

Macdonald, Catherine. *A City at Leisure: An Illustrated History of Parks and Recreation in Winnipeg*. Winnipeg: City of Winnipeg, Parks and Recreation Department, 1995. Pp. xiii, 220. Black and White Photographs, paper

Catherine J. Kiszkiel

Volume 25, Number 1, October 1996

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016112ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016112ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Kiszkiel, C. J. (1996). Review of [Macdonald, Catherine. *A City at Leisure: An Illustrated History of Parks and Recreation in Winnipeg*. Winnipeg: City of Winnipeg, Parks and Recreation Department, 1995. Pp. xiii, 220. Black and White Photographs, paper]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 25(1), 72–73. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016112ar>

problem of cohesiveness, however, is Logan's decision to tell the story as a tale of two cities. First, we are given the Tucson story, then Albuquerque's, but with little connecting tissue. The reader seeks discussion of the similarities and differences, but this is an approach in which the author seems reluctant to engage. Thus, the Tucson environmentalists appear in chapter four, but we must wait for chapter nine to find out about their Albuquerque counterparts. Integrating corresponding chapters might have produced a more systematic and thoughtful analysis.

Broad issues which might have established a solid foundation for the book are touched on, but the author was apparently so committed to focus on the three, distinct anti-city hall groups that he manages to deal with certain fundamental matters only in passing. For example, more than half way through the book, the reader learns that whereas Tucson resisted a proposed cross-town freeway (fearing it might turn the city into another Los Angeles), Albuquerque welcomed as many freeways as it could get. Since the automobile was the instrument which made possible the post-war settlement and expansion of both cities, the reader is left wondering how these different approaches shaped the respective cities and the degree to which opposition to city hall really influenced highway decision-making. An issue which should have dealt with front and centre is consigned to a paragraph toward the end.

One finishes *Fighting Sprawl* feeling pessimistic. Here were two small cities (each the seat of their respective state universities) which at the beginning of the century were courting health seekers and retirees with the promise of a pleasant life of abundant sunshine and clean, dry air within a spectacular mountain-desert setting. After World War II defense and high tech industries moved in and development leapfrogged from the city to the foothills and ecologically sensitive parts of the desert. Polluted air now obscures the mountains; strip development and suburban lawns insult the desert aesthetic, and the Southwest has become ANYWHERE, USA. The opposition to thoughtless development may be stronger now, but in the absence of much historical evidence from Professor Logan, one is left with the old saw—"You can't fight city hall."

James L. Wunsch
Corporate/College Program
Empire State College
State University of New York

Macdonald, Catherine. *A City at Leisure: An Illustrated History of Parks and Recreation in Winnipeg*. Winnipeg: City of Winnipeg, Parks and Recreation Department, 1995. Pp. xiii, 220. Black and White Photographs. paper.

This volume traces, in text and illustration, the development of Winnipeg's parks and recreation system from its beginnings in

1893, to 1993. It was produced as part of the system's centennial celebrations.

A City at Leisure is rooted in theory, even though well-established theory, an uncommon touch in commemorative productions, which tend to favour a rather unshaped chronology. In brief, Macdonald's book argues that changes in urban society generated changes in leisure and recreation needs, which in turn led to changes in services. It has, in this respect, much academic as well as popular interest.

The book also argues that the Winnipeg experience was a North American one. Winnipeg experienced rapid urbanization and industrialization and in meeting the problems thus created, the city responded to the influences of the Public Parks Movement of the 1890s and, subsequently, to the "environmental" influences of the City Beautiful Movement and the "educational" ones of the Playground movement.

Macdonald's book says that the history of Winnipeg parks began in the 1890s with the Public Parks movement. As with many urban centres in Canada and the United States, it was based on a combination of economics, altruism, a sense of fair play, and a fear of public disorder. The provincial *Manitoba Public Parks Act* was passed in April of 1892, allowing the creation of parks boards that, in turn, worked to acquire, improve and maintain public parks. The social, economic and environmental benefits of parklands and recreation areas in the growing city were recast in the early 1900s in response to the City Beautiful Movement. Yet another response to alarming increases in urban crowding and impoverishment emerged as the Playground Movement, devised to encourage health, morality and overall respectability in children.

Through the discussion of the acquisition, the improvement, and the maintenance of public parks, community centres and other recreation facilities such as pools and outdoor theatres, this book generates a clear view of the processes involved in the building of a city. But this view would not be complete without an understanding of the urban society, its motivations and its changing needs, both in the organizations and in the community. In this regard, the book not only considers the developments in the central urban area but also devotes considerable attention to the suburban municipalities and their role in the provision and growth of parks and recreation services. Revealing a keen awareness of the significance of political groups and individuals as well as organizations, this volume explores the visions, motivations, and even shortcomings of prominent leaders involved with the advancement of the city's parks and recreation interests.

A City of Leisure is written in an accessible and engaging style, and maintains the reader's interest, as the ideas remain clear, succinct, and focused throughout. As well, the use of newspaper-style columns allows for quick and easy consumption of the material. The numerous and highly detailed particulars reveal painstaking research, while the author's lively written style suits

the tempo of the presentation of the material. Accordingly, the form, style, and content of this illustrated history suit the intended audience, a popular and local readership.

Still the book successfully incorporates issues of financial constraints, class, and geographic and social divisions. Macdonald cultivated the rich primary sources to produce a harvest of events, people and places from days past. A number of issues were overlooked, notably race, ethnicity, gender and religion. Also beneficial, but perhaps deserving of a volume of its own, would be an examination of the influence of ideas on urban development, such as shifting societal attitudes towards technology and the environment, and even how technological advances dramatically altered the provision and use of recreation.

A City at Leisure neither supports nor challenges previous interpretations, nor does it offer any new approaches or new perspectives, for the study of urban history. As an inquiry into urban development it has nevertheless moved into previously neglected areas, and should even generate a higher level of public interest (locally, at least) in urban history.

Catherine J. Kiszkiel
Department of History
Carleton University

Harris, Richard. *Unplanned Suburbs Toronto's American Tragedy 1900 to 1950*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. Pp. xvi + 356. Maps, illustrations. \$39.95 (U.S.) hard.

I spent the first year of my life in an attic apartment that my parents rented from a war veteran. Ed Clement had built the house himself in a new subdivision just outside Ottawa's city limits. Taxes were cheaper, building regulations were lax, and do-it-yourself building was seen as a way of easing the postwar housing shortage. Richard Harris's book acknowledges my experience as a late and specific manifestation of a phenomenon that peaked during the economic and immigration booms that preceded the earlier world war: the owner-built working-class suburb. Harris asks why these suburbs came to be and why they disappeared. He also seeks to explain why Toronto's suburbs were probably more blue collar than most, while at the same time arguing for the widespread applicability of his model.

Why did workers move to the outskirts? In Toronto they did not follow the streetcars to suburbia, for a 30-year 1891 monopoly made the TTC responsible only for the existing city. Streetcar lines therefore did not become loss-leaders for suburban land speculation, a role they often played elsewhere. Nor did workers follow heavy industry to the outskirts. Though some did, large numbers of suburban workers commuted to jobs downtown. Workers therefore had motives for moving to the outskirts

beyond merely following employment or suburban transit: they took an active role in advancing their own aspirations.

Chapter 4 recapitulates one explanation, first setting out the middle-class suburban ideals of family privacy, independence, efficiency and health, and then showing middle-class stigmatization of tenements and lodging houses as subversive of these values was enshrined in civic housing regulations that helped push the working-class into the less-regulated townships. Chapter 5 explores how workers, for their part, willingly sacrificed privacy (they took in lodgers to pay for their homes), modern services, and accessibility for independence and financial security.

These explanations hinge on class, but contemporaries predictably favoured a racial explanation: the Brits—and most suburbanites were British immigrants—were more enterprising than the Jews who ghettoized the Ward in the downtown. Jews, indeed, lodged or rented downtown near the garment factories that employed them, but those who could, converted older homes into lodging houses and, if successful, moved to homes or apartments in suburban Forest Hill. But did Brits value home ownership more? Harris alludes briefly to the English dream of the semi-rural cottage, and the fact that only 10 per cent of workers in England owned their own homes. He could have probed more deeply the idealization of the rural in British popular culture, as has Michael Bunce in *The Countryside Ideal: Anglo-American Images of Landscape* (Routledge 1994). But he concludes from comparison with American cities that immigrants in general aimed at home ownership if the nature of the local ethnic division of labour didn't inhibit them. That inhibition came into play here. Toronto's working-class suburbs were as large as they were because Toronto was more of an immigrant city even than New York, in an era when British emigrants went mostly to Canada, and heavily to Toronto, rather than to the United States.

Nonetheless workers' suburban home ownership was only possible because capitalists' attention was concentrated elsewhere. The lack of suburban transit kept land values low and speculative builders were drawn to accessible serviced sites that were more commercially marketable. Many workers faced with the difficulty of securing credit and willing to walk from the end of the car line therefore built their own homes, facilitated in doing so by the laxity of rural regulations, the comparatively simple technology involved, and the assistance of friends and neighbours.

The blue-collar suburb, however, transformed itself from the early 1920s to late 1940s. As immigrants became established they improved or rebuilt their homes and joined the call for municipal regulation and services and the extension of public transit, even though this raised costs and taxes. But scattered developments were expensive to service. Even before the 1930s suburbanites were defaulting on taxes and imperiling municipal finances; during the Depression many more moved back into the city to save on transit fares by renting the upper