Document generated on 10/12/2024 5 a.m.

Urban History Review
Revue d'histoire urbaine

Arthur, Eric. *Toronto No Mean City*. Third edition revised by Stephen Otto. University of Toronto Press, 1986. Bibliography, index, 272 black and white plates, 17 maps, $18.95 paper

H. Stanley Loten

Volume 16, Number 2, October 1987

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017792ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1017792ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)
1918-5138 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this review

Loten, H. S. (1987). Review of [Arthur, Eric. *Toronto No Mean City.* Third edition revised by Stephen Otto. University of Toronto Press, 1986. Bibliography, index, 272 black and white plates, 17 maps, $18.95 paper]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, *16*(2), 228–229. https://doi.org/10.7202/1017792ar

All Rights Reserved © Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine, 1987

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

https://www.erudit.org/en/

the economy, with its tax burden some 25% above Ontario's, an inflated wage structure that eroded its competitive position and resulted in high unemployment, and the enormous opportunity costs of spending public resources on bread and circuses?

In reviewing Montreal's prospects, the author is hard pressed to find any comparative advantages, other than Montreal's universities and her cultural and environmental ambience. These, it is felt, will provide the basis for attracting managers of footloose industries, if carefully planned. Indeed, Higgins has always had serious reservations about market solutions, but his favouring of intervention as a way out of this dilemma is mildly puzzling in the light of past federal efforts (MSUA, DREE), and more important, his scathing review of the Mirabel fiasco. Notwithstanding, his list of general principles (218ff) should be reviewed by all policymakers because they highlight the importance of building interurban and interregional linkages as an integral aspect of any solution. Unfortunately, no concrete plans are drawn up, and, in the hands of opportunists, these generalities lead to the kind of simplistic approaches that are featured in the Picard report (of the Consultative Committee to the Ministerial Committee (de Cotret) on the Development of the Montreal Region, November, 1986).

Despite these concerns, the study is full of interesting observations, clear thinking, and wise suggestions. Anyone interested in Montreal's past and future will profit from reading it over and over. It is to be regretted that the excellent raw material was not reworked into what could have been a genuine classic.

N. H. Lithwick
Professor of Public Administration
and Economics
Carleton University

Arthur, Eric. *Toronto No Mean City.* Third edition revised by Stephen Otto. University of Toronto Press, 1986. Bibliography, index, 272 black and white plates, 17 maps, $18.95 paper.

In the mid 1950s Professor Arthur put his future at Toronto's School of Architecture on the line in order to defeat the proposed new city hall (already designed and out to tender) and to set up an international competition for a building that would, in his words "proudly express its function as the civic centre of government." As we all know he succeeded in this and did not become the next director of the school. One cannot help but wonder how much of the trouble that has beset the school since that time stems from those events. In any case, the point here is that Arthur's campaign for the city hall, and his book on the architectural heritage of the city both stem from the same source: his understanding that architecture is not just the expression of a culture but is very importantly a means to the attainment of one. His pessimistic assessment of Toronto's future reflects his awareness that few other people either in the architectural profession or in civic life realized this.

The book, a very timely re-issue 23 years later with added maps and illustrations, is still a highly personal and intimate account of buildings well known and well loved by someone with a keen eye for both the authentic and the phoney. Professor Arthur described it as a history of taste but it is really a *tour de force* of connoisseurship. The main body of text is in five chapters that cover Toronto's history from its very first beginnings to the end of the nineteenth century. It is a continuous narrative that unfolds exactly as it might if one were fortunate enough to be able to wander around the city with Arthur as guide and companion while the buildings were still standing. His fun in finding architectural treasures and his knowledge of the oddities and profundities connected with them make it a sparkling adventure.

And this is the main point of the exercise. Heritage can not be based on some abstruse assessment of a building as "important" to an academically reified architectural tradition. Fundamentally it must be valued because it is our own and we recognize its worth. This is also the hooker.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Arthur's book is his unflagging capacity to recognize architectural quality even in works that he finds of highly questionable taste. Although he would certainly not advocate Gothic or any other revival he responds enthusiastically to "gothic revival at its best" (Chapel of St James-the-Less, St. James Cemetery) while castigating the former customs house — "Rome has many examples of this kind of pilfering, but it was usually better done" — with the same kind of withering accuracy that terrified his students and kept them honest. His assessments and interpretations are always grounded in the architectural quality of each building, not in its membership in any school, style, fashion, fad or movement.

Surely this is the only sane basis on which heritage can proceed. We can not save everything older than 1914. Arthur's book documents the amazing turn-over in buildings that has already taken place in the city's short history. And while he laments many needless losses he sees this process as essentially healthy and inescapable. But, as he emphasizes so eloquently, within a context of continuing active development we must still value those buildings and places that have real quality and we must somehow learn to recognize the quality that exists in the heritage that we have. Few of us are able to bring to bear the acuity of mind and eye that Professor Arthur possessed. But he is a wonderful guide and example. There have been few architects in Toronto able to be so dedicated to both progressive ideals and heritage values at the same time. I well remember, with

considerable shame, how many of my professional colleagues wanted to demolish the old city hall. Apparently they thought it old fashioned and therefore worthless. This book stands as a testament to an ideal in architecture — that an architect, at least, should be aware of architectural history, should see it as integral to modern professional practice, and should have the wit to be able to recognize value residing in good honest work whether or not the style involved is currently fashionable. If architects cannot do it then who can. And if we are not able to intelligently appreciate the work of our forebears, can we expect any better fate for our own?

H. Stanley Loten
School of Architecture
Carleton University

Oberlander, Peter. *Land: The Central Human Settlement Issue.* Human Settlements Issues 7. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985. Pp. x, 103. Photographs, tables and bibliography. $9.95.

This book attempts to synthesize material from two CMHC/CIDA sponsored seminars at the University of British Columbia, a CMHC/CIDA sponsored paper intended to contribute to the 1983 annual meeting of the U.N. Human Settlements Commission and some of the discussion at that meeting. Its focus is on developing countries where urban populations have increased rapidly and conditions deteriorated badly since the hopeful resolutions of the 1976 Habitat Conference in Vancouver.

The central human settlements issue in developing countries, according to Oberlander, is the impact on the scarce resource — urban land — of economic development which emphasizes the industrial sector and which ignores related population distribution effects. The result has been the abolition of customary land tenure and an increasing commercialization of land, including state land, uncontrolled speculation, and a growing concentration of land in the hands of powerful private individuals and corporate interests. Problems have been aggravated by the regularization of land titles required for allocating property taxes in association with sites and services programs.

Oberlander examines the inadequacy of existing responses to the problem of urban land supply. He then reviews various policy and program initiatives which have been proposed for national governments and international co-operation agencies. Land issues, Oberlander suggests, should be approached in a social development context. Land policies should be an integral part of national development plans. Governments should concentrate on the acquisition, development and servicing of well located and affordable land. Policies related to public control of land should be less changeable. Governments should discourage speculators from holding needed land out of use by taxing it heavily. And again, the Habitat recommendation passed after long debate and resistance, a tax should be put on the speculative profit accruing from increases in the value of land unrelated to owner improvements. House-building can be left to the informal housing sector. Governments major concern should be with security of occupancy, and this in relationship to all forms of tenure.

Oberlander is particularly enthusiastic about the merits of various forms of collective control over land by communities (eg. ownership or long-term lease). This goes a step beyond the idea of community participation in housing development supported at Habitat. Community land tenure and management, he feels, would make it easier for the nation-state to manage land, permit the implementation of Habitat's community-level recommendations, promote mobilization of self-help activities in the informal housing sector and provide opportunities for useful collaboration between communities and social agencies, NGOs and international organizations.

Oberlander's book addresses an important issue and presents some interesting material. The exposition, however, could be more systematic. The use of material on a variety of countries and cities at different stages of historical evolution, at various points of location between centre and periphery demands a conceptual framework if effective sense is to be made of it all and appropriate policies recommended. Instead we are presented in the early chapters of the book with a sort of collage of quotations, with linking comments from the author. Coherence is further undermined by an irregular alteration in tone from analytical, to pedagogical, to polemical. The reader will, nevertheless, gain from it a picture of what is and what is not being discussed about land issues at international fora on human settlements.

An idea supported by Oberlander not dealt with extensively in international discussions or the literature, though it is suggested by W.A. Doebele, is that of community land tenure. It would have been interesting, therefore, had this idea been developed a little and some examples of its implementation provided. By not elaborating upon what he means by "community" and by not addressing the problems of how the local decision-making process might work, for example, Oberlander fails to do the idea the justice it may deserve.

Community land tenure proposals cannot be pursued far without running into a problem many discussions of human settlements issues try to avoid. So does Oberlander. This is the relationship between the state, invoked to action on behalf of the urban poor, and the private interests recognized as responsible for aggravating their problems. One might well argue that it begs the question to suggest that state inaction is the result of a lack of political will. It also ignores paths of enquiry to which a growing literature on urban political