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Editorial

Richard Harris

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Editorial

Richard Harris

For twenty-one years, the *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine* has been a voice of scholars interested in the history of Canadian cities. In that sense it has served a function similar to that of the *Journal of Urban History* in the United States, and the *Urban History Yearbook* (now simply *Urban History*) in Britain. In other respects, however, it has differed from its sister journals. From its early days, the *UHR* has included visual material, whether maps or photographs, as a matter of policy. The large-page format and high quality paper serve both an aesthetic and a rhetorical function. Is it that Canadian scholars appreciate the physical presence of the city better than their American and British counterparts, and therefore seek ways to express it? I doubt it. The Canadian difference is probably a blend of accident and the fact that *UHR* is not the product of a publishing house driven by the profit motive. This situation should be a source of satisfaction, though not of complacency. Today more than ever, journals must weigh costs of production very carefully. However, there are good scholarly reasons for maintaining a comparatively expensive journal format. As with my predecessors, I hope that contributors will continue to think of the *UHR* as a unique journal where visual materials routinely add substance as well as style to academic discourse.

The *UHR* has also differed from its closest counterparts in being predominantly, indeed resolutely, Canadian. The *JUH*, for example, tends to publish articles by American scholars writing about US cities, but that is not its exclusive mandate. In contrast, the *UHR* has always sought primarily to present material dealing with Canadian cities. It also has a commitment to present comparative research, although the regrettable scarcity of such material has resulted in only a small quantity being published. These policies have created a

clear identity for the *Review* and have made it indispensable to those interested in Canada's urban past. At the same time a possible danger exists—that of parochialism and therefore of marginalization within a scholarly discourse that is increasingly international. Who, might we ask, except those interested in Canadian urban history, should read the *UHR*? The answer, I hope, is urban scholars anywhere.

Canadian cities have a form and character that sets them apart, in varying ways, from those in other countries. The forces that shaped them, however, are as well-known in Los Angeles as they are in Berlin. If I mention Berlin, it is because I was there recently. One ubiquitous, but frequently overlooked, feature of that German city is its 'Schrebergärten'. Visually and functionally, these are a cross between English allotment gardens, North American-style cottages and (very tidy) Third World shantytowns, with some uniquely German features thrown in for good measure. (I am thinking of the beer gardens that some Schrebergärten communities boast.) They grew up in the late-nineteenth century in response to overcrowding of workers in multi-storey tenements. They expressed then, and continue to express, a popular desire to enjoy 'nature', to possess a piece of land, and to shape a home of one's own. To a Canadian, the German garden cottages are curious, yet strangely familiar. Turning around this observation, we might usefully reflect upon ways in which Canadian cities would seem strangely familiar to outsiders. Such reflection encourages us to develop a comparative point of view, and define more clearly the distinctive qualities of the Canadian scene. This, I think, is a neglected but worthwhile endeavour. I hope that contributors to the *Review* will place their varied subjects within a wider, and at least implicitly comparative, frame of reference.

Worldwide the study of urban history has changed over the past couple of decades. One obvious development is technological, as computers have become the norm and telecommunications transform the modes of scholarly discourse. As yet, none of the major urban history journals have gone 'electronic', but recently a group of urban historians at the University of Chicago started an e-mail bulletin board, 'H-URBAN'. (For subscription details see a note in this issue.) If it survives—and judging from recent exchanges there is no lack of enthusiasm—then H-URBAN is likely to become a significant arena for discussions on urban history, and also the most up-to-date source of information on conferences, book projects, and jobs. To date most subscribers are from the U.S.A. but this is a context where Canadians could make their presence, and their perspective, felt.

Intellectual trends have broken down some boundaries that separate urban history from other academic fields, notably social history. At the same time, relations have become closer between academics and the larger community of people interested in urban history. Popular interest in historic preservation is still high, and our history is presented in an increasing number of venues. Since I believe it is important for the *UHR* to reflect these trends, in co-operation with the Associate Editors, I have initiated some changes in the Advisory Board to strengthen the *Review's* links with Canadian archivists, museologists, and social historians. In the end, however, the vitality of the journal depends not on editors and advisors, but on you, the wider community of readers and contributors. As readers, enjoy! As contributors, I hope to hear from you soon.