North American Urban History: The Everyday Politics and Spatial Logics of Metropolitan Life

Mary Corbin Sies

Perspectives internationales sur l'histoire urbaine : un aperçu des tendances récentes
International Perspectives on Urban History: A Review of Recent Trends
Volume 32, numéro 1, fall 2003

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1015740ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1015740ar

Résumé de l'article
Au début du XXIe siècle, l'histoire urbaine est un domaine en plein essor en Amérique du Nord. Ses aspects interdisciplinaires et intellectuellement stimulants sont maintenant plus affirmés qu'ils ne l'étaient 25 ans auparavant. Les chercheurs publient des études de plus en plus nuancées et complexes pour comprendre les recoupements entre l'espace de la ville et le processus d'urbanisation, ainsi que des études qui tiennent compte de la diversité de comportement des communautés qui composent la ville. Un nouveau courant littéraire est en train de naître, qui relie l'expérience du quotidien dans l'Amérique urbaine à des courants sociaux plus vastes et des questions de méthodologie historique. Ce champ intellectuel se développe de manière si rapide qu'il est difficile d'en faire la synthèse. Cet article se cantonne donc à l'examen de cinq thématiques récentes d'histoire urbaine au Canada et aux États-Unis : les classes sociales et la ville, le logement, la vie citadine et politique, les relations entre la ville et la banlieue, et les relations entre races dans un contexte métropolitain. Ces diverses catégories d'études remettent en cause des idées reçues sur la manière dont fonctionnent les milieux urbains et suburbains, et incitent les spécialistes en urbanisme à porter sur leurs sujets d'étude un regard neuf, interdisciplinaire et tolérant.

Citer cet article

Découvrir la revue
North American Urban History: The Everyday Politics and Spatial Logics of Metropolitan Life

Mary Corbin Sies

Abstract
At the start of the twenty-first century, North American urban history is flourishing. Compared to twenty-five years ago, the field has become more interdisciplinary and intellectually invigorating. Scholars are publishing increasingly sophisticated efforts to understand how the city as space intersects the urbanization process, as well as studies that recognize the full complexity of experiences for different metropolitan cohorts. A burgeoning literature connects the everyday cultural experiences of urban North Americans with larger social processes and issues of historical analysis. Such a rapidly evolving field defies attempts to summarize the state of its scholarship. This essay will therefore confine itself to a survey of five themes of recent scholarship on the urban history of Canada and the United States: social class and the city, housing studies, urban life and politics, city-suburb relationships, and race relations and the metropolis. These diverse bodies of literature challenge our common wisdom about how cities and suburbs work and inspire urbanists to approach their topics with fresh eyes, an interdisciplinary purview, and an open mind.

Résumé
Au début du XXe siècle, l'histoire urbaine est un domaine en plein essor en Amérique du Nord. Ses aspects interdisciplinaires et intellectuellement stimulants sont maintenant plus affirmés qu'ils ne l'étaient 25 ans auparavant. Les chercheurs publient des études de plus en plus nuancées et complexes pour comprendre les recoupements entre l'espace de la ville et le processus d'urbanisation, ainsi que des études qui tiennent compte de la diversité de comportement des communautés qui composent la ville. Un nouveau courant littéraire est en train de naître, qui relie l'expérience du quotidien dans l'Amérique urbaine à des courants sociaux plus vastes et des questions de méthodologie historique. Ce champ intellectuel se développe de manière si rapide qu'il est difficile d'en faire la synthèse. Cet article se cantonne donc à l'examen de cinq thématiques récentes d'histoire urbaine au Canada et aux États-Unis : les classes sociales et la ville, le logement, la vie citadine et politique, les relations entre la ville et la banlieue, et les relations entre races dans un contexte métropolitain. Ces diverses catégories d'études remettent en cause des idées reçues sur la manière dont fonctionnent les milieux urbains et suburbains, et incitent les spécialistes en urbanisme à porter sur leurs sujets d'étude un regard neuf, interdisciplinaire et tolérant.

A quarter century ago, the study of North American urban history appeared to be in the doldrums. New generations of scholars pointedly overlooked the field's pioneering studies, practitioners of the new urban history questioned whether social history had made the field redundant, and scholars could be heard at professional meetings fretting about attracting the next generation to the field. Early in the twenty-first century, however, the state of North American urban history could not look more different. Since the mid-1980s, scholars have taken urban history in new directions and the field has become more adventurous and interdisciplinary. Traditional themes, such as technology and the city, federal-city relations, and planning and housing remain vital while many new lines of inquiry have opened up, such as urban culture, race relations, and studies of the working class. Long-standing subfields, such as urban politics and suburbanization, have taken startling turns, producing bold new challenges to previous scholarship.

Perhaps because the field has sometimes seemed in distress, urbanists have been prone to worry in print about the state of their art. Indeed, the proliferation of so many lines of inquiry can be disconcerting. Raymond Mohl argued as early as 1988 that "the outpouring of scholarship has fragmented the field and created problems of comprehension and analysis." More recently, Timothy Gilfoyle noted that such "multiple and perplexing views" are "emblematic of the interpretive confusion marking urban history since 1980." In contrast to these positions, however, I argue that North American urban history has never been more intellectually invigorating than at present. Where some condemn the broad constructions of "urban" and characterize today's scholarship as lacking analytic rigor, I perceive increasingly sophisticated efforts to understand how the city as space intersects the urbanization process. While some decry the loss of a single integrated interpretation, I salute studies that recognize the full complexity of experiences for different metropolitan cohorts.

To those scholars who criticize urban history's insularity, I point out the burgeoning literature that connects the everyday cultural experiences of urban North Americans with larger social processes and issues of historical analysis.

Such a diverse and rapidly evolving field defies attempts to summarize the state of its scholarship, however, particularly in an essay of this size. I have therefore focused on a few lines of inquiry that illustrate some of the most intriguing recent scholarship on the urban history of Canada and the United States. Those themes are class and the city, housing studies, urban life and politics, city-suburb relationships, and race and the metropolis. In selecting these topics, I have been guided by my own expertise, but have had to make hard choices due to space limitations. I regret omitting work on the urban environment and urban commerce, and I have left the themes of technology, immigration, and institutional politics in the good hands of scholars more qualified to assess them. I have woven work on gender through each theme rather than attend to it in a separate section. For the five topics receiving detailed attention, I ask the reader's forbearance.
There is overlap between categories, but these interconnections are some of the developments energizing our field.

One cannot review North American urban history without engaging the issue of what difference the border makes. Nonetheless, readers will see that most of the literature cited herein either ignores the issue or assumes that cities in Canada and the United States share more similarities than differences. This article will not provide a systematic discussion of the matter, nor could it. The situation is complicated. In my own specialization on suburbia, summary judgments about national difference become mired in regional contrasts, the impact of racial-ethnic cultures, the path dependency of certain kinds of land use, real estate, and transportation patterns in particular cities, and the shifts in U.S. and Canadian policies at different levels of government over time. A recent exchange between Martin Wexler and Richard Harris on housing policies illustrates the expertise and texture of argument needed to sort through the issue. If we are serious about studying whether and how Canadian and U.S. cities resemble or diverge from one another, and in what dimensions, we have our work cut out for us and should begin by trying to suspend any cultural or political assumptions we bring to the issue. Comparative research is essential, as Richard Harris has observed. Scholars need to question even such conventional assertions as that racial conflict has had a stronger impact on American urban forms or that Canada’s urban dwellers practice a tolerant multiculturalism. There is more to be learned about how race and ethnicity, gender, religion, and class interact with urban forms and cultures on both sides of the border.

All of the themes developed below, in fact, offer useful and vital tools for thinking about North American cities, beginning with imaginative interdisciplinary scholarship. Another improvement is the serious analysis of urban places, not as backdrops to history, but as players that actively structure metropolitan life. A third promising trend is the effort to re-connect urban experience — such as housing, community building, neighborhood festivals, and reform campaigns — with urban politics. Some of the best current work analyzes how power and politics permeate everyday urban lifeways at the level of the household and neighborhood. Similarly, and on the reverse side of that equation, several intriguing histories study local urban processes for the light they shed on larger issues of North American history. Cultural approaches have been useful in recovering the lives of racial, ethnic, and lesbian or gay subgroups and in studying urban and suburban cohorts of different social classes. When cultural studies are supplemented with research encompassing the social and economic underpinnings of urban places, the result is especially powerful. A subcategory of such scholarship might be called insurgent histories, following Leonie Saintcock’s usage. These are studies that place issues of cultural difference and social power at the center of their research and challenge “official stories” of urban development. Several good recent cultural histories, insurgent and otherwise, have challenged our common wisdom about how cities and suburbs work and cautioned scholars to approach their topics with fresh eyes and an open mind. In that spirit, let us examine these themes and assess their contributions to the field.

**Class and the City**

In one of the more astute reviews of recent urban history, Howard Gillette observed that few cultural histories of urban communities paid attention to the relationships between these groups and urban space. How does the changing form of the urban built environment interact with the people who live there and, in turn, with larger social and economic processes? These questions inform a richly suggestive set of studies exploring the relationships between social class formation, class culture, and the built environment. Following Stuart Blumin’s assertion that class is an empirical proposition, scholars have studied the full range of class communities, as Andrew C. Holman puts it, “from the finite worlds of the workplace, neighborhood, market, public street and square, and domestic circle.” The best analyses show how spatial change and class formation were “interactive processes,” as David Scobey argues in *Empire City: The Making and Meaning of the New York City Landscape* (2002). Reform professionals, civic-minded capitalists, and property developers in Gilded Age New York, he suggests, employed the real estate economy to produce a cityscape that promoted capitalist growth, civilizing order, commercial power, and their own class authority. In smaller studies that pack genuine surprise value, James Borchert, Molly Berger, and Richard Dennis analyze residential hotels as key media through which elite social life was staged and reproduced in Pittsburgh, Manhattan, and numerous Canadian cities.

Bourgeois identity formation is the subject of three books that focus on the nexus of class and the social, economic, and cultural changes that shaped industrial cities after 1840. In *The Monied Metropolis: New York and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850–1896* (1999), Sven Beckert studies the emergence of a national upper class by analyzing the structure of the New York economy, the place of bourgeois workers within it, their social and cultural organization, dispositions, and collective actions. In *Provincial Lives: Middle-Class Experience in the Antebellum Middle West* (1999), Timothy Mahoney reconstructs the system of gentility social elites of midwestern American river towns created to consolidate their power but shows how the economic forces and integrated social networks gathering in the nation’s major metropolitan centres increasingly circumscribed their lives. In *A Sense of Their Duty: Middle-Class Formation in Victorian Ontario Towns* (2000), Andrew Holman analyzes the intertwining structural and cultural phenomena that middle-class Canadians won into the new urban societies of Galt and Goderich, Ontario. Although none of these books assesses the impact of social class formation on urban space as fully as *Empire City*, each considers how citizens refashioned domestic, leisure, and business environments to further class interests. Holman, for example, shows middle-class culture
influencing the physical environment through public efforts to improve beautification and infrastructure and private efforts to build, furnish, and properly occupy bourgeois homes.\textsuperscript{34} John Hagopian’s article on Dickson’s Hill in Galt nicely supplements Holman’s book by delineating how economic and cultural forces interacted with middle class community building and urbanization to produce a cultivated landscape of single-family homes.\textsuperscript{35}

All of these studies could profit from a careful distinction between upper- and professional-managerial-class urban dwellers, however. The latter cohort’s emergence during the second half of the nineteenth century profoundly affected the design and management of North American cities as professional-managerial activists re-formed the metropolitan environment, embedding their own culture in its landscape and institutions.\textsuperscript{36} In a time of increasing social inequalities, their solutions were predicated on class hierarchies that reinforced the reformers’ cultural authority as they provided modest amelioration of conditions for the working poor.\textsuperscript{37} Sean Purdy depicts this dynamic aptly in a recent article on early twentieth-century Canadian housing reform, as does Daniel Walkowitz when he links social work to middle-class identity formation through the mechanism of othering its clientele.\textsuperscript{38} Working With Class: Social Workers and the Politics of Middle Class Identity (1999) also remedies the excision of women’s agency in the shaping of cities seen especially in Scobery’s and Mahoney’s studies. Holman, Purdy, Shannon Jackson, Lori Ginzberg, and Marta Gutman, among others, evaluate the environmental reform work of elite women as a function of upper- or middle-class formation.\textsuperscript{39} In a wonderfully detailed study of the brokering of social power in turn-of-the-century Buffalo, Mary Rockwell assigns women the central role in increasing and maintaining the urban upper-class family’s wealth and social power, while Molly Berger demonstrates how new luxury construction enabled similar kinds of social and economic transactions in New York City.\textsuperscript{40}

The professional-managerial class undoubtedly exercised its greatest influence on the metropolitan built environment in the suburbs. Planned, exclusive suburbs may be considered the material embodiments of professional-managerial class formation, as my own research has shown.\textsuperscript{41} During the twentieth century, the new class enshrined this homogeneous, low-density, and urbane environment of single-family homes as the common sense of modern middle-class living. Larry McCann has analyzed how residents, land developers, builders, planners, financial institutions, and government agencies negotiated and ultimately regulated this formula in "Suburbs of Desire: The Suburban Landscape of Canadian Cities, c. 1900–1950," (1999).\textsuperscript{42} Studying mainstream suburban imagery can take us only so far in comprehending the metropolis, however. As Peter Ward documented in A History of Domestic Space: Privacy and the Canadian Home, only one in four dwellings in Montreal and Quebec City was a detached, single-family home in 1920, compared to 90% in Winnipeg or Vancouver.\textsuperscript{43} Moreover, any standardized landscape is vulnerable to reinterpretations and reuses that undermine its intended ideological meanings.\textsuperscript{44} We do well to remember that such transgressions occurred in upper-middle class enclaves, as well as in working-class communities where scholars more commonly look for them.\textsuperscript{45}

Urbanists should welcome studies of bourgeois power to discern the multi-level impact of elites on the shape of North American metropolitan environments.\textsuperscript{46} As Beckert intones, “their access to capital, their ability to forge dense social networks, their influence on the state, and their capacity to formulate ideas explaining the world to themselves and to others have stamped the lives of all Americans, independent of race, class, and gender, along with our natural and built environment.”\textsuperscript{47} A similar statement could be tendered about Canadian cities. But in neither case does a focus on the bourgeois role in city building tell the whole story or encompass the entire urban landscape. Not even the most prosperous neighbourhoods or business districts were the product of elite culture. Construction workers, tradesmen, domestic servants, neighbourhood activists, and working households shared in their creation and use. Sections of the metropolis where they exercised greater influence often constituted – to elites, anyway – a place apart.\textsuperscript{48}

Several splendid histories of working-class communities enable scholars to comprehend their nature.\textsuperscript{49} One of the best, Richard Harris’s Unplanned Suburbs: Toronto’s American Tragedy, 1900 to 1950 (1996), goes beyond documenting the omnipresence of blue-collar suburbs in the metropolitan industrial landscape, to recovering workers’ strategies for owning their homes, and the class-inflected uses to which they put them.\textsuperscript{50} Andrew Wiese’s forthcoming Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization Since 1916 (2003) establishes that African Americans migrated to U.S. suburbs early on in substantial numbers and he catalogues how and why black suburbs differed from their white middle-class counterparts.\textsuperscript{51} These books employ interdisciplinary research strategies that frame community building as a process in which social and economic constraints interacted with culture and lived experiences to produce a suburban landscape. They accord working class actors agency to shape their communities. Most important, Harris and Lewis pose two key questions: Did working-class suburbanites lead a distinctive way of life? To what extent is the metropolis the product of their cultures rather than elite power? Other urbanists are asking similar questions focusing on race and ethnicity.\textsuperscript{52} In “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” Robin Kelley applies James Scott’s notion of infrapolitics to uncover the daily actions, stifled thoughts, and hidden transcripts black people employed to construct a culture of opposition and the social spaces in which to practice it.\textsuperscript{53} Scholars working on white mainstream communities will need to adapt a parallel research strategy so that comparisons are empirically substantiated and do not depend on mass-mediated representations of middle class lifestyles.\textsuperscript{54}
The most persistent cultural representations of urban subcultures and built environments concern “underclass” residents of “slums” or inner city “ghettos” in the United States. In the opening chapter of Yo’ Mama’s Dysfunktional: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America (1997), Kelley indicts social scientists “for turning ghetto residents into an undifferentiated mass” and pathologizing their behavior. Several recent studies, including Lewis’s In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia (1991) and Kelley’s Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class (1994) have begun the task of understanding racial-ethnic urban communities from the inside out. Elizabeth Clark-Lewis advocates using ethnography and material culture studies to capture how people actually lived in cities and transcended urban problems. For imaginative, if disparate, treatments of inner-city living experiences, one can do no better than Camillo José Vergara’s, The New Urban Ghetto (1997), Farah Jasmine Griffin’s “Who Set You Flowin?” The African American Migration Narrative (1996), Hannah Jopling’s, “Re-membered Communities: Gott’s Court and Hell Point in Annapolis, MD, 1900–1950,” (1998), and Luis Aponte-Parés’s, “Appropriating Place in Puerto Rican Barrios: Preserving Contemporary Urban Landscapes,” (2000). Steven Gregory’s Black Corona: Race and the Politics of Place in an Urban Community (1999), an insurgent history like Harris’s and Wiese’s books, condemns the tropes ‘black ghetto’ and ‘inner city’ for masking inequalities in economic and political resources and underscores Coronans’ efforts to lobby for better treatment. Similar kinds of “scripts” – to invoke Earl Lewis’s term – for fighting to “improve[ing] conditions at home because home was a place worth improving” deserve scholarly attention. They are the kinds of political acts that connected ordinary urban dwellers with the pressing historical and social justice issues of the day.

Housing Studies

Housing studies provide a window onto understanding one range of strategies that urban North Americans used to improve their economic standing and quality of life. Canadian geographers have produced the best of these. They explore a most fruitful set of questions. How was housing developed, built, and managed? How did households strategize to own or rent in a particular location and why? What quality of life resulted from their decisions? Richard Harris and Robert Lewis, in their combined collaborative and individual research, provide the most comprehensive answers because they integrate housing into an ambitious analysis of urbanization processes. Their interpretation encompasses industrial deconcentration; land development; residential strategies that factor in job location, transportation, and putting the home site to productive uses; home-building techniques; and the municipal regulatory environment or lack thereof in early twentieth-century suburbs. Several article-length studies contribute further insights concerning the availability, affordability, and desirability of certain types of shelter for identifiable populations. Harris & Send-buehler and Robert Robson examine the affordability and financing of housing for low-income residents in Hamilton and the Northwest Territories. Harris and Gilliland & Olson consider the desirability of homeownership and tenancy for working families in Toronto and Montreal, while David Burley analyzes what drew landlords to invest in rental accommodations during changing economic circumstances. Larry McCann has assessed both the conceptual fluidity and the planning and zoning mechanisms that, he argues, underwrote the desirability of suburban living throughout twentieth-century Canada. In a richly suggestive article, Marc H. Choko compares housing types, values, and tenancy among four ethnic populations in five cities. French Canadians, he discovers, were as invested in homeownership as English Canadians in the early twentieth century, a finding that challenges several longstanding assumptions about who occupied what kinds of dwellings in Canadian cities and why. Recent studies have documented a much broader range of housing types than ever before, particularly for middle- to lower-income urban dwellers. They include public housing, complexes, rear tenement or alley dwellings, marginal and manufactured housing, apartment houses and residency hotels, bungalows, cape cods, modern ranch, and other suburban single-family homes, nurses’ residences and domestic shelters, casitas, and suburban cases, and federally sponsored homes and communities related to national defense emergencies. In addition, three surveys of housing apply the insights of social history to provide new, if overly broad, interpretations of everyday domestic architecture in Canada and the United States.

The best of these studies contribute good analyses of what housing means to particular cohorts. Investigating questions of meaning enables scholars to understand not only how housing types embody the priorities and constraints of past cultures and economies, but how individuals experience and shape urban space. Working-class households, for example, chose rental housing or homeownership according to a complex calculus of survival strategies that included affordability, flexibility to relocate to find work, accommodation of kinship networks, changes in the deployment of household labor, and the ability to put house and yard to productive use. These arguments complicate more abstract interpretations of meaning, such as Ward’s assertion that “domestic privacy” was the sine qua non of daily life in Canada or Doucet & Weaver’s suggestion that “individualism” underlay the desire for property ownership among immigrants from English backgrounds. Gender analyses challenge the utility of the pub-
lic/private dichotomy in characterizing how women interact with domestic space. For example, they reveal married women embracing homeownership as a life insurance strategy, single women shaping space to mitigate its prescriptive influences, and homeless women negotiating the ambiguities of “living inside” domestic shelters.85

Indeed, several scholars demonstrate how specific groups defined the meanings of housing in ways contrasting with state-sanctioned forms and ideologies.86 Jill Wade has outlined the logics that inspired residents in Vancouver to maintain powerful emotional ties to shacks, cheap lodging houses, and jungles.87 Andrew Wiese, David Schuyler, and Earl Lewis note African Americans’ strong attachment to black enclaves, where “home meant both the household and the community,” and municipal planning incited suspicion and hostility.88 Kelly Quinn, on the other hand, documents the aspirations and expectations black Americans brought to public housing as they made application to live in Langston Terrace, demanding their right to rationally planned modern housing.89 In an astute study of the politics of everyday space in East Los Angeles, Margaret Crawford sets out the tactics Chicano households use to “decommodify” their suburban houses, investing them with personal and cultural identity, adapting their form in distinctive ways.90 Even white middle-class families transgressed standardized housing prescriptions, as Annemarie Adams shows in her analysis of how family members “misused” both the site plan and the interior features of their new Eichler houses in suburban California.91

**Urban Life and Politics**

The strategies, tactics, and transgressions used by different groups to influence their circumstances are significant for two reasons. They remind us of the ways ordinary North Americans interacted with urban space, shaping their habitations and neighbourhoods. They also constitute a local politics, recording urban dwellers acting on their own behalf in ways that made sense to them. Scholars, in other words, are redefining their understanding of politics, expanding their purview from elections and party agendas to political behaviour based in the family, the household, women’s organizations, and neighbourhood social actions, as Robin D. G. Kelley and Philip Ethington have urged.92 The new emphasis centres on removing the barriers between political and social history, recovering how citizens experienced and responded to the processes and policies of urbanization.93 Many of the housing articles cited above make exactly these kinds of connections. Harris, for example, depicts working-class families caught up in industrial deconcentration marshalling their resources to own property and build a shack in low-amenity settlements.94 Sandbuehler & Gilliland analyze the *Ontario Housing Act* of 1919, crafted in part to reform these unplanned suburbs by prescribing redesigned neighbourhoods based on the rationalized land-use planning of the middle class.95 Jill Wade delineates a similar dialectic between the occupants of marginal housing and the bureaucrats evicting or relocating them.96 One of the strongest accounts of local political culture as it played out in an American neighbourhood, however, is Becky M. Nicolaides’ *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920–1965* (2002). In a richly textured account that weaves together work, housing, leisure and consumption practices, racism, municipal power, and political sensibilities, Nicolaides tells a well-rounded story of suburban residents “seeking family security in a hostile capitalist economy.”97

Another noteworthy body of scholarship on urban political culture focuses on participation in the public sphere, especially contests over mass culture and the use of public space.98 While this material has been well reviewed elsewhere, it is worth mentioning four particular lines of inquiry, beginning with studies that focus on class, racial-ethnic, or sexual subcultures occupying, squaring off over, or differently interpreting parks, streets, strips, or places of leisure.99 Studies of women in the public sphere examine women intervening in the processes of urbanization, directly shaping the institutions, politics, lifeways, and physical layout of cities.100 Closely related is scholarship analyzing the politics of development of specific social institutions, e.g., libraries, schools, churches, colleges, settlement houses, and mutual benefit associations.101 Urban histories of consumption, most notably the work of Lizabeth Cohen, explore the changing shape of cities through the politics and cultures of consumer activities.102 These studies of politics as a local process benefit from the influence of subcultural theory, discourse theory, and theories of intersectionality (i.e., theories showing the interacting dimensions of inequality, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality).103 They illustrate how a diverse range of urbanites contributed to the urban polity and shaped both the meanings and physical features of urban space. Their principal liability, as Timothy Gilfoyle has pointed out, is their lack of attention to official power structures. This is not an either/or proposition, however, but a both/and. We need more studies that analyze the relationships between official and ordinary local politics, as Clyde Woods’s *Development Arrested*, Stephen Gregory’s *Black Corona*, Timothy Mahoney’s *Provincial Lives*, and Harris’s and Lewis’s collaborative articles do.104 Important interpretations of municipal politics, such as Jon Teaford’s argument that professional elites created and presided over modern city services and urban infrastructures still need to draw connections between these new agents of municipal authority, local political cultures of urban elites, and broader structural lines of power in capitalist economies.105 Urban histories in general could profit from the insights of a growing literature on global capitalism, immigration, and transnationalism. A good place to start is Nilal Perera’s trans-city analysis, “Exploring Columbo” (1996), which asks scholars to think through the relevance of urban developments in the former capital of Sri Lanka for a proper understanding of New York.106

Among the most useful treatments of official urban politics, especially for comparative purposes, are those that concen-
trate on federal housing policies. Scholars focusing on either side of the border have asked what governments do for housing and what housing does for governments. Those seeking answers to the first question consider the differences between the housing systems of Canada and the United States. U.S. policies subsidize homeownership, uphold the private market, and seem disinclined to distribute good housing equitably to low-income families, as John Bauman and Gail Radford have established. The role of the Canadian government, however, is less straightforward. According to Paul André Linteau and Sean Purdy, Canada has intervened steadily in the market and sanctioned policies that strengthen the labour force and the nuclear family, despite its lesser subsidy of homeownership. But Richard Harris points out that Canada has historically been less proactive than its cousin to the south, having waited until the late 1940s to enter the public-housing business. These and other contrasts have been delineated in more detail by scholars examining federal housing policies during and after national defense emergencies.

Those probing the second question—what housing does for governments—complicate the arguments. For every researcher who, like L. J. Evenden, concludes that wartime housing established a common citizenship experience and “a distinctive Canadian residential landscape,” others charge that objectives such as rationalizing governmental administration prevailed over the provision of suitable housing and that, as was the case in the U.S., programs did not reach the neediest citizens. And although Kristin Szylvian argues correctly that U.S. housing policies aimed to quell labour unrest and actively opposed creating a noncommercial sector in the market, they did nonetheless elevate physical standards for worker housing and profoundly influence what got built in the private market and where. Overlooked in these discussions, however, are recent analyses of the innovations in planning, design, materials, construction processes, and economies of scale that characterized the wartime housing efforts. Both nations generated effective strategies for addressing shortages of affordable housing when they had to. More research on these programs might yield perspectives useful for intervening in present day housing crises.

**City-Suburb Relationships**

All of the themes previously mentioned—class and the city, housing, and urban life and politics—are helping scholars reassess what they think they know about the relationships between cities and suburbs. Although this new line of inquiry engages many researchers at present, it originated in the collaborative work of Richard Harris and Robert Lewis. Their new synthesis contributes three observations reverberating among urban and especially suburban historians today. The first is Lewis’s discovery that industrial deconcentration has been underway since the 1850s. In *Manufacturing Montreal: The Making of an Industrial Landscape, 1850 to 1930* (2000), Lewis documented the dynamics that stimulated the growth of successive waves of manufacturing districts on the metropolitan fringe of Montreal and other North American cities. Several developments followed this flow of industrial capital from the center to the periphery: working-class residential districts, transportation facilities, and other metropolitan services. That industry led the way to the suburbs and did so well in advance of World War II challenges received wisdom about urban geography, technological spurs to suburban development, and the timing of worker migration to the periphery. It also establishes that multinucleated metropolises are not a post-1970s phenomenon associated with high-tech growth corridors. Lewis’s argument has been reinforced by political scientist Todd Gardner’s analysis of census data, Harris’s and Lewis’s research on Toronto, and a series of case studies of other cities, including Greg Hise’s excellent account of the public/private coordination of the dispersion of industry, housing, and commerce prior to World War II in *Magnetic Los Angeles: Planning the Twentieth Century Metropolis* (1997).

The second observation is Harris & Lewis’s insistence that North American suburbs always have been heterogeneous, not white, Protestant, middle-class, green and leafy havens peppered with golf courses and superior schools. That neighbourhoods catering to different social classes have existed in historic suburbs should be obvious to any scholar willing to drive through a metropolis with her eyes open, and has been concurrently documented in a series of case studies. This has led to a necessary and fruitful rethinking of what a suburb is—what it looks like as well as who lives there. It has stimulated the categorized proliferation of a more diverse range of suburban types, the exploration of heterogeneity among communities of specific racial-ethnic groups, and the creation of a new category entirely, the “ethnouburbs.” Unfortunately, the discovery of working-class suburbs seems to have bolstered the stereotype of middle-class suburbs. Research on both Canadian and American communities suggests that the social and cultural boundaries between the two—and between consumption-based and production-based lifestyles—may be less transparent than presumed. Urbanists should apply the same fresh eyes and quality of research techniques to the understanding of middle-class lifeways and local politics that scholars like Robin Kelley, Elisa Barkley Brown, and Earl Lewis bring to their study of African American working-class enclaves. We also need a better understanding of the social, economic, and geographical relationships that exist between different components of the metropolis. We know a great deal about what suburbanites thought about cities, but very little about how they viewed and responded to their immediate neighbours. Relationships between suburbs and neighbourhoods formed an essential context in which North Americans experienced metropolitan life.

Harris and Lewis’s third contention—that distinctions between cities and suburbs are not warranted—is more controversial. It has galvanized a lot of rethinking. Certainly one of the central observations on which they base that argument—the proliferation of low-income suburbs and the persistence of high-status inner districts—is accurate. So is the industrial character of whole manufacturing districts on the periphery...
Race and the Metropolis

Given the common wisdom that race has not been a major determining factor in the urban social geography of Canadian cities, “Race and the Metropolis” might seem an odd choice for concluding this review. Recent scholarship on race has tremendous resonance for urbanists, however. For historians of the U.S. experience, race is beginning to take its rightful place as a central organizing scheme for understanding metropolitan development. Scholarship on race exemplifies many of the best practices summarized in my introduction, as I shall reiterate below. More than this, studies of race, cross-fertilized by ideas from African American history, Diaspora and transnational studies, black feminism, and ethnic studies, offer fresh knowledge and suggestive techniques for rethinking North American urbanization. Two related lines of inquiry will illustrate what I mean. Histories of the official politics of housing discrimination, many of them inspired by Arnold Hirsch’s second ghetto thesis, open new windows on de jure racism, and reveal the citizen-local-state and federal relations underlying segregation and containment policies in inglorious detail. Good examples include Raymond Mohl’s narrative of second ghetto formation in ethnically complex Miami; Mark Barron’s comparison of white and black public housing in Marietta, Georgia; David Schuyler’s exposé of urban renewal in Lancaster, Pennsylvania; Amanda Seligman’s indictment of private housing-market discrimination in Chicago; Arnold Hirsch’s discussion of the racial agenda of the Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954; and Catherine Ross and Nancy Green Leigh’s account of structural racism in contemporary inner-city revitalization efforts. Perhaps the premier analysis of racism in a state-sanctioned alliance of local to national economic interests, however, is Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta (1998) by planning historian Clyde Woods. His penetrating interdisciplinary survey ponders the Delta economy’s relationship to broader issues, such as whether systematically planned capitalist economies relentlessly expand social inequalities.

At the same time, Development Arrested shows how working-class African Americans pursued alternative paths of development, in a bluesy counterpart to official economic development efforts. Thus it joins other insurgent histories that probe for the different logics African Americans employed to organize their communities and their lives. Several studies of local politics, white and black, examine resistance and counter-resistance to black integration of white neighborhoods. In Thomas Sugrue’s account of Detroit, Hirsch’s study of Trumbull Park, and Nicolaides’ and Allison Baker’s research on suburban Los Angeles, we learn how working-class whites collapsed the issues of race and housing, forging official politics of whiteness and nativism that reconfigured urban and eventually national politics in the United States in the latter third of the twentieth century. These are suggestive for the texture and complexity with which they delineate racialized thinking, the connections between urban experiences, space, and politics, and between local and national politics. On the other side of the equation, studies of counter-resistance dramatically contradict the notion that African Americans passively endured discrimination in housing, employment, mobility, and urban services. Kenneth Goings and Gerald Smith found that African Americans talked back, fought back, and shot back rather than accommodate to restrictions of the Jim Crow era in Memphis. In a study of memory, place, and urban history in Norfolk, Virginia, Earl Lewis outlined the resourcefulness of community members who deployed infrapolitics, coded communications, and geography to defend home and neighbourhood, adjusting as conditions warranted. In a similar vein, Elsa Barkley Brown and Gregg Kimball have mapped the cultural meanings black Richmonders gave to city spaces to reveal “the everyday rituals of urban life and the moral geography of southern urbanization.”

Examples such as these could inspire richly textured examinations of additional ethnic, religious, regional, and transnational urban subgroups, from Asian businessmen settling in Vancouver, heterolocal Eastern European communities in greater Washington, D.C., Barbadian migrants to New York and Toronto, and French Canadian
households in the province of Quebec.\textsuperscript{151} No comprehensive understanding of urban processes can occur without this quality of analysis of how urban dwellers used forms and space and crafted a local politics. Nor can a single interpretation hope to capture the range of experiences that shaped a given city.

**Conclusion**

Given the vitality and richness of the studies reviewed in this essay, it would be counterproductive to conclude by calling for renewed efforts to forge a grand synthesis to guide the future of North American urban history. Scholarship completed since the late 1980s has demonstrated the merits of a different \textit{modus operandi}. One might measure the success of our subfield not so much by focusing on the most widely read urban histories but by measuring, instead, how widely we read.\textsuperscript{152} The best literature in any of the themes cited above makes a good argument for interdisciplinarity and for continuing to expand the intellectual cross-fertilization that comes from familiarizing ourselves with research in neighbouring disciplines. All urban historians, for example, benefit from listening to the rhythms of life that emanate from different kinds of places,\textsuperscript{153} internally complex places,\textsuperscript{154} subgroups fighting for spaces,\textsuperscript{155} and groups, e.g., Pacific Rim migrants, for whom discriminatory practices were designed to minimize their physical traces.\textsuperscript{156} Such inter- and multi-disciplinary work offers the best prospect for developing an accurate and integrated urban history.\textsuperscript{157} As Howard Gillette argued in 1990, it may also re-infuse our field with the kind of bold social commentary that prompted a critic like Sam Bass Warner to study the history of cities. It may inspire and equip historians who desire to do so to delineate how contemporary social and policy issues intersect with historic processes of urbanization.\textsuperscript{158}

We will have achieved a constructive level of maturity in urban history when scholars can turn fresh eyes on a topic and challenge its common wisdom. The ability to see beyond what we think we know becomes an especially potent asset when combined with a commitment to interdisciplinary thinking about urban experiences and spaces. We could fruitfully apply some novel ideas from studies of race and the metropolis to a broad range of urban histories, by way of illustration. The critical scrutiny of binary racial thinking that has recently energized racial-ethnic studies might prove useful for comprehending late-twentieth-century North American cities in light of transnational and new immigrant socio-geographic migrations.\textsuperscript{159} Urbanists might consider re-periodizing urban history from the perspectives of specific racial-ethnic populations, as scholars of the Great Migration have done for research on U.S. cities.\textsuperscript{160} Important insights might come from comparing internal and international migration, fields whose studies usually constitute separate literatures, as Joe Trotter has noted.\textsuperscript{161} Specialists on Canadian cities could rethink how urban subgroups fare in negotiating local politics and power relations by striving to write insurgent histories, borrowing selective insights from scholars who understand American cities through the prism of race.\textsuperscript{162} All urbanists might benefit from comparative research, to consider, for example, what analyses of ethnicity and power in various colonial and post-colonial cities around the globe might offer for understanding the changing ethnic dynamics of North American cities over time.\textsuperscript{163} Ultimately, a field that analyses the development of the city as a process central to nation building ought to question when and whether the national is the appropriate geographical scale for understanding urbanization processes and experiences.\textsuperscript{164} If urbanists can sustain the interrogative spirit of this different \textit{modus operandi}, we should have another two decades of creative ferment to engage us.

**Notes**


2. These developments have been on abundant display at recent biennial meetings and in the journals associated with the two principal professional societies that attract North American urban history scholars: the Urban History Association (which has just begun holding biennial meetings in even years) and the Society for American City and Regional Planning History (which holds biennial meetings in odd years). Both the JUH (1974–) and the Journal of Planning History (2002–) are published by Sage.


17. See, for example, Richard Harris, Unplanned Suburbs: Toronto’s American Tragedy, 1900 to 1950 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Uni­versity Press, 1998).

18. See, for example, David Scobey, Empire City: The Making and Meaning of the New York City Landscape (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002) and Robert Lewis, Manufacturing Mont­real.


20. See, for example, the articles in “Special Issue: The New African American Urban History," ed. Goings and Mohl.


28. Scobey, Empire City, 11.

29. Ibid, 4, 10–11.


33. Holman, A Sense of Their Duty.

34. Ibid., 103–4.


42. Beckert, Monied Metropolis, 332–33.


50. Harris, Constructors, chs. 4-5, pp. 11, 13; Robert Lewis, Manufacturing.

51. Wiese, American Studies.

52. Woods, Development Arrested.

53. Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem.”

54. It is sometimes the case that scholars of working-class culture compare it with middle-class prescriptive literature rather than empirically documented middle-class lifeways. See for example, Harris, Unplanned Suburbs, ch. 4; Gary Cross, “The Suburban Weekend: Perspectives on a Vanishing Twentieth Century Dream,” in Visions of Suburbia, ed. R. Silverstone (London: Routledge, 1997), 112.


51. Wiese, Places of Their Own; Wiese, “The Other Suburbanites”.


53. Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem.”


84 Ward, *Historic of Domestic Space*, 4; Doucet and Weaver, *Housing the North American City*.


86 Matt Senduebeler andJayce Gilliland, “...to produce the highest type of manhood and womanhood:” *The Ontario Housing Act, 1919, and a New Suburban Ideal,* *UHR* 26:2 (1998), 42-55.

87 Wade, “Home or Homelessness?”


92. Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem,” p. 78; Philip J. Ethington, “Recasting Urban Political History: Gender, the Public, the Householder, and Political Participation in Boston and San Francisco during the Progressive Era,” SSF 16:2 (1992), 302.


94. Harris, Unplanned Suburbs.

95. Sendbuehler & Gilliland, “...to produce the highest kind,” p. 44.

96. Unplanned Suburbs.

97. Nicolaides, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (Cambridge, 1989); Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in Habermas and the Public Sphere, ed. C. Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 103–42.


104. Woods, Development Arrested; Gregory, Black Corona; Mahoney, Provincial Lives; Harris and Lewis, “Geography of North American Cities and Suburbs.”

105. Teaford, An Unheralded Triumph; David Harvey, Spaces of Hope (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).


110. I thank Richard Harris for clarifying his position on this issue in a private communication. See Harris, "More American."


112. Evenden, "Wartime Housing," 41–42; Wade, "Home or Homelessness"; Robson, "Housing in the Northeast Territories"; Sendbuehler & Gilliland, "to produce the highest type," 62.


116. Lewis, Manufacturing Montreal, see 6–7.


120. Harris, Unplanned Suburbs; Lewis, Manufacturing Montreal; and Wiese, "The Other Suburbanites," are good examples of this re-thinking exercise.


126. Kelley, "We Are Not What We Seem"; Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere"; Lewis, In Their Own Interests.


128. Ibid., 284.

129. Ibid., 265–70; Lewis, "Special Issue: Industrial Suburbanization"; Lewis, Manufacturing Montreal.


133. Clark-Lewis, "Urban History: State of the Art."


141. See for example, suggestive concepts such as infra-politics, as Kelley uses it in “We Are Not What We Seem”: intersectionality, as developed by black feminist thought in Patricia Hill Collins, Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) and summarized by Weber, Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality; power relations, as set out in racial formation theories in Michael Omi and Howard Winant, Racial Formation in the United States: from the 1960s to the 1990s (New York: Routledge, 1994) and Lisa Lowe, Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); transnationalism, as developed in Basch, Glick-Schiller, Blanc, Nations Unbound; and mestizaje, in Gloria Anzaldua, Borderlands/La Frontera (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999).


144. Woods, Development Arrested.

145. Ibid.

146. Gregory, Black Corona; Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem”; Wiese, Places of Their Own; Elsa Barkley Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere”; Nieves, “They Gave Their Hearts and Lives to It.”


149. Lewis, In Their Own Interests; “Connecting Memory”; Clark-Lewis, “Urban History: State of the Art”; Thomas, “Racial Inequality and Empowerment.”


153. Wiese, “The Other Suburbanites.”


155. Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem”; Goings & Smith, “‘Unhidden’ Transcripts.”

156. Dubrow and Graves, Sento at Sixth and Main.


