

Notes and Comments

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Historical Photographs of Canada's Urban Growth, c.1850-1900

Notes et commentaires

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NOTES AND COMMENTS/NOTES ET COMMENTAIRES

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH

The Railway Map of Canada West..., published by Maclear and Company, Toronto, 1857. The map is reproduced through the courtesy of the National Map Collection, Public Archives of Canada.

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An index covering the years 1972-1977 is also available free of charge. When ordering, please indicate *Index for the Urban History Review, 1972-1977*. (Ottawa: National Museum of Man Mercury Series, History Division Paper No. 24, 1978).

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PROMOTIONAL BROCHURE

A promotional brochure for *Urban History Review* is available for distribution at conferences and for circulation by mail. Persons interested in having copies for such purposes may request them from the History Division, National Museum of Man, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0M8.

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Une brochure publicitaire concernant la *Revue d'histoire urbaine* est disponible. On peut se la procurer soit pour la distribution lors de conférences soit pour l'expédier par la poste, en s'adressant à: Division de l'histoire, Musée national de l'Homme, Ottawa (Ontario), K1A 0M8.

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- J.B. Cullingworth, *Canadian Housing Policy Research: Some Initial Impressions* (July 1980), 62 pp., \$3.00. Paper No. 117.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC SERIES

- S.E. Corke, *A Selected, Annotated Bibliography of Canadian Housing Research, 1970-1979* (June 1980), 264 pp., \$8.00. Vol #13.

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- Frank Johnson, et. al. *Core Area Report: A Reassessment of Conditions in Inner City Winnipeg.* 1979. Pp. 235. \$8.50.

- Sybil Frenette. *Conservation Strategies for Selected Older Neighbourhoods.* 1979. Pp. 78. \$7.25.

- C. McKee, C. Engel, and C. Sherba. *Handbook for Managers of Social Housing.* 1979. Pp. 126. \$7.00.

- C. McKee, S. Clatworthy, S. Frenette. *Housing: Inner City Older Areas.* 1979. Pp. 98. \$7.00.

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CANADIAN CENTRE FOR ARCHITECTURE

The Canadian Centre for Architecture, founded in 1979, is a private institution interested in all aspects of the study of architecture and the built environment. One of its purposes is to act as a clearing-house for information pertinent to architectural records in Canada. For this reason, the Centre has initiated the Canadian Architectural Records Survey. Funded in part by the Canada Council, the aim of CARS is to collect information on the location and contents of architectural holdings in Canada and then publish a comprehensive research guide which will be distributed across the country for the use of students, researchers, and scholars. All information will be

kept on file, and the guide will be continually updated.

Architectural collections may be public or private and may consist of architectural records in the broadest sense:

- drawings
- renderings
- blueprints
- view of buildings
- books, periodicals and other printed material
- post card collections
- cadastral maps, insurance atlases and other large scale maps showing buildings
- photographs and slides
- personal or business papers

If you know of any individuals, institutions, or organizations which may be in

possession of any architectural records, such as those listed above, it would be most appreciated if the information were forwarded to G. Pierre Goad, Project Co-ordinator, CARS, The Canadian Centre for Architecture, 418 Bonsecours Street, Montreal, Quebec H2Y 3C4.

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NEW JOURNAL FOR THE HISTORY OF
CANADIAN SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY
AND MEDICINE

The *HSTC BULLETIN: Journal for the History of Canadian Science, Technology and Medicine/Revue d'histoire des sciences, des techniques et de la médecine au Canada* commenced publication in the autumn of 1980. It is a successor to a newsletter which has been successfully published since 1976. The first volume of three numbers will carry refereed articles in both English and French in these areas. The journal will also provide reviews of books, news of the profession, bibliographies, and other valuable notes. One year's subscription is \$8.00 in Canada for individuals, \$10.00 for institutions, and \$10.00 for individuals in the USA and overseas, \$12.00 for institutions. Cheques, payable in Canadian funds to *HSTC BULLETIN*, or requests for information concerning submission of articles, should be sent to the editor, Dr. Richard A. Jarrell, Dept. of Natural Science, Atkinson College, York University, Downsview, Ontario, Canada M3J 2R7.

CMHC PUBLICATIONS

The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation has published a *List of CMHC Publications* (Cat. No. NH 15-3/1978). The list includes both free and priced publications

and a list of CMHC Offices in Canada. For further information write National Office, CMHC, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0P7.

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PUBLICATIONS DE LA SCHL

La Société canadienne d'hypothèques et de logement a publié une *Liste des publications de la SCHL* (N° de cat. NH 15-3/1978), qui fournit la liste des publications gratuites et payantes et la liste des bureaux canadiens de la SCHL. Pour obtenir de plus amples renseignements, on peut écrire au Bureau national de la SCHL, OTTAWA K1A 0P7.

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The *Directory of Canadian Urban Information Sources* is a compendium of data relating to urban studies which was prepared by the former Ministry of State for Urban Affairs. First published in 1974, it appeared in two revised editions, the most recent being 1977. The *Directory* included significant bibliographic references, a list of libraries, archives and information centres holding research material, urban organizations and universities offering urban courses. While some of this data will be dated, much may be of use to students of urban affairs. CMHC has taken over the remaining stock of the 1977 edition, and copies may be obtained free of charge by writing Monica Welch, Canadian Housing Information Centre, CMHC, Montreal Road, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0P7.

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Le *Répertoire des sources d'information urbaine au Canada*,

préparé par l'ancien ministère d'État aux Affaires urbaines, est un recueil de données relatives aux études urbaines. Il a paru d'abord en 1974 puis en deux éditions révisées, la dernière datant de 1977. Le Répertoire comprend des références bibliographiques utiles et une liste des bibliothèques, archives et centres d'information possédant des sources de documentation, d'organismes urbains et des universités donnant des cours sur les affaires urbaines. Certaines de ces données seront périmées, mais beaucoup peuvent être utiles aux étudiants des affaires urbaines. La SCHL a acquis tous les inventus de l'édition 1977, dont on peut obtenir gratuitement des exemplaires en s'adressant par écrit à Monica Welch, Centre canadien de documentation sur l'habitation, SCHL, chemin de Montréal, OTTAWA K1A 0P7.

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"CITY BLOCKS, CITY SPACES"
HISTORICAL PHOTOGRAPHS OF CANADA'S
URBAN GROWTH, c. 1850 - 1900

The exhibition "City Blocks, City Spaces" opened in Ottawa at the Public Archives of Canada on April 22, 1980. The exhibition later moved to the Centre for Film and Photography in Toronto (July, 1980), the McCord Museum in Montreal (November 5, 1980 - January 4, 1981), and the Public Archives of Nova Scotia in Halifax (July 3, 1981 - August 14, 1981). The organizers of the exhibit also hope to confirm bookings in Winnipeg and Victoria in the spring and summer of 1982.

An exhibition catalogue of 102 pages is available upon request. It includes twenty-eight half-tone reproductions, along with an

introduction, text, captions, and biographical notes on the photographers by Lilly Koltun. It was designed by Jacques Charette and Associates Ltd. Copies of the catalogue will continue to be available through 1982 since a certain number have been set aside for each venue.

The following review of the exhibit was prepared by Louise Abbott. A graduate of McGill University, Ms. Abbott is a freelance broadcaster based in Montreal. She is photography critic for the *Montreal Gazette* and a contributor to *ArtsCanada* and *Afterimage*.

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Colonial settlement in Canada began with forts established along the St. Lawrence and its tributaries at Tadoussac, Quebec, Trois Rivières, and Montreal. Like city walls, houses reflected the garrison mentality: they had high-pitched roofs, dormer windows, and, where the inhabitants could afford it, solid walls of stone. After the British conquest, however, settlement took a different course as agriculture and commerce superseded warfare. By confederation, Toronto was a bustling capital city of sixty thousand with a business district along the waterfront which looked like a bit of London transplanted. It was not until the last spike had been driven into the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885, however, that substantial towns began to appear on the map of western Canada. At first they were little more than motley collections of wood-frame houses strung along rutted dirt roads, but gradually they assumed some of the liveliness and sophistication of their older counterparts in the east.

Tracing Canada's urban growth during the period between 1850 and 1900 is the subject of a handsomely mounted photography exhibition produced by the Public Archives of Canada, entitled "City Blocks, City Spaces." Lilly Koltun, an archivist with the National Photography Collection, proposed the idea for the exhibition several years ago, after becoming increasingly aware of the richness of the nineteenth-century urban photography holdings in the Public Archives. "I knew that not many institutions have such wide general collections - images that range from one end of the country to the other," she recalls. "And I also knew that this material was virtually never consulted in its original form. People were satisfied with catalogue reproductions, but those never give the quality, the feeling of the original prints."

Once Koltun had won approval for her proposal, she discovered that she needed to do even more digging than she had anticipated. She examined thousands of photographs in order to find the two hundred which would best illustrate Canada's urban development, as well as provide insight into the photographic styles and attitudes of the era.

"At first I thought I should document the period when the growth of Canadian cities was most spectacular - 1880 to 1920," Koltun explains. "But then I realized that, if I did that, I would be basically making a history rather than a photoshow. I wanted something that related to the history of photography and also correlated to the earliest city development, beginning in the 1840s and 1850s, when there was a lot of immigration."

"I thought 1900 would be a good cutoff because after that there is a break in continuity. For example, in showing the transportation system, I wanted to stay away from the motor car, which began a whole new trend.... In terms of photographic techniques, as well, there was a major change in the early twentieth century. Most of the photographs in this show are sepia-toned albumen prints. But after 1900 albumen went steadily out of style, and there was much more in the way of black-and-white bromide printing."

Although Koltun hoped that the exhibition would be national in scope, she eventually had to exclude some of the major cities, like Calgary and Vancouver. "The Archives didn't have adequate representation for the entire period that I wanted to document, and I decided against having loans from other institutions because of time restrictions." The cities Koltun settled on for the exhibition are Halifax, Quebec, Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Winnipeg, and Victoria.

"City Blocks, City Spaces" is divided thematically into four sections; within each are explanatory texts and separate groupings of photographs of the seven cities. The exhibition opens with panoramas, frequently taken from the same vantage point years apart. Thus the viewer can compare, for example, two scenes overlooking the harbour in Victoria and see how the city has filled out from 1870 to 1890. Fields and fences have been supplanted by factories and homes.

Among the most unusual panoramas are one taken in Montreal circa 1852 and another in Toronto in 1856. The Montreal



*Beaver Hall Hill Area, Montreal, c. 1852. Craig Street is in the foreground. Photographer: unknown.
[Source: P.A.C. #C-47354].*

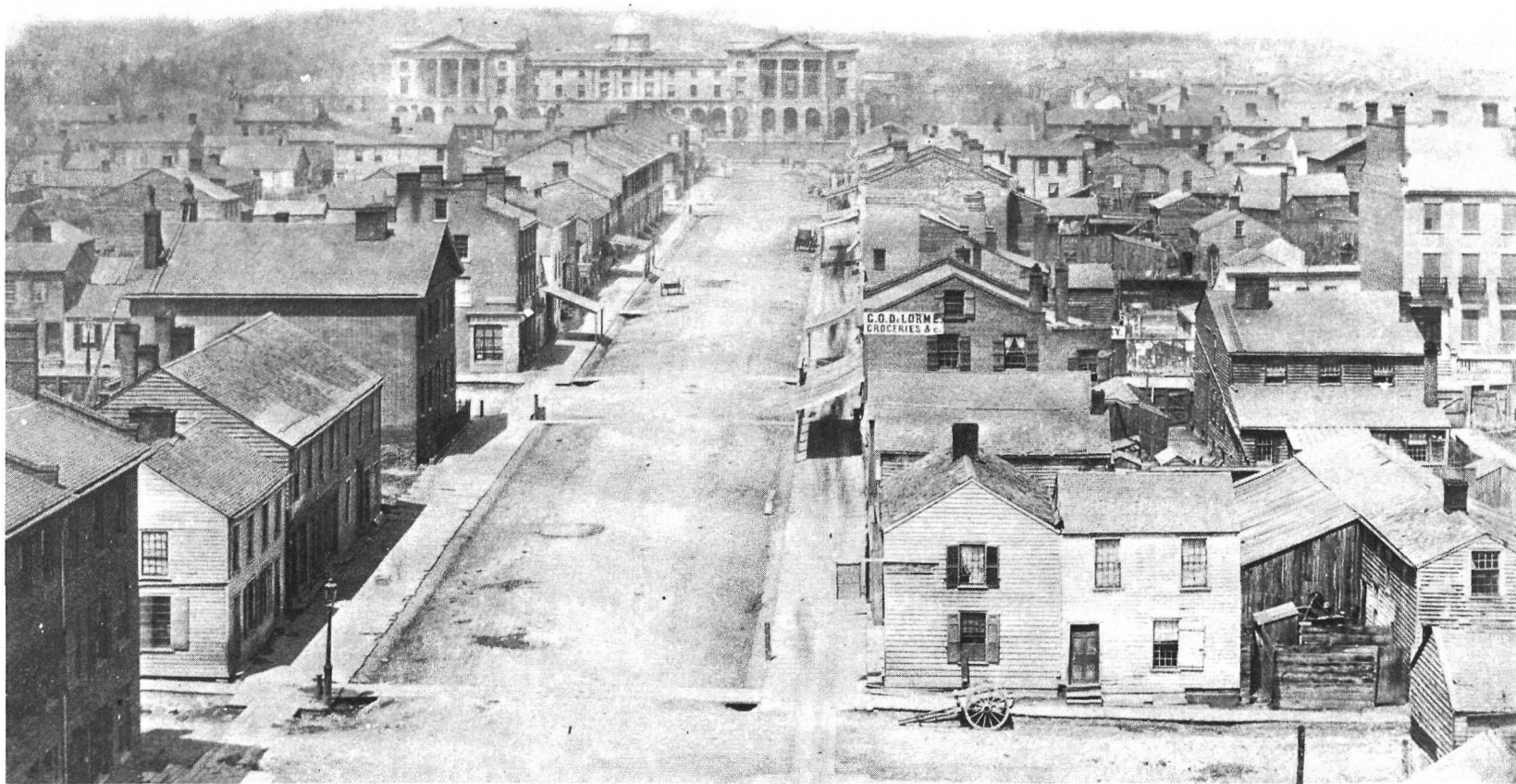
view, which shows Craig Street (now St. Antoine) in the foreground, is one of the earliest surviving photographs of any Canadian city. Unlike the others on display, it is not a paper print made from a glass negative. Instead it is a daguerreotype, a unique image created on a silver surface sensitized with iodine and developed by exposure to mercury vapour. The daguerrotype was invented in 1839, but became outmoded by the late 1850s.

The Toronto panorama, which was produced by the well-known if short-lived partnership of Armstrong, Beere, and Hime, was taken from a hotel at the corner of King and York Streets. It is composed of thirteen parts, each approximately eight by ten inches. Although the camera angle was changed at certain points, the grouping shows a more than three-hundred-degree view of the city.

To obtain the Toronto panorama, Koltun made an exception about requesting loans and borrowed it from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Library and Records Department in London, England. It was simply too important, she felt, not to be included. For one thing, it represents paper printing from a period when the process had only recently been introduced to Toronto. But the photograph's greatest value, of course, lies in the fact that it shows the city in a very early stage of development. Thus the viewer can see, for instance, the way Osgoode Hall looked before the renovations of 1857. Bad luck seems to have plagued early photographs of Toronto; the panorama is one of the few extant from the 1850s.

The second section of "City Blocks, City Spaces" takes a look at main streets and neighbourhood clusters. Whereas the panoramas offer a broad view of the city, these photographs move in closer. Nonetheless, they continue to show buildings - like Bonsecours Market in Montreal, the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa, and the Post Office in Winnipeg - in their context, including the street activity around them. What emerges overall from this section is not so much a sense of the chaos of unplanned cities as the relative order. As Koltun points out in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, "Canadians in the nineteenth century had no zoning by-laws, but this only occasionally resulted in anomalies such as a church shouldered too closely by retail stores and other businesses."

"City Blocks, City Spaces" next presents "Proud Monuments." Here the buildings are represented in isolation from their surroundings. The photographer was interested primarily in documenting - and glorifying - the architectural style of the banks, churches, industrial buildings, and private residences which constituted his subjects. To emphasize their outlines, he set them against cloudless skies; to indicate their size, he sometimes included human figures standing or sitting on the entrance steps, say. Some of the views are frontal, while others are taken at a slightly oblique angle. For example, Koltun points out, in a photograph of Toronto's Temple Building of the Independent Order of Foresters, the camera has been placed "so as to reduce to a minimum any parallax distortion in the lines of a building caused by



Toronto, 1856. Photograph taken from the top of the Rossin House Hotel, 1856. Photographer: Armstrong, Beere, and Hime.

[Source: Loaned by courtesy of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Library and Records Department, London, England].

the camera's lens, resulting in an ideal view of the structure never attained by a spectator at eye level."

The final section looks at the transportation and communications network, including roads, railways, waterways, and telegraphs, that defines the city along with its architecture. Horse-drawn carriages wait outside Ottawa's Broad Street Station; just across the road, a uniformed driver stands in a trolley car. A freighter's boat is seen beached on the bank of the Red River below Fort Garry, in a photograph made by Humphrey Lloyd Hime on the famous exploratory survey party to the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan districts in 1858. A man and woman stare out from their perch atop a crudely fashioned cart pulled up in front of a hotel in what is conjectured to be Winnipeg. These images help conjure up what Koltun refers to as "The Invisible City."

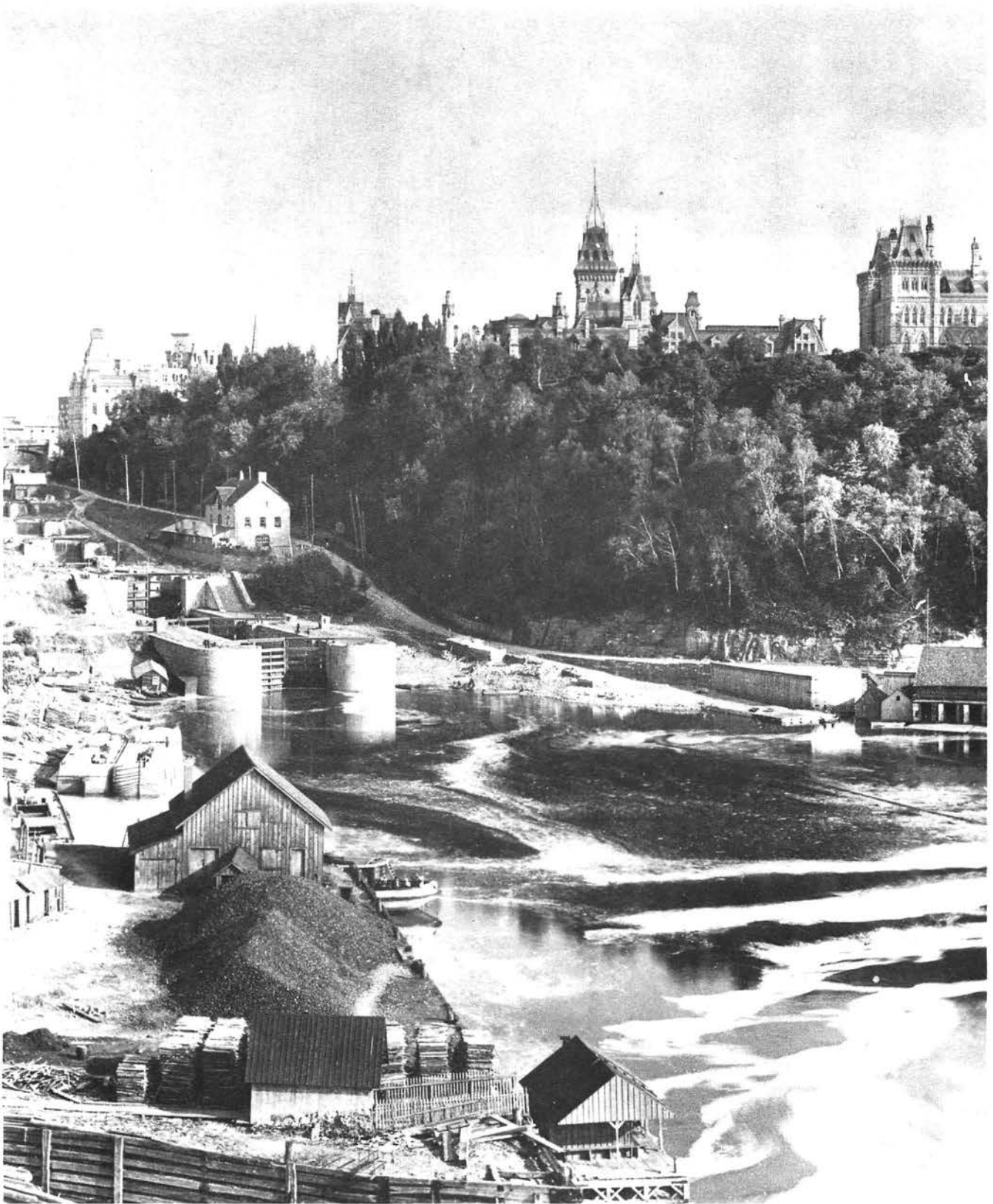
In organizing the exhibition, Koltun went to considerable lengths to convey, by means of didactic placards and pointed juxtaposition, not only *what* the contemporary photographers were documenting but *how* and *why*. She wanted viewers to understand the inherent manipulation in the process, the idealized interpretation that usually resulted. "I was trying to bring out the fact that there was a lot of bias. Photographers had an image of the city in their minds, and they persisted in putting that across. It is really surprising to see the homogeneity of their attitudes, the same compositional formulas and tendency to pictorialize. The Ottawa views, for example, were made by different photographers over a period of forty years; yet virtually all of them were taken from the position

of the Parliament Buildings looking west on the Ottawa River."

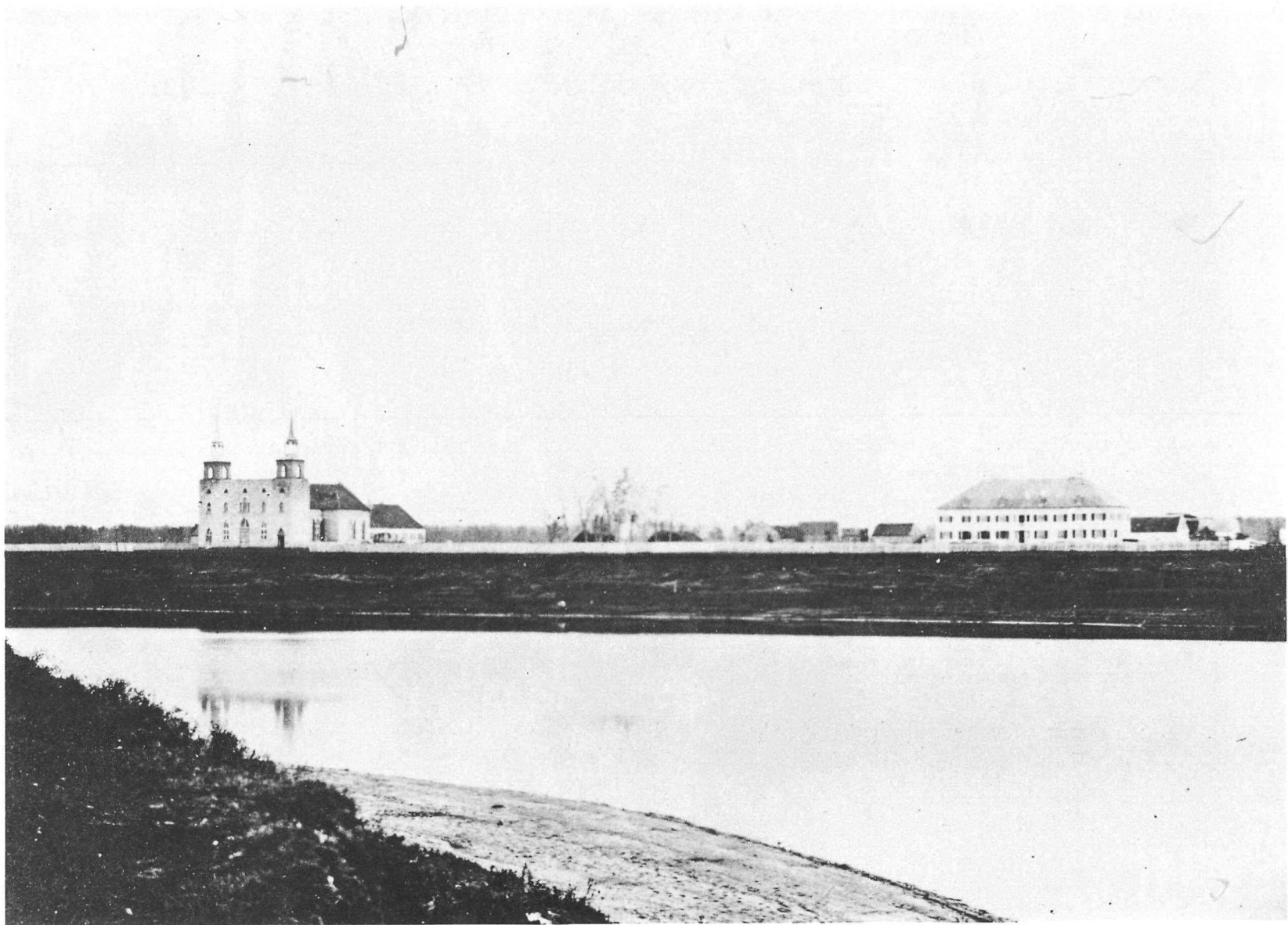
The conformity in urban photography derived partly from the fact that most professional photographers, whether consciously or not, drew on existing pictorial conventions. Two views of Halifax - one an engraving from 1801, the other a photograph from 1869 - are particularly striking in their similarity. "Sometimes a photographer had a unique personal vision. Hime's photographs, for example, stand out because of their starkness; he emphasized the flatness of the landscape and simplified his composition, concentrating on one or two things. But most of the time, the photographs remind you forcefully of previous engravings, paintings, or pictures of different kinds."

The reigning Victorian belief in progressive materialism also contributed to the promulgation of an idealized depiction of the city. But perhaps the most important factor was simply that the photographs were taken for commercial purposes; the photographers wanted to sell them to architectural clients and travellers, who preferred scenes unmarred by snow or detritus.

Only rarely did photographers reveal the seamier side of urban life, as in an image of the tightly packed, makeshift harbourfront dwellings of the Chinese in Victoria. "The odd time," says Koltun, "particularly later in the century photographs of less well-to-do areas were taken - not with the idea of reforming conditions, but because they were picturesque. In Quebec City, say, on Sous-le-Cap Street, the leaning, half-timbered houses with lower-class types in the windows



*Rideau Canal locks at the Ottawa River, below the Parliament Buildings,
n.d. Photographer: unknown.
[Source: P.A.C. #PA-122755].*



Cathedral of St. Boniface and Nunnery on the banks of the Red River, opposite Upper Fort Garry, 1858.
Photographer: H.L. Hime.

[Source: P.A.C. #C-17518].



Chinese houses, Victoria Harbour, 1886. Photographer: E. Deville.
[Source: P.A.C. #C-23415].

created a mediaeval European appearance."

What must not be overlooked, of course, is the way in which the nature of the photographic medium *per se* affected rendition. Because a sharp, finely detailed print could be produced by a skilled practitioner, soft-focus, atmospheric views tended to be dismissed as shoddy. "Most of the photographs are contact prints, which emphasize detail. Some of them are huge, which means that the cameras must have been immense, and any photographer who has gone to the trouble of carrying around a heavy camera and glass plates is not going to hide the technical quality of his work."

The limitations of the equipment used also helps to explain the noticeable absence of people in the early photographs: lenses were not fast enough to record them on film. It is only in the later views that human figures appear, primarily as indices of scale. "At first people paid attention to the camera and stared into the lens," notes Koltun. "Later on, they began to ignore it a bit, as it became more commonplace to see a photographer in the streets. But even then the most prominent figures in the photographs are always posed.... Unposed photographers didn't even become known until the snapshot in 1888. We do have a couple of early Kodak snapshots of Winnipeg, and they are quite different in the impression they give you. They really do suggest more of the liveliness of the street than the commercial shots, which are far more controlled."

In attempting to give a sense of the evolution of the photographic aesthetic and

technology as well as of the growth of Canadian cities, "City Blocks, City Spaces" is admirably ambitious in scope; yet it is flawed because of that. Considered individually, the photographs on view are largely interesting, if not breathtaking documents. But overall, the exhibition appears piecemeal, "The Invisible City" being the weakest, least resolved component. As relevant as they are to an understanding of photographic history, the thematic groupings are less successful in conveying urban history, separating as they do photographs of the same city from each other. Even the extensive text fails to create real coherence. Nonetheless, perhaps criticism of the exhibition's structure amounts to quibbling, for most viewers take obvious delight in seeking out photographs of the city they know best and discovering the way familiar places once looked.

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