

**Harris, Richard. *Unplanned Suburbs Toronto's American Tragedy 1900 to 1950*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. Pp. xvi + 356. Maps, illustrations. \$39.95 (U.S.) hardcover**

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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the tempo of the presentation of the material. Accordingly, the form, style, and content of this illustrated history suit the intended audience, a popular and local readership.

Still the book successfully incorporates issues of financial constraints, class, and geographic and social divisions. Macdonald cultivated the rich primary sources to produce a harvest of events, people and places from days past. A number of issues were overlooked, notably race, ethnicity, gender and religion. Also beneficial, but perhaps deserving of a volume of its own, would be an examination of the influence of ideas on urban development, such as shifting societal attitudes towards technology and the environment, and even how technological advances dramatically altered the provision and use of recreation.

*A City at Leisure* neither supports nor challenges previous interpretations, nor does it offer any new approaches or new perspectives, for the study of urban history. As an inquiry into urban development it has nevertheless moved into previously neglected areas, and should even generate a higher level of public interest (locally, at least) in urban history.

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I spent the first year of my life in an attic apartment that my parents rented from a war veteran. Ed Clement had built the house himself in a new subdivision just outside Ottawa's city limits. Taxes were cheaper, building regulations were lax, and do-it-yourself building was seen as a way of easing the postwar housing shortage. Richard Harris's book acknowledges my experience as a late and specific manifestation of a phenomenon that peaked during the economic and immigration booms that preceded the earlier world war: the owner-built working-class suburb. Harris asks why these suburbs came to be and why they disappeared. He also seeks to explain why Toronto's suburbs were probably more blue collar than most, while at the same time arguing for the widespread applicability of his model.

Why did workers move to the outskirts? In Toronto they did not follow the streetcars to suburbia, for a 30-year 1891 monopoly made the TTC responsible only for the existing city. Streetcar lines therefore did not become loss-leaders for suburban land speculation, a role they often played elsewhere. Nor did workers follow heavy industry to the outskirts. Though some did, large numbers of suburban workers commuted to jobs downtown. Workers therefore had motives for moving to the outskirts

beyond merely following employment or suburban transit: they took an active role in advancing their own aspirations.

Chapter 4 recapitulates one explanation, first setting out the middle-class suburban ideals of family privacy, independence, efficiency and health, and then showing middle-class stigmatization of tenements and lodging houses as subversive of these values was enshrined in civic housing regulations that helped push the working-class into the less-regulated townships. Chapter 5 explores how workers, for their part, willingly sacrificed privacy (they took in lodgers to pay for their homes), modern services, and accessibility for independence and financial security.

These explanations hinge on class, but contemporaries predictably favoured a racial explanation: the Brits—and most suburbanites were British immigrants—were more enterprising than the Jews who ghettoized the Ward in the downtown. Jews, indeed, lodged or rented downtown near the garment factories that employed them, but those who could, converted older homes into lodging houses and, if successful, moved to homes or apartments in suburban Forest Hill. But did Brits value home ownership more? Harris alludes briefly to the English dream of the semi-rural cottage, and the fact that only 10 per cent of workers in England owned their own homes. He could have probed more deeply the idealization of the rural in British popular culture, as has Michael Bunce in *The Countryside Ideal: Anglo-American Images of Landscape* (Routledge 1994). But he concludes from comparison with American cities that immigrants in general aimed at home ownership if the nature of the local ethnic division of labour didn't inhibit them. That inhibition came into play here. Toronto's working-class suburbs were as large as they were because Toronto was more of an immigrant city even than New York, in an era when British emigrants went mostly to Canada, and heavily to Toronto, rather than to the United States.

Nonetheless workers' suburban home ownership was only possible because capitalists' attention was concentrated elsewhere. The lack of suburban transit kept land values low and speculative builders were drawn to accessible serviced sites that were more commercially marketable. Many workers faced with the difficulty of securing credit and willing to walk from the end of the car line therefore built their own homes, facilitated in doing so by the laxity of rural regulations, the comparatively simple technology involved, and the assistance of friends and neighbours.

The blue-collar suburb, however, transformed itself from the early 1920s to late 1940s. As immigrants became established they improved or rebuilt their homes and joined the call for municipal regulation and services and the extension of public transit, even though this raised costs and taxes. But scattered developments were expensive to service. Even before the 1930s suburbanites were defaulting on taxes and imperilling municipal finances; during the Depression many more moved back into the city to save on transit fares by renting the upper

floors of larger urban houses. Suburban neighbourhoods began to filter upmarket, and the fate of the blue-collar suburbs was sealed by federal mortgage legislation in the 1950s that imposed expensive minimum building and servicing standards.

Harris's argument about the extent of owner building is, as he says, the most original part of the book. He does not argue that owner building was without precedent, but he does say repeatedly that working-class suburbs were new to the pre-World War I period. Ken Jackson long ago pointed out that the poorest citizens lived on the periphery of the old walking city, and in Canada proletarian suburbs can be traced back to the earliest years of urban development. I cannot address the Toronto situation from personal knowledge, but in early 19th-century Ottawa, squatters inhabited the periphery both within and without the limits of old Bytown, on Lot 39, Letter "O", and the By Estate. In the 1850s the industrialization of the Chaudière transformed west-end LeBreton Flats and Rochesterville into working-class suburbs where millhands built homes with lumber supplied by land speculators. In the 1870s mill villages sprang up along the rail line in rural Nepean, and in the 1890s working-class suburbs did follow the streetcar into the township.

Perhaps some of the confusion over the nature and extent of the phenomenon arises from what Harris means by a "suburb". He cites a number of definitions that really don't fit his case and retreats into a sensible yet unhelpful assertion of the need to understand "the full range of places that have grown up at the urban fringe". The suburbs of very large US cities were often industrial, well removed from the preexisting core, and political entities in their own right. Harris concedes that Toronto was small enough for people to keep walking, and that the city wasn't all that industrial. It follows that spatial arrangements there, as in Ottawa, were not new but rather a continuation of those characteristic of the old walking city.

The book's subtitle *Toronto's American Tragedy* reflects both Harris's advocacy of urban planning and his desire to point out the more general applicability of his findings. He finds the tragic flaw in this arcadia of working-class thrift and self-reliance within the very laissez-faire policies that gave rise to it. He argues that even minimal suburban controls could have averted the financial disaster brought about by post-facto servicing. It is refreshing to find a Harris in Ontario who favours government intervention, but it is simplistic to argue that servicing in advance of construction would have warded off the financial collapse of the suburban municipalities. Calgary had serviced its suburbs with sewers and water mains, and the collapse of the pre-war boom left that city with 26,763 serviced but unoccupied lots, and a crippling debt. The need was for more generalized suburban planning, not merely the installation of services in advance of construction.

The problem in Calgary was that council became facilitators of rampant land speculation, a subject that surfaces only sporadically in Harris's study. A chapter on land speculation would have helped him tie his narrative more firmly than he does to

the rise of consumer capitalism. Construction may have been "the industry that capitalism forgot", but a probing of land speculation would have highlighted the degree to which capitalist subdividers parlayed immigrants' desire for security into consumerism, and the degree to which workers themselves speculated in vacant lots. In Ottawa, the pre-1913 property boom drew investment dollars from labourers and shoeshine boys, with local subdivisions even being bought up by French Canadians living in the mining towns of northern Ontario. In neglecting land development, Harris falls victim to one of the limitations he decries in other studies: a failure to acknowledge workers' agency.

Harris also understates the complexity of the political arrangements. It is not true that rural municipalities might have provided a full array of services if they could have convinced the farmers to bear part of the cost. The *Ontario Municipal Act* since 1849 had assumed that suburban land would be annexed into the cities. It was only as cities became unwilling to assume the servicing costs for newly-annexed areas that provincial legislation was slowly amended to permit assessment or planning of specific localities for a gradually-increasing variety of urban services: police villages (a large number of which were created before WWI, mostly to contract for street lighting), five-mile urban zones under legislation of 1912 to coordinate suburban road development, suburban service areas authorized in 1922, high school and water areas, and so forth. Right through Harris's period rural townships could assess for sewer and water only by obtaining special legislation to overcome a host of statutory inhibitions. Within the very real limits imposed by provincial legislation, however, Ottawa's ex-urban municipalities did undertake planning initiatives, especially if one expands the definition beyond sewer and water programs. One wonders what a more thorough reading of local council minutes might have revealed in the Toronto area.

Despite these limitations Harris performs a useful service in reminding us that the suburbs before the automobile era were not entirely or even largely the preserve of the middle class: our vision has been blinkered by propagandists from Andrew Jackson Downing to E.P. Taylor. More importantly, Harris demonstrates that the wave of British, mostly English, immigrants who arrived in the Laurier years built not only their own geographically distinct communities, but the homes within them. North America's early 20th-century suburbs may not have been as distinct from the modern third-world experience as we sometimes think. What makes the North American case different, however, is that this tale of working-class agency ends with the victory of hegemonic consumerism and regulation, and the corporate tract housing of the 1950s.

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