITY OF MONTREAL

1889

DESIGNED AND ENGRAVED BY THE LONDON ENGRAVING CO. LTD.

"Bird's-Eye View of the City of Montreal, 1889".

George Bishop Eng. & Ptd. Co. (Ltd.).

Courtesy: National Map Collection, Public Archives of Canada.



cities? Presumably not, but what difficulties are involved in locating others and obtaining access to them? Why are the interior western provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan unrepresented? How accurate is the information portrayed on the maps? The layman may well ask what is the "wide range of researchers" served by these maps? One is warned of "some errors" - what sort of errors? Which of the artists portrayed their cities most faithfully? Why were many of the maps published in the United States? While the answers to some of these questions may not be known at present it would surely have been appropriate to have identified these and similar points and at least attempt to provide some potential answers.

One assumes that the exhibition is directed at the general public, judging from the general tone of the written introduction and the fact that the display was prompted by the fascination that visitors to the National Map Collection have shown for bird's-eye maps. Yet if it is indeed aimed at lay people the selection of the Public Archives building in Ottawa to accommodate the exhibition must severely limit the public's exposure to it. Furthermore, this would seem to be an appropriate exhibition to put "on the road" to provide the opportunity for residents in the other 74 cities featured in the exhibition to browse through it. Unfortunately there are no immediate plans to send the display on tour.

The bird's-eye exhibition draws attention to a valuable type of historical document. However, the lack of a clearly identified purpose in the exhibition, except that of assembling "as many examples as possible of this specialised form of cartography", means that the needs of neither researcher nor layman are served as well as they might have been.