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SOURCES FOR THE HISTORY OF URBAN PLANNING IN CANADA, 1890-1939

By 1912, there was widespread recognition in Canada of an acute shortage of decent housing. A national town planning movement developed because many in the housing reform movement became convinced that the servicing of suburban lots could become so much more efficient through preventive planning, that large numbers of families currently doomed to slum conditions would become able to afford sanitary suburban dwellings. The movement manifested itself in such national conferences as the "First Canadian Housing and Town Planning Conference" held in Winnipeg in 1912,¹ and the separate meeting of Canadian delegates to the National Conference on City Planning convention held at the University of Toronto in 1914.² Soon two national organizations devoted to town planning were formed: the Civic Improvement League of Canada (founded in late 1915) and the Town Planning Institute of Canada (T.P.I.C.), begun in 1919. By the 1920's, town planning consultants such as Horace Seymour, Norman Wilson, A.G. Dalzell, and A.E.K. Bunnell were doing work for cities and towns throughout the country. Moreover, Canadian planners were advocating planning principles which, they believed, might be applied throughout urban Canada.

National bodies were founded, the same consultants gained employment from coast to coast, and planning principles assumed to be generally useful were discussed because by 1912 the rapidly growing cities of Canada experienced some common fundamental causes of ugliness and inefficiency, such as unco-ordinated subdividing, systems of local taxation which often encouraged scattered suburban development, and frequently injurious mixing of land uses. As well, their development was profoundly affected by two advances in transportation technology: the electrified street-car and the automobile.

The most important sources concerning these common problems of urban growth and the principles advanced to deal with them are the speeches, articles and planning reports of members of three groups at the core of the professional wing of the planning and housing movement: architects,

engineers and surveyors.³ The national journals and records of proceedings in which their planning thought and experience were regularly recorded include: the Annual Reports of the Commission of Conservation, The Canadian Architect and Builder, The Canadian Engineer, The Canadian Municipal Journal and its successor, The Municipal Review of Canada, the Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, Town Planning and Conservation of Life, and the T.P.I.C.'s Journal. In addition, similar sources of provincial scope should be consulted, such as the Proceedings of the Association of Ontario Land Surveyors and of the Ontario Association of Architects. Members of the three professions in Canada helped prepare most of the important city planning reports of the period, notably those for Kitchener (1924), Ottawa and Hull (1915), St. John (1922), Toronto (1909; 1929) and Vancouver (1930).⁴ As well, the T.P.I.C. during the mid-1960's conducted a series of taped interviews with veteran planners or their surviving relatives.⁵ The Canadian Institute of Planners kept at its Head Office in Ottawa much valuable material, particularly on the T.P.I.C. The Public Archives of Canada has recently obtained the Seymour papers from Miss Marion Seymour, and -- as of July, 1975 -- was attempting to acquire the Cauchon papers from the National Capital Commission.⁶ It might be observed here that while taped interviews and correspondence add valuable detail to the narrative history of the movement both nationally and locally, they offer little insight into planning ideas not available in the printed sources.

The opportunities for further research in this field for the pre-World War II period are largely at the provincial and local levels. More needs to be learned of the reasons why the provincial planning legislation of the years after 1911 was passed, and about the town planning activities of such provincial bureaucracies as the Ontario Railway and Municipal Board, the office of the Townsite Engineer for Northern Manitoba, the office of the Director of Town Planning of Saskatchewan, and the office bearing the same title in the Alberta government. As well, a number of province-wide pressure groups which campaigned for town planning legislation need more looking into; e.g., the Ontario Housing and Town Planning Association and the British Columbia Technical Association.

Regarding the local level, the author has essayed a sketch of the planning achievements, and of the politics of planning, for each of the major centres where a planning effort seems to have been made, in order to help account for the priorities adopted in the planning advocacy of architects, engineers and surveyors.⁷ A small number of case studies concerning the relationship between politics and planning in this era have been published. For example, Edmund Dale's conclusions regarding Edmonton before 1945 are forcefully summarized in a 1971 article.⁸ Alan Artibise's work on Winnipeg⁹ contains a neat dissection of town planning efforts in that "progressive" burgh before 1914. Wilfrid Eggleston's history of Ottawa lays great stress on the planning role of the National Capital Commission and its forerunners, but might have been more specific concerning the political forces which slowed the remodelling of the capital.¹⁰ More case studies need to be done in this area. Among the possible sources for such studies would be council minutes, the files of the planning commission or equivalent and of the city engineer's department, the records regarding the city at any provincial bureaucracy supervising planning, local newspapers, any files of realtors' and/or property-owners' associations, any material on local planning and housing groups, and -- least reliable -- interviews.

Another fundamental question which only the case study approach can solve concerns the long-range impact of the planning done before World War II. For instance, were the much-touted zoning by-laws of Kitchener (1924) and Vancouver (1928)¹¹ really that much more effective than Edmonton's? How well did the suburban arterial route programme of Tracy leMay, Toronto's City Surveyor, really meet future needs? The urban geographer in particular might try his hand at this kind of research. Assessment of pre-war planning remains incomplete without evaluation of its lasting effects.

One need only add that this brief note has not even touched on the vast subject of post-war planning to drive home the point that a great deal of work must yet be done before a definitive history of urban planning in Canada may be expected. To those interested in the subject, I echo the hearty call of J.S. Woodsworth (made in quite another connection), "Come on in; the water's fine!"

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1. See the accounts in The Canadian Municipal Journal, VIII, 9, Sept. 1912, p. 338; and in The Canadian Engineer, XXIII, July 25, 1912, p. 235.
2. The Canadian Engineer, XXVI, June 4, 1914, p. 365; W.H. Atherton, "A Dominion Bureau of City Planning and Housing", The Canadian Municipal Journal, X, 9, Sept. 1914, p. 365.
3. Their position of professional leadership was institutionalized in 1919, when the new T.P.I.C. constitution specified that only they might become "Full Members". The constitution is printed in full in The Canadian Engineer, XXXVI, May 15, 1919, pp. 452-453.
4. Thomas Adams and Horace L. Seymour, "Report on Plan of the City of Kitchener, Ontario" (April 4, 1924), (typed ms., Seymour Papers, P.A.C.); Canada, Federal Plan Commission, Report on a General Plan for the Cities of Ottawa and Hull (1915); St. John, Town Planning Commission, The St. John, N.B., Town Planning Scheme 1922 for the Undeveloped Areas of the City and Suburban Districts in the County of St. John (the document was not published until 1932); Toronto Guild of Civic Art, Report on a Comprehensive Plan for Systematic Civic Improvements in Toronto (1909); Toronto, Advisory City Planning Commission, Report (1929); Vancouver, Town Planning Commission, A Plan for the City of Vancouver, British Columbia, including Point Grey and South Vancouver and a General Plan of the Region (1930).
5. The interviews were conducted by G.R.D. Fryer and A.L.S. Nash. The tapes are now in the possession of Professor J.E. Page of York University.
6. Enquiries in regard P.A.C. holdings should be directed to Mr. Paul Migus at the Archives.
7. Walter van Nus, "The Plan-Makers and the City: Architects, Engineers, Surveyors, and Urban Planning in Canada, 1890-1939", unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Toronto, 1975.
8. Edmund H. Dale, "Decision-making at Edmonton, Alberta, 1913-1945: Town Planning Without a Plan", Plan Canada, II, 2, 1971.
9. Alan F.J. Artibise, Winnipeg: A Social History of Urban Growth, 1874-1914, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975.
10. Wilfrid Eggleston, The Queen's Choice; A Story of Canada's Capital, Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1961.
11. For (perhaps self-interested) declarations that they were quite effective, see, respectively, the assessment by A.B. Kauffman, Chairman of the Kitchener Town Planning Commission, in The Canadian Engineer, LV, Sept. 18, 1928, pp. 319-320; and Vancouver Town Planning Commission, A Preliminary Report upon Economic Background and Population (1945), pp. 9, 64-65.