

After the Sprawl? Suburban Pasts and Futures In the Greater Toronto Area

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Exhibit Review:

After the Sprawl? Suburban Pasts and Futures In the Greater Toronto Area

Michael Buzzelli

As students of the city, we concern ourselves in large part with urban form, specifically with the ways that cities are built, the consequences of form for urban residents, and alternatives we have for urban growth. In the exhibit *After the Sprawl? Suburban Pasts and Futures in the Greater Toronto Area*, curator Michael McMahon presents these issues in the context of suburbanization in the Toronto region after World War Two. Its main message is that suburbanization has continuously bred counter-movements, each meant to solve the problem of sprawl, though never succeeding. Visitors are shown that if sprawl is to be managed, viable past efforts at containment and new alternatives must be put into practice. But as the exhibit title itself suggests, the momentum of Toronto's city-building practices are too entrenched to deal with sprawl effectively, making alternatives appear hopelessly optimistic.

In terms of design, *After the Sprawl?* is first rate. Located on the main floor of the (formerly Metropolitan) Toronto Archives, the exhibit presents itself immediately upon entry to the building. The exhibit begins with a variety of photographs, maps of different scales and text mounted on two adjacent walls at the entrance. With the aid of informative text captions, the exhibit takes visitors chronologically through the planning and development of Toronto's postwar suburbs. For example, postwar suburbanization is portrayed with informative text and images mounted on wall displays, encased sliding panels and display cases, all relating to two of Canada's more prominent neighbourhoods, Thorncrest Village and Don Mills. Near the end of the exhibit are three suspended displays containing more information on recent trends and issues in the region. The effective layout of the exhibit is complemented by its attractive display. In one example, early postwar planning is accented with contemporary drapery and wall colouring, acting as a window on the suburban ideal. Closer to the present, environmental issues are portrayed in a set of high-quality digital images of the Oak Ridges Moraine, a sensitive ground-water feature that continues to face the prospect of development at the expense of regional water quality. These materials are fittingly set against a green background, evoking an environmental message. The final touch is a collection of 'scrap books' which round out the exhibit and delve more deeply into specific topics, such as the Don Mills development.

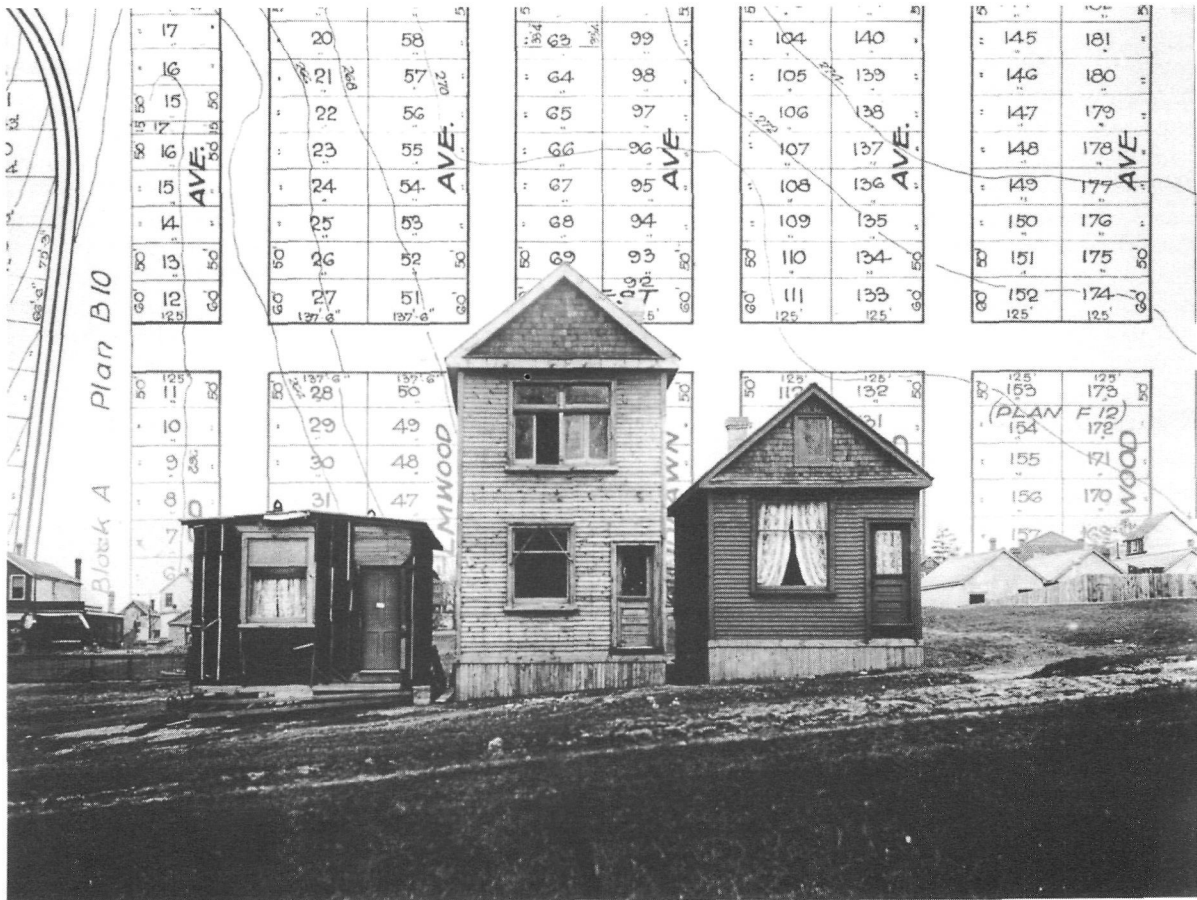
Since *After the Sprawl?* is intended for the general public, the layout and appeal of the exhibit make the chronology of Toronto's postwar suburbanization easy to follow. Visitors begin by reading criticisms of prewar *urban sprawl*, characterized by the serial replication of the grid street system and owner-building on the urban fringe. The early postwar response was the suburban ideal, exemplified by Thorncrest Village. The design, layout and marketing of Thorncrest contained familiar elements; a curvilinear garden suburb street pattern and single-family dwellings on generous lots. Thorncrest was innovative, too, requiring membership in a homeowners' association. In this way, we are told how early postwar suburbanization took the course of commercial viability and social exclusion, not to mention hefty land consumption.

This leads to the representation of Don Mills. Intended as much more than a dormitory suburb, Don Mills is presented as the integrated and self-contained corporate suburb that set the model of planning and suburbanization for decades to come. More importantly, in a series of images and captions, Don Mills is shown to have introduced a new kind of sprawl in Canadian planning and development: *suburban sprawl*. Replicated time and again since it was built, the basic form of Don Mills has not eliminated the problem of sprawl, just cloaked it in a new guise. In this vein, Erin Mills, a development much larger than Don Mills, is portrayed as an affirmation and acceleration of postwar suburban sprawl. This point is driven home by a text caption which explains that, following the precedent of Don Mills, Erin Mills was built despite the state's efforts to contain this new kind of sprawl.

Through these examples, *After the Sprawl?* effectively conveys the historical pattern of unsuccessful attempts at dealing with sprawl. The theme is carried closer to the present through recent issues and planning trends that seem equally ill-fated. At stake, we are told, are continued problems of housing affordability, environmental degradation and, to a lesser extent, countryside heritage. And the message is clear: our current practices are no better than previous reactions to sprawl, however defined. In Markham Heritage Estates, for example, prospective residents literally pluck a farmhouse out of the region's rural landscape and transfer it to a lot purchased from a developer. Heritage is apparently preserved, even if longstanding structures are removed from their original contexts and relocated on prime agricultural land. This is to say nothing of how this relocation might hasten development in those places where historical farmhouses once stood. In another example, representing the new (sub)urbanism in a neighbourhood known as Cornell, sprawl concerns are apparently addressed by dense land use, though it is located on previously vacant land on the fringes of the region. Higher densities barely mask further subdivision and automobile dependency. Through these recent examples, the message of the exhibit can be generalized: solutions to sprawl have always been elusive, and our current problems have deep historical roots.

Finally, *After the Sprawl?* presents us with a glimmer of hope. In order to deal with sprawl effectively, past attempts and current alternatives must be considered, we are told. Erin Mills is presented as the example of rampant postwar sprawl, by passing provincial and regional attempts at growth control. Though Erin Mills bit into the greenbelt that was to contain growth closer to Metropolitan Toronto, the failure was with lax enforcement, not the idea itself. Stricter growth control is one means of confronting sprawl. Intensification is presented as a current alternative to further suburbanization. Though heralded by the Metropolitan Toronto government in the 1950s as "maximum development", intensification makes use of existing infrastructure, provides more affordable housing and consumes less land on the urban fringe. The message here is that we must come to terms with the existing built environment in future growth rather than to repeat suburbanization. For example,

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This illustration from *After the Sprawl* shows housing on Coxwell Ave. circa 1912, superimposed on a speculative subdivision plan for Port Credit, circa 1928. It brings alive an early phase of working-class suburban settlement.

the new urbanism will not work, we are told, unless it is made more transit friendly, and therefore sustainable.

Although *After the Sprawl?* is intended for the general public, it also has scholarly appeal. Several links are drawn with scholarly works, such as Richard Harris' *Unplanned Suburbs*, presenting the kinds of urban landscapes that postwar planners and developers felt they needed to confront. References to John Sewell's *The Shape of the City* help the visitor to understand how Don Mills established the pattern of postwar suburbanization in Canada. And a direct connection is drawn between the social exclusionism of postwar suburbia and Gavin Mackenzie's book *Privatopia*. In these ways, *After the Sprawl?* evokes the central thesis of Peter Hall's *Cities of Tomorrow* – plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

If the exhibit's comment book is any indication, the details and overall message of *After the Sprawl?* are not lost on visitors; the exhibit is informative and thought-provoking. Most telling is the interest it has garnered among one group of suburban residents, Etobicoke Citizens for Effective Government. In cooperation with the City of Toronto, they have organized a visit to the exhibit followed by a tour of Etobicoke which will highlight some of the

themes presented, intended as a forum for public participation in community development. If the negative message has any counterweight, then, it is the success *After the Sprawl?* is having with its intended audience. With the designer Jim Miller, photographer Vid Ingelevics, researcher/editor Manda Vranic, and the sponsorship of the City of Toronto's Clerk's Department, Anna and Vern McMahon, and van Nostrand DiCastrì Architects, curator Michael McMahon has mounted an exhibit of interest and relevance to all students of urban form. *After the Sprawl?* runs from February 1998 through August 1999 at the City of Toronto Archives, 255 Spadina Road.

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