

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Kimbley, Laurel, comp. and Canning-Dew, Jo-Ann, ed. *Hastings and Main: Stories from an Inner City Neighbourhood*. Vancouver: New Star, 1987. Pp. 158. Illustrations. \$9.95

Patricia E. Roy

Volume 17, numéro 2, octobre 1988

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017664ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017664ar>

[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

Roy, P. E. (1988). Compte rendu de [Kimbley, Laurel, comp. and Canning-Dew, Jo-Ann, ed. *Hastings and Main: Stories from an Inner City Neighbourhood*. Vancouver: New Star, 1987. Pp. 158. Illustrations. \$9.95]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 17(2), 128–129. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017664ar>

thirties in Calgary, where the Cohens had moved after various economic disasters in Winnipeg. Cohen explains how the old-time drummers operated, selling small products to prairie stores, constantly seeking novelties or lines to sell. The combined income and labour of six brothers and their parents sustained the small business and as they scattered from Vancouver to Montreal, they established a small network to acquire and distribute products like kitchenware and jewellery. While the original Saan store was opened (Albert Cohen's brother Samuel is credited with developing the chain) to retail war surplus, the focus remained wholesaling. The account of the wholesale trade, especially scouting out imported and domestic goods, is fascinating for the thirties, forties and fifties.

In the fifties, Gendis was transformed. Without attributing success to virtue or brilliance, Cohen explains the marketing effectiveness Gendis developed and the two key products it sold. Cohen deftly summarizes the technological and commercial environments that led to the break-throughs of Papermate as an effective ball-point pen and Sony as a superb transistor radio. He also explains the problems and strategies Gendis used to distribute and to strengthen its distribution once the products became huge sellers. The efforts to maintain exclusive national distribution were crucial in both cases. Indeed, Gendis is the only remaining joint-venture Sony has in the world and that was only preserved in the seventies after Cohen fought off expansionist pressure from Sony USA. Earnings from the distributorships led to expansion into retailing in the sixties and seventies and Gendis now operates three chains with more than four hundred stores.

There is a refreshing modesty and clear exposition in the Gendis story, although Cohen's style of reconstructing conversations is unsettling to the historian. Cohen reflects on the main negotiations that led to key company acquisitions and

expansion. But the volume is not a comprehensive corporate history replete with vast financial details. Most interesting to the history of Winnipeg and Canadian cities is the pattern of development from consumer-goods distributor serving local markets to a nation-wide operation diversifying from wholesale to retail trade with a great deal of real estate assembled on the way. Winnipeg became the centre for Gendis only because Albert, the key acquirer of Papermate and Sony, had returned there after World War II. There are no particular locational advantages to Winnipeg. Sony once urged Gendis to relocate to Toronto as the focus of the retail stores in Ontario and Quebec. Cohen is quick to emphasize his reliance on Winnipeg financial and legal talent. Key moves in the expansion of Gendis as a major retailer and a public company were assisted by one organization derived from the grain trade. The Richardson financial organization provided crucial advice and service. (Ironically, Richardson Securities, like another pivotal Winnipeg business institution, the Hudson's Bay Company, recently transferred its main operations to Toronto.) Taken together, the two books provide urban historians with close studies of Winnipeg as a commercial centre. Levine's book is one of the very few studies of the history of Canadian exchanges. Urban scholars will find it interesting for its portrait of the grain trade and urban-rural commercial tension even if they will still rely on Artibise and Bellan for the context of Winnipeg's commercial roles. Cohen's memoir explains the typical Winnipeg economic institution, the commercial agency. Together the books portray key sources of Winnipeg's development and to help to suggest why that development has been rather stately since the 1920s.

Barry Ferguson
St John's College
University of Manitoba

Kimbley, Laurel, comp. and Canning-Dew, Jo-Ann, ed. *Hastings and Main: Stories from an Inner City Neighbourhood*. Vancouver: New Star, 1987. Pp. 158. Illustrations. \$9.95.

As a child in the 1950s, I had to make frequent visits to an orthodontist in downtown Vancouver. The only prospect of pleasure in these trips was the opportunity to ride the interurban from my home in New Westminster. Alas, my mother insisted that unless she or another adult accompanied me, I had to travel on the bus. Her reason was simple. The tram depot at Hastings and Carrall was so close to Hastings and Main that it was not a proper place for a young girl on her own. Thus, Hastings and Main had an image of mystery and dubious respectability. Indeed, Hastings and Main, Vancouver's oldest neighbourhood, was and is Skid Road.

This collection of twenty oral histories began in 1980 as a seniors' project at the Carnegie Centre, the community centre in what had been the Carnegie Public Library. It includes one reminiscence of the 1890s, but it also offers the memories of two individuals born in the 1940s! For those who grew up in the area in the late 19th century and the early decades of the 20th, there were plenty of opportunities to swim in Burrard Inlet, to play soccer at Larwill park, or to watch adults playing organized baseball. Even young people, however, were aware of the presence of bawdy houses and "the dope scene." The most extensive and vivid recollections, however, are of the relief camps and demonstrations of the unemployed in the 1930s. Significantly, the only individual repeatedly mentioned is "Gerry" McGeer, the mayor who read the Riot Act in 1935.

In selecting the recollections for publication, Jo-Ann Cannington-Dew, the editor, sought to "reflect the profile of the neighbourhood" (p. 15). Thus, eighty per cent of the individuals represented are men. Many worked in the resource industries and

transportation, the commercial activities most closely linked with the neighbourhood. A quarter of the interviewees, several of them veterans of World War II or the Korean War, admit to being ex-alcoholics and one is self-confessed ex-heroin addict. Two, including a murderer, have criminal records. Their stories confirm the traditional outsiders' view of Hastings and Main.

If the selection is really representative of the community, however, it dispels several assumptions. Immigrants are conspicuous by their absence. A former Texan is the only interviewee who was not born in Canada. In fact, five of the contributors were born in Vancouver and three, including two native Indians, were born elsewhere in British Columbia; five came from the Prairie provinces; three from Ontario; two from Nova Scotia; and one from Quebec. Second, although several contributors provide no evidence of recent gainful employment, only four indicate that they ever received relief or welfare and two of them referred only to the 1930s. Several, in fact, take pride in the fact that they never sought relief or welfare.

Nevertheless, if my mother could read this book, she would feel vindicated in her refusal to let me go to the tram depot alone. While I was visiting the dentist, a 13-year-old boy was becoming a heroin addict at Hastings and Main. His story, however, has a happy ending. He kicked his habit and became a social worker who, as a professional, perceives Hastings and Main not as Skid Road but as a community. And, he might have added, it's a community of survivors. Residents of Hastings and Main may appear to outsiders as "down and outers" but they are, in fact, very real people with pride in what they have done and what they have overcome. All seem content with their lives and that surely is an accomplishment.

Patricia E. Roy
Department of History
University of Victoria

Annick Germain et Jean-Claude Marsan (dir.), *Aménager l'urbain de Montréal à San Francisco: politiques et design urbains*, Montréal, Editions du Méridien, 1987. 191 pages. (29,95\$)

Depuis une quinzaine d'années, en Amérique du Nord et en Europe de l'Ouest, une partie importante de la classe moyenne, celle des jeunes professionnels fortement scolarisés, dont l'importance numérique s'est remarquablement accrue depuis 1970, a renouvelé le discours sur la ville centrale. Le plus souvent sans enfants (ou avec un seul enfant) tout en bénéficiant de revenus supérieurs à la moyenne, ces couches sociales moyennes ne sont plus intéressées par la banlieue résidentielle. Elles valorisent plutôt la centralité, la diversité sociale et culturelle, la convivialité communautaire. Dans ce contexte, le grand ensemble, horizontal comme vertical, n'a plus sa place. C'est maintenant le projet à échelle humaine, le quartier ou plus exactement l'unité de voisinage qui fait credo. Voilà pourquoi on valorise le cœur des agglomérations, pourquoi on redécouvre!! les charmes des quartiers anciens (y compris le centre-ville), même les plus mal-en-point, dont on idéalise le passé pour mieux valoriser le présent et défendre le potentiel d'aménagement. L'histoire sert ainsi d'alibi à un projet d'appropriation ou de réappropriation physique et symbolique de la ville, du cœur de l'agglomération urbaine.

Dans cet esprit, *Aménager l'urbain de Montréal à San Francisco* est un ouvrage intéressant pour connaître le point de vue des spécialistes de l'aménagement qui font maintenant du design urbain de préférence à la "planification" urbaine. Pour reprendre les propos de O. Bohigas, ce livre donne la parole aux "cercles professionnels, administratifs et universitaires" qui ont inversé leur réponse à "l'alternative entre le plan et le projet", en faveur du "projet ponctuel et concret" (p.74). Ce recueil rassemble les meilleures contributions (onze) faites à deux séries de conférences

publiques tenues à Montréal à l'automne de 1985 et à l'automne de 1986. La première série traitait des places et espaces publics. Le thème de la seconde était la renaissance des centres-villes. *Aménager l'urbain...* est, en outre, l'occasion pour J.-C. Marsan, l'un des éditeurs, de reprendre, en leur donnant un cachet international, les principales thèses sur le passé et sur l'avenir de Montréal qu'il avait déjà présentées dans *Montréal en évolution* (1974) et dans *Montréal: une esquisse du futur* (1983). En particulier, il cherche à évaluer en quoi l'urbanisme de projet pourrait relancer, sur des pistes plus fructueuses, l'aménagement du centre-ville montréalais.

L'ouvrage comprend des contributions d'hommes politiques locaux, de grands commis de l'Etat, de professionnels réputés du secteur privé et d'universitaires. Certains, par ailleurs, combinent plus d'un de ces titres. Les textes vont donc de l'exposé scientifique, de facture universitaire, embrassant de larges concepts, au témoignage d'une expérience locale, au réquisitoire avec une pointe d'émotivé. Le titre de l'ouvrage néglige, toutefois, la dimension européenne qui s'y trouve. En effet, si la moitié des sujets traités sont nord-américains et nous transportent à San Francisco, Toronto, Boston ou Pittsburgh, l'autre moitié nous emmène en Europe de l'Ouest, à Barcelone, à Rome, à Bruxelles ou en région parisienne. Il eut, peut-être, mieux valu, dans le titre, parler de "Barcelone à San Francisco", comme le fait Marsan lui-même en conclusion de son diagnostic sur Montréal (p.36).

Le leitmotiv de ces spécialistes est l'humanisation de l'aménagement de la ville: construire à échelle humaine et ainsi faire prévaloir l'intérêt public à l'ensoleillement, aux espaces verts, au droit à la ville. Le symbole de cette humanisation, l'équipement pivot permettant de transcender la ségrégation des classes sociales et des activités urbaines, c'est la rue (et la place publique). Ce projet d'humaniser les centres