

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Lyon, Deborah and Robert Fenton. *The Development of Downtown Winnipeg: Historical Perspectives on Decline and Revitalization*. Report No. 3. Winnipeg: Institute of Urban Studies, 1984. Pp. viii, 200. Maps, tables. \$16.00 paper

Clarence T. Aasen

Volume 14, numéro 1, juin 1985

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017889ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017889ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Aasen, C. T. (1985). Compte rendu de [Lyon, Deborah and Robert Fenton. *The Development of Downtown Winnipeg: Historical Perspectives on Decline and Revitalization*. Report No. 3. Winnipeg: Institute of Urban Studies, 1984. Pp. viii, 200. Maps, tables. \$16.00 paper]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 14(1), 76–77. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017889ar>

Ultimately, then, what is sought in this type of work is not necessarily the pursuit of additional complexities, or specific elements in greater depth, or a novel or a social science study, but a history with more balance, more critique and less exclusion of people and groups from their own history. Furthermore, if *Toronto to 1918* is indeed defined by the omnipotence of business and related elites, more needs to be recorded even in a general history about the underlying conditions, relations, and strategies. There is every indication that Toronto has hardly emerged from its particular historical burden, and citizens, perplexed by the continuing phenomena of business and elite domination, civic corruption, and the neutralizing of public participation, need the deeper understanding of historical roots as a basis for meaningful critique and interaction. The muting of opposition, the absorption of protest, the marginalizing of nascent political formation and competition all historically derived and patterned, deserve exposure. Although Toronto emerges as a metropolis it also emerges from its history perhaps more in the dystopian imagery of Fritz Lang and Orwell, than as simply the triumphant transformation of "a Lake Ontario locality into a world-scale city."

Meyer Brownstone
Centre for Urban and Community Studies
Department of Political Science
University of Toronto

Lyon, Deborah and Robert Fenton. *The Development of Downtown Winnipeg: Historical Perspectives on Decline and Revitalization*. Report No. 3. Winnipeg: Institute of Urban Studies, 1984. Pp. viii, 200. Maps, tables. \$16.00 paper.

An increasingly common view is that cities, as products of time, must be analyzed historically if they are to be properly understood and if urban interventions are to occur with not only a social and situational sensitivity, but also to have a long term effectiveness. Following this view, modernist notions such as universalism, a future orientation, and *tabula rasa* are being replaced by contextualism, historical analyses and sensitive infill.

This report, one in a series of studies conducted and published by Winnipeg's Institute of Urban Studies regarding the social and environmental condition of that city, exemplifies such view. Following an explicitly historical perspective, and utilizing predominantly secondary information, the report attempts to assess the effects which a variety of social, economic and policy "forces" have had on the decline and revitalization of downtown Winnipeg since its founding more than 125 years ago. Six major phases are used to analyze Winnipeg's development and to provide an organizational framework for the study: origins; pre-confederation to 1870;

early post-Confederation, 1870-96; pre-World War I, 1897-1914; wars and depression, 1915-45; and the post-War period, 1946-84. In addition, the authors characterize the pre-1914 periods as ones of rapid growth, leading Winnipeg to its peak of power and affluence in Western Canada. From 1914 to the present, Winnipeg's rate of growth has gradually diminished along with its commanding dominance over the prairie hinterland. The report deals with these processes in some depth and detail.

An unquestioned assumption that "a vibrant city contains an active heart" begins and underlies the entire report. The analysis consistently attempts to demonstrate the ways in which Winnipeg's "heart" is less socially and economically active than it should be and to clarify the various local and regional factors which caused or ameliorated this inactivity. The resulting malaise is attributed to three main factors: the diffusion of economic activity over too broad a region; dispersion of central business district activity over too large a core area; and failure of the redevelopment process in the downtown. Three main policy areas — housing and residential development; central business district activities and facilities; and urban and municipal planning, an activity in which Winnipeg has a long and highly regarded tradition — receive special attention, purportedly because they contribute the most toward explaining the deterioration of Winnipeg's downtown core and the ineffectiveness of its redevelopment processes. The study concludes, somewhat ambiguously, that to resolve the issue of Winnipeg's central city deterioration will require that "... the behaviour patterns stimulated by these historic forces be altered to reflect changed times."

Placing history in the service of urban understanding which leads to a more informed public policy, as this report attempts to do, is, however, no easy task. Neither does it necessarily entail, as the report seems to suggest, a singular, or even a convergent, vision of the city, or a commitment to particular social and urban issues. As students of urbanism quickly discover, history is utilized in various ways and for often contradictory purposes: as a purely descriptive, intellectually detached endeavor; in an interpretive manner, where a discovery of the urban "essences" and a more profound understanding are the central intentions; as a search for continuities, which can then be used projectively to maintain or reinforce the status quo; or even to serve a revisionist stance, where the episodes of history are selectively chosen and manipulated for preconceived and often self-serving purposes.

Neither the substantive domain nor the methodological constraints of the historical pursuit, in themselves, determine how and why history will be utilized or what effect it will have. Rather, underpinning historical analyses are theoretical and philosophical bases and ideological commitments

which give an intellectual and a social order and meaning to the historical pursuit.

The major weakness of this report is in its lack of such theoretical, philosophical or ideological framework around which its analytical methods can be formed and its conclusions developed and interpreted. For example, the authors do not explain what they mean by an historical approach, why they consider such an approach to be more appropriate than other approaches, or how such an approach relates to the policy domain. As a result, information presented in a seemingly descriptive manner, such as changes in the quantity and distribution of commercial functions in Winnipeg's core, are utilized prescriptively to suggest that the city limit suburban mall expansion. However, what are the theoretical and substantive relationships between a "vibrant city heart," its commercial activity, and these suburbanization processes? Why did the city so readily allow the core to deteriorate? What roles did local versus provincial and national factors play in these processes? And what does an historical analyses show us that other forms of analyses do not? As basic as they might be to understanding Winnipeg's urban core decline and attempted revitalization, the report essentially ignores such questions.

The study suffers also in terms of the depth with which it deals with substantive issues and the strength of its conclusions as a result of its basically uncritical stance. Using the earlier example, the assumption that a "vibrant city contains an active heart" has for decades generated substantial and often heated debate amongst urbanists, not only because of its organicist and naturalistic overtones, but also because of its known historical and cultural variability. Even in relation specifically to Winnipeg, this assumption cannot be accepted uncritically, since the authors' own analyses indicates that the city historically has had an essentially centrifugal growth pattern, a pattern which was greatly reinforced when an improved roadway system, extended public transportation, and widespread car ownership made suburban living feasible for much of the city's population. Their analyses indicate also that, from its beginnings, Winnipeg's core development was the result of a variety of isolated factors and incremental development processes which were spatially concentrated because it was economically and socially convenient to do so, and not because there was something intrinsically urban, of special cultural significance, or necessarily natural about such a concentration. In this and in a number of other instances, the empirical data appears to contradict the assumptions made and the conclusions drawn.

With the exception of the last section on the downtown land market dynamics and its inconclusive ending, the report is clearly written and easy to read. It also provides a convenient, general overview of Winnipeg's development history. However, one would hope that an historical analysis such as this would provide a special and deeper insight into urban change processes. This, unfortunately, was not the case. As

a result, the report is of limited usefulness for either scholarly or policy purposes.

Clarence T. Aasen
School of Architecture
Carleton University

Gamelin, Alain; René Hardy; Jean Roy; Normand Seguin; and Guy Toupin. *Trois-Rivières illustrée*. Trois-Rivières: La Corporation des fêtes du 350^e anniversaire de Trois-Rivières, 1984. Pp. 226. Illustrations.

Les quarts de siècles ou les centenaires sont souvent l'occasion pour les municipalités de publier des albums commémoratifs sur leur passé. Ces publications, de valeur inégale, font généralement peu de place à une lecture globale de la continuité historique de la communauté et de son patrimoine et se partagent entre la généalogie et l'anecdote. Ce sont ces défauts qu'ont réussi à éviter les auteurs de *Trois-Rivières illustrée*, un ouvrage publié à l'occasion des fêtes du trois cent cinquantième anniversaire du poste de traite érigé par Lavolette.

Disons d'emblée que ce livre constitue beaucoup plus qu'un simple album-souvenir, malgré ce que les auteurs en disent dans leur trop modeste avant-propos. Il s'agit bien plus d'une publication riche et complexe qui peut se lire selon des rythmes divers. On y trouve en effet une pénétrante analyse sur différents aspects de l'histoire urbaine de Trois-Rivières, qui utilise, avec un équilibre mesuré le texte et l'image. Le livre s'articule sur huit chapitres chronologiques ou thématiques, documentés chacun par une abondante iconographie. Le lecteur pourra commencer par une première plongée dans le passé trifluvien en s'intéressant aux quelque 200 photos assorties de légendes instructives ou bien il choisira d'aborder le texte qui se recommande par ses qualités d'analyse, d'information et de style. Mais, tôt ou tard, les premières curiosités assouvies, il découvrira le plaisir de «lire» le livre, page par page, dans l'ordre voulu de l'écrit et de l'image, dont le dosage bien pensé stimulera à la fois l'esprit et l'imagination.

Les deux premiers chapitres retracent l'évolution historique de ce qui fut longtemps la seule ville de la Nouvelle-France et du Québec en dehors de Québec et de Montréal. Le premier restitue l'époque coloniale, française jusqu'en 1763, britannique ensuite, et retrace les lents débuts du peuplement à l'époque de la traite des fourrures, les hauts et les bas de l'histoire de la ville après la conquête et les activités du village industriel tout proche des Forges du Saint-Maurice. L'exposé retrace les deux premiers siècles de la vie de Trois-Rivières de façon raccourcie, un peu comme un lever de rideau. Il est vrai que l'historiographie trifluvienne possède sur cette période des classiques qu'il aurait été vain de vou-