

Toronto Sprawls: A History By Lawrence Solomon

R. Alan Walks

Volume 100, numéro 1, spring 2008

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065734ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065734ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Walks, R. (2008). Compte rendu de [*Toronto Sprawls: A History* By Lawrence Solomon]. *Ontario History*, 100(1), 110–112. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065734ar>

and sociological research. 'Long eclipse' is the operative term, for she shows that secularization is not only a 'Quiet Revolution' made patently visible by legal enactments that with the stroke of a pen transfer institutional authority from church to state. Rather, it can come about, too, by erosion caused by trends and hardly visible events that over a long duration eat away at the religious culture of an elite until it disappears from public view, though not without leaving traces.

But that disappearance does not mean that religion itself has disappeared from the scene. Only one form is in eclipse. For as

Paul Bramadat shows in *The Church on the World's Turf*, and Catherine Gidney surely knows and champions, evangelical Christianity has a vigorous though modest (not as modest as SCM's!) presence on English Canadian university campuses today.

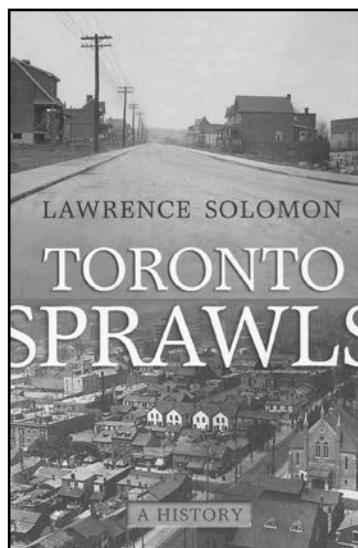
John H. Simpson
University of Toronto at Mississauga

Bibliography:

Bramadat, Paul. *The Church on the World's Turf: An Evangelical Christian Group at a Secular University*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Toronto Sprawls: A History

By Lawrence Solomon. Toronto: University of Toronto Centre for Public Management Monograph Series, 2007. xix + 120 pp. \$19.95 softcover. ISBN 0-7727-8618-0. <www.utppublishing.com>



Neoliberal urban scholars approach the question of 'urban sprawl' – defined as low-density auto-dependent urban development – from one of two mutually incompatible positions. The first, which is well articulated in *The Voluntary City*, endorses low-density

demand, of households voting with their feet (or, rather, their cars), rather than of state intervention in the land market. It is the democratic choice of the majority and the state should not try to subvert that will by imposing urban planning policies which aim to contain, intensify, consolidate or otherwise intervene to reduce the urban footprint, even if there may be long term public benefits.

While maintaining criticism of state intervention in the land market, the second neoliberal approach argues, instead, that sprawl is the result of overzealous state involvement in the form of freeway subsidies, zoning and other land-use controls which have aimed to disperse urban populations. This story views the compact city as economically and socially more efficient, yet urban planners or municipal and other public officials promote and subsidize urban dispersion out of both a moral aversion to dense cities and as a paternalistic attempt at social engineering. The villain of the story is still well-intentioned but misguided state *dirigisme*, but in this second approach such action is the cause of the sprawl that the first approach celebrates. Eliminating subsidies that maintain ineffi-

(sub)urban forms, arguing that they result from the preferences for large lots and automobile travel, and disdain for dense living. 'Sprawl' is thus the result of market

cient transportation systems and force development to the fringe, and revoking land-use regulations that prevent developers from building at more profitable higher densities, are the policy prescriptions that flow from this second perspective.

Toronto Sprawls is a piece of revisionist history that draws from this second viewpoint. Solomon seeks to counter the claims of “studies in their hundreds” (p. xi) that pin the low-density forms of urban expansion, evident in the Toronto region, on suburban aspirations, the automobile, and/or a profit-thirsty development industry. Solomon’s argument is that sprawl in Toronto has been caused by a history of legislation in favour of dispersion at the municipal and upper levels of government and, furthermore, that in doing so, “governments acted not to satisfy the public’s desires but to frustrate them.” (p. xi) Indeed, Solomon argues that market forces were making Toronto as dense as Greenwich Village in New York City, and if this process had not been thwarted by government decisions the old, pre-amalgamation City of Toronto could have housed half of the entire population of the current greater Toronto area, and would now be as compact as “desirable areas of New York, or of Paris, Milan and other attractive European cities.” (p. 77)

Toronto Sprawls is divided into eight chapters, organized thematically in a loose chronological order, in addition to a preface, introduction, conclusion and postscript. The first several chapters attempt to document, in the years before and after 1900, the benevolence of a free and open land market for producing in Toronto what Douglas Rae has termed “the forces of centred urbanism.” Toronto at the turn of the century exhibited some of the highest densities on the continent, but Solomon shows in subsequent chapters that the City actively sought to reduce these levels in the name of social and moral reforms by disallowing apartments,

‘rear’ houses and multi-family dwellings of all kinds. In Chapters 4 and 5 he documents the influence of Thomas Adams and the ideas of the garden city movement, as well as such Federal legislation as the Veterans’ Land Act, in shaping Canada’s cities before the Second World War. Solomon characterizes this early history, in the title of one memorable chapter, as a “War Effort against the Cities.” (p. 41).

The period following the Second World War is represented by chapters 6, 7 and 8. These document the role of the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation and subsidies from upper levels of government in promoting inefficient residential land uses, the reasons for (and unintended effects of) partial and then full amalgamation (in 1998) within Metropolitan Toronto, and dispersion-inducing regional policies in the ‘90s’ (or outer) suburbs. Chapter 1 traces the history of the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) and lays part of the blame for the low-density nature of the early post-war suburbs on the politicization of transit and the single-fare system that was implemented after the formation of the original Metro in 1953. Solomon concludes with a look at how Toronto might have been if only its leaders had acted according to prevailing residential preferences for urban living rather than give in to the demands of social reformers and planners. His postscript suggests a number of market-based policy reforms, regarding user fees, property taxation and congestion pricing, that he feels could reduce the systemic bias against dense urban living.

Solomon applies to the task of writing *Toronto Sprawls* the skills he learned (and the pervasive ideological perspective he gleaned) while working as an urban affairs columnist for the *National Post*. The result is succinct, clear, readable and well supported. On the whole, I find the main thrust of the argument, regarding the centrality of certain forms of state

regulation, to be convincing and applicable to the Toronto context, and the sources utilized are appropriate to the task. Yet the contribution made by *Toronto Sprawls* remains limited. Solomon does not position his arguments within any scholarly traditions, and the book lacks discussion of the theoretical or philosophical bases undergirding the visions of the social reformers and municipal leaders that he criticizes, as well as those views supporting his own perspective. Because of this, the book ends up naturalizing a neoliberal discourse which posits the market and the state as logically opposed, and thus fails to understand the complex relationship between state regulation and private-sector development aims. Furthermore, Solomon does not ponder the array of political-economic forces acting on Toronto over the course of its history, and thus cannot adequately consider alternative hypotheses that connect prevailing social relations to state initiative. He likewise fails to consider the effects of (and reasons for) the pervasive *lack* of government initiative and implementation. As Richard White has recently shown, the latter is as much a cause of Toronto's sprawling form as are any direct government actions.

These flaws limit the contribution of the monograph. While accurately representing the relative importance of state institutions, regulatory mechanisms and policy in shaping Toronto's regional form, *Toronto Sprawls*

remains radically incomplete in explaining *why* the city has developed the way it has. Finally, permeating the analysis is an anti-suburban bias, which appears to imply that it would have been socially just, because it would have been economically efficient, if municipal and provincial governments had allowed poor fringe suburban communities to remain alienated and severely under-served in favour of elites residing in the urban core. While gentrifiers living in the urban core may identify with these sentiments, Canadians living outside the inner city (many who are poor and struggling) may find the message implicitly smug and dismissive of their own aspirations.

R. Alan Walks

University of Toronto at Mississauga

Bibliography:

Beito, David T., Peter Gordon, and Alexander Tabarrok, eds. *The Voluntary City: choice, community, and civil society*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2002.

Rae, Douglas W. *City: urbanism and its end*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.

White, Richard. *The Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe in Historical Perspective*. Toronto: Neptis Foundation, Paper 4, 2007.

Old Canadian Cemeteries

Places of Memory

By Jane Irwin, with photographs by John de Visser. Richmond Hill, Ontario: Firefly Books, 2007. 320 pp. \$75.00 hardcover. ISBN 1-55407-146-1. (www.fireflybooks.com)

The concept of a permanent resting place for our dead is relatively new. At one time, churchyard cemeteries were periodically emptied and their bones transferred to charnel houses to make room for

more burials. In fact, as Jane Irwin tells us in her excellent book, *Old Canadian Cemeteries*, it was not until the 1600s that Europeans in India established the first permanent burial grounds. Canadian cem-