

"Canada's Urban Past": A Report on the Canadian Urban History Conference

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"CANADA'S URBAN PAST":
A REPORT ON THE CANADIAN URBAN HISTORY CONFERENCE

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David Knight & John Taylor

"Canada's Urban Past" was the first conference of its kind to be held in Canada. More than 200 people gathered for sessions devoted to the study of the Canadian city. Participants represented numerous academic (and non-academic) disciplines, and all but the main banquet speaker, H. J. Dyos, were from Canadian institutions. The conference, at the University of Guelph, May 12 to 14, was organized under the guidance of Gilbert Stelter and Terry Crowley (both History, Guelph). Fifteen formal sessions were held, but there were also many opportunities for informal exchanges during receptions, banquets and walking tours. The Guelph meeting thus served the usual conference functions of exchange of ideas, information and techniques. But being the first, it also served as an insight into or a reflection of the "state of the art" of retrospective urban studies in Canada.

In its broadest terms, the conference demonstrated the dicta of H. J. Dyos as he outlined them in his "Banquet Address": that urban studies is both eclectic and homeless, the multi-dimensional waif of the learned community. The conference was eclectic. It successfully brought together people of many disciplines, and, for the most part, each of these people demonstrated knowledge and sensitivity with respect to fields not their own. But these people were together as urbanologists for a few days only. It was clear that they would return, like Cinderella, to their respective departmental hearths at the end of the conference and reassume their primary identities as planners, geographers or political scientists. In these respects, it appears, students of the Canadian urban scene are not much different than their counterparts in other parts of the world.

Historians dominated the conference if all participants (including chairmen and commentators) of all sessions (including workshops, panels, etc.) are taken into account. But in terms of the

working end of urban studies, the nearly equal importance of geographers is apparent, and without them yawning gaps would reveal themselves. The only other discipline strongly represented was planning and architecture.

	<u>History</u>	<u>Geography</u>	<u>Planning/ Architecture</u>	<u>Other</u>	<u>Total</u>
Programme Participants (incl. chairmen)	32	16	7	5	60
Principals (incl. panels, workshops, etc.)	20	10	4	5	39
Principals (formal papers only)	12	10	3	2	27

Among the programme participants, there were two political scientists, one economist, and two others from the social sciences. If history were considered a social science, there were no participants from the "Humanities". This was regrettable, but not surprising. What was surprising was the weak representation from political science and economics and the total absence of representatives from sociology (perhaps the dominant discipline in urban studies in the United States), anthropology and psychology.

Given the lop-sided profile of participants, it was not surprising that the subject matter presented had a distinctive orientation. The bulk of the formal papers concentrated on aspects of urban growth: why cities did or did not grow, why they grew the way they did, and the ethic and image of growth and metropolitan reach. A second major concentration was on planning and the planning process, and a third on internal city systems. It is clear from the last that study of the internal structure and dynamics of the Canadian city is still at a fairly embryonic stage, though the workshops on the Hamilton and Montreal projects and the two sessions oriented to urban politics show healthy prospects. Twenty-five Canadian historical geographers were coincidentally in Britain attending the Second British-Canadian Historical

Geography Conference, and many are working in these areas. The conference was probably weaker as a result. The pathology of the Canadian city tended to be represented incidentally, for example in the planning of housing, or unexpectedly, as in the commentary by Paul Rutherford (History, Toronto) on the urban reform movement. The most direct examination of the evils of urban life was the study by Terry Copp (History, Wilfrid Laurier) of depression relief in Montreal.

Though there were no formal papers, the theme of the "usable urban past" was well represented by a panel on urban heritage, presentations from the Museum of Man's visual history series -- "the visual metaphors of Social Values" in the words of Alan Gowans (History in Art, Victoria) -- and a good display of publications, most of which were non-existent a decade ago.

The conference also indicated that urban studies are pervasive in Canada. No one region can be considered dominant. Urban studies also seems to be about equally balanced chronologically. Of the bulk of formal papers 13 were essentially nineteenth century and 12 essentially twentieth century, though there seems to have been bias here by subject area and region: most of the twentieth century papers were either concerned with planning, or cities in the west and north, or both. No surprises here.

On the basis of this conference, then, one might be able to argue that the study of Canada's urban past is perhaps half way along the road to becoming a fairly well-rounded field of study.

The eight papers that can be grouped under the question "Why did some cities grow and others not?" are useful for some links but also some differences they highlighted. Ruben Bellan (Economics, Manitoba) painted a very broad picture which, unfortunately, did little to add to our understanding of urban growth, although it did serve as a useful review of Canadian urban and economic development. Two other papers also painted with a "broad brush" but they both represented growth in the sense of applying recently developed analytical techniques and conceptual frameworks.

First, James Simmons (Geography, Toronto) presented a

theoretical interesting discussion of his work in which he is attempting to develop a dynamic, quantitatively-based, predictive model of "The Evolution of The Canadian Urban Economy". Essentially, Simmons is focussing on the economic processes which initiate and transmit growth impulses in the Canadian urban system. Where, and through which decisions, does growth occur? How does growth move from place to place in order to produce the patterns of urban growth which we observe consistently over time? Simmons examined the main spatial inter-dependency attributes of Canadian economic growth over time, drawing on present day patterns and extrapolating back in time. The historian discussant of this paper seemed "lost" although the geographers in the audience generally were quite "at home" with the terms, concepts and basic assumptions, if not all about the inner workings of the model. However, most historians and many historical geographers present were uncomfortable with the ahistorical nature of Simmons' work.

Second, Larry McCann (Geography, Mount Allison) developed a detailed and comprehensive paper on "Staples, Urban Growth, and the Heartland-Hinterland Paradigm: Halifax as an Imperial Outpost, 1867-1917". Halifax was described as being in the hinterland of a Toronto-Montreal "metropolitan economy." Its economic prosperity depended largely on central Canadian decisions about such things as railway and port development, and the strengthening of the defence function. The market for Halifax's manufactured products was only a regional one, and Haligonians neglected to develop certain industries because other Nova Scotia communities were closer to sources of fish and forest products. All told, Halifax lost in rank relative to other cities because of its Hinterland location. The methods used, including factor analysis, did not reach down to the level of individuals or even groups of decision makers, hence McCann's paper was questioned by an historian for what it did not identify, namely, the role and perceptions of Halifax business men. Perhaps this is the next stage of McCann's research?

The remainder of the papers all focussed more or less on individual and group decisions and perceptions. That by David B. Knight (Geography, Carleton), "Boosterism and City Support Regions in

the Province of Canada" highlighted several interrelated themes, including "boosterism" - which he defined as "an exaggerated proclamation of worth of a particular place over all other places" - and a new method for delimiting city centered regions. The latter (for Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal and Quebec) were developed after analyzing members' voting patterns in the 218 "seat of government" divisions taken in the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada, 1841-1859. Maurice Careless (History, Toronto), the discussant, agreed with Knight in his suggestion that the delimited regions should be referred to as "attitudinal regions". Knight demonstrated how supporters of the different localities fought for the desired function and how their images of and attitudes held towards the other cities formed an integral part of the decision making process. He concluded that it is essential to grasp the "psychological link" in the city-region formula, this in addition to economic, demographic, cultural and social linkages.

A different sort of "attitudinal regions" map surely could be developed by Ronald Rudin (History, Concordia) who presented a controversial and important paper on "The Montreal Banks and the Urban Development of Quebec, 1840-1917". The map would delimit those areas within Quebec where there were branches of anglophone-controlled Montreal banks and thus which were recipients of needed capital from the main banks. Rudin suggested that urban development in the province, from 1840 to the start of the First Great War, was markedly influenced by the attitudes and resulting decisions of Montreal anglophone bank managers. Professor Careless suggested that Montreal had always looked West and therefore had no inclination to start looking eastward. However, since, as Rudin showed, there were selected loans made to certain Quebec towns, perhaps we can suggest that such loans may have helped in the delimitation of some oddly shaped hinterlands, although Rudin has not yet told us precisely what these hinterlands were.

J. G. Snell, (History, Guelph) also was concerned with attitudinal regions. His paper on "Metropolitanism as a Factor in American Relations with Canada" unevenly explored perceptions held by Northern U.S. business and civic leaders towards their cities' areal

claims to economic and sometimes even cultural hinterlands that crossed the border into Canada. Snell agreed with both Knight and Rudin in suggesting that city spokesmen and leaders acted within the parameters of the image they created.

The same conclusion can be drawn from the paper by Leo Johnson (History, Waterloo) entitled "Mercantile Theory and Industrial Development: Guelph, 1847-1910". Johnson broadened the definition of boosterism to one of being essentially an ideology of growth. The paper examined Guelph's ideology of growth as held by the businessmen and linked it to such things as the problem of taxes and the generation of needed capital, road development, and mill development. This paper was criticized by a geographer for not placing enough attention on the regional context or to spatial associations, both within Guelph's own hinterland or within the larger urban system.

The criticism aimed at the Johnson paper is also suggestive of the criticism that can be aimed at the paper given by Alan Artibise (History, Victoria), "Boosterism and the Development of Prairie Cities, 1871-1931". Artibise was critical of the work by geographers for being "incomplete". He then presented a thoroughly fascinating paper on the role of boosters' policies and actions as deciding factors in the process of prairie urban growth. Artibise claimed a lot for boosterism. Indeed, while not denying its importance as a factor, geographers and economists decry Artibise's overstress on boosterism at the expense of the spatial and economic processes alluded to in the other papers (especially Simmons, McCann and also Bellan) mentioned above.

The several authors who examined the question, "how did some cities grow and others did not", thus did so at different scales and from different conceptual perspectives. The differences lead to different questions being posed for further work. But, clearly, the work of geographers and historians would benefit by bringing together the historian's "traditional" concern for the role of individuals and local ideologies as they relate to urban development with the geographer's "traditional" concern for urban hinterlands, locational analysis and connectivity measures. Historian Leo Johnson suggested

that "geographers put too much focus on the arena rather than the actors", but, if one accepts this, then it must be admitted that the reverse may also be true. Somehow a balance must be struck, for if geographers do ignore the actors - as two at the conference did because of their scale of approach - then they will indeed miss something. And, if historians ignore the geographical dimension to their research - as several of the contributors to the conference did - then they may simply have their actors operating within a void. Surely this was implicit in Professor Dyos' plea - "let's not have city history but the history of cities". The linkage element certainly is implicit in this plea, and brings to mind Professor Brian J. L. Berry's pithy summation of a geographical perspective: "cities as systems within systems of cities".

If the first group of papers focussed on the latter part of Berry's comment, then another group focussed on elements of the first part, cities as systems. The papers can be grouped around the question, "How did cities physically develop the way they did?"

Michael Doucet (Geography, Toronto) called for a critical examination of two themes: an assessment of the impact of speculators on the land market and their financial success; and the ultimate role of land speculation in nineteenth-century Ontario cities. The city given close scrutiny by Doucet was Hamilton, from 1847 to 1881. He found that the land development process was essentially decentralized, uncoordinated, and unregulated, with hundreds of different people being involved in the various stages of property development. Heterogenous neighbourhoods emerged in the subdivisions. Speculators obviously had some influence, especially those who subdivided, but Doucet noted that for Hamilton there generally was little evidence of speculative building, thus he holds that it is to the people who purchased from the subdividers, and even further purchasers after that, all of whom we must study if we are to better understand the land development process. Even so, much more than Doucet told us needs to be learned of the social, political and economic lives of those people in Hamilton who were speculators.

Isobel Ganton (Geography, Toronto) in examining "Land Subdivision in Toronto, 1851-1883", noted that the timing of subdivisions, in terms of both numbers of decisions and amount of land, corresponded with periods of economic prosperity, depression, and of population growth, and reflected the effects of these on construction. Expectedly, she found that the location and nature of subdivision was less influenced by natural features than by preceding man-made constraints.

In contrast to very detailed analyses by Doucet and Ganton, Max Foran (History, Calgary) painted with a broad brush in his "Land Development Patterns in Calgary: An Historical Analysis", 1880's to the mid-1900's. Foran declared that land development evolved in response to the alternatives imposed by the limitations of railroad (CPR) and physical site characteristics, although the paper actually suggested many other elements, as one would expect, including taxing, inter-group perceptions and attitudes, changing technologies, inertia, economic prosperity, land speculation, zoning, etc. Geographers present squirmed during the presentation of the paper because of sweeping generalizations about "environmental barriers", reminiscent of Griffith Taylor's style of several generations ago.

Vancouver was another city influenced by the CPR, one of two major land corporations which tapped an anti-urban sentiment by encouraging suburban movement. The process of gradual land release for home development was carefully examined by Deryck W. Holdsworth (Geography, British Columbia) in "'Far from the Maddening Crowd's Ignoble Strife': Corporate Images of Suburban Homes in Vancouver". The CPR and the British Columbia Electric Railway streetcar interests regulated the demand for land and homes and encouraged distinct images of residential environments by manipulating the social expectations and also the character of different parts of the city.

While two large companies were principals in land development in suburban Vancouver, Paul Koroscil (Geography, Simon Fraser) described how one company, British Yukon, through five subsidiary companies, controlled the areal growth of Whitehorse. In his paper, "A Historical Perspective of Planning and Development in Yellowknife and Whitehorse",

Koroscil, utilizing the citybuilding process framework, traced the planning and development decisions of the respective companies and also the interplay between the companies and the local political bodies, like the Boards of Trade. Further, he examined the changing patterns of spatial organization, functional and residential growth, of the two cities.

At quite a different scale, Shirley Spragge (History, Queen's) examined two early 20th Century attempts at creating public housing in Toronto. Both the quasi-public Toronto Housing Company (which constructed 334 units in 1913) and the Toronto Housing Commission (which built 230 units in 1920) were dominated by businessmen and manufacturers who sought to keep the workers content and close to their factories. The impact on city development at the time was relatively slight, but the case is instructive because of the links to be traced between business, legislative and public health groups.

Also instructive was Patricia Roy's (History, Victoria) paper on "The Promoter as Politician: David Oppenheimer and Public Ownership in Vancouver" for, while acknowledging that no one person was responsible for building Vancouver, she demonstrated how Oppenheimer obviously was a critical force in the first decade of Vancouver's existence. This paper will be referred to again, but it is well to remember that key individuals were involved in city development, whether in public or private business capacities. The problem is to find the necessary papers which permit a re-creation of roles and processes.

The importance of source materials was clearly evident in the papers discussed here, for the materials included company records, private letters, newspapers, assessment rolls, and registered plans. With special reference to the existence of numerous land records, Peter Goheen (Geography, Queen's) commented that "There is a danger in going after records just because they are there! Why do we want to examine land records? What is the process of which land development was a part?" It is this latter question that remained unanswered after each of the papers had been presented. Professor Dyos also referred to it when he declared that "We are still in quest for the missing link.

What is the way in which these (land) developments and business interests were tied into the social life and growth of the city?" Clearly there is much about the process whereby land is converted into urban uses that remains little understood.

At this point it is worth noting that little of the internal social structure of the Canadian city was discussed during the conference. Sound work is being done in Canada by geographers and historians, sometimes in interdisciplinary teams. Paul-André Linteau and Jean-Claude Robert (*Histoire, Québec à Montréal*) did discuss their large group project which is examining many facets of Montreal, the physical city, and its complex society, 1815 to 1914. Also there was an uncomfortable session examining Michael Katz's The People of Hamilton Canada West. In his response to prepared comments about his book, Katz (*History, York*) quickly moved to what he and his interdisciplinary team are now doing. He tossed out a provocative comment that deserves closer examination: "There was an illusion of change in the 19th century. While there was lots of talk of equality and mobility in the 19th Century that was not what was happening. While people were making a lot of small changes in their lives they did not add up to much real change in mobility or the wealth and power structure of the community". With reference to both the "Montreal Society in the Nineteenth Century" project presentation and to the "Katz session", it was interesting to note the tensions raised by those who doubted quantitatively-based analyses of large masses of people, with an emphasis on economic considerations, rather than focussing on the elites, using social and psychological explanations and hypotheses.

In spite of scholarly activity, the relationship of the parts of the city, in both their spatial and social dimensions, still tend to be at the stage of definition, and the relationship of the space of the city to its social structure, and how that relationship was mediated by the political and institutional process is still unclear. Equally the manner in which the city's physical and social resources were allocated or managed, and for and by whom remains relatively unknown.

From the papers in the "political" sessions,¹ and the sessions on the Hamilton and Montreal projects, some of the elements and relationships in the internal city were identified. But as most of the principals recognized, their research has focussed on specific aspects (like social structure, provision of utilities and relief, or political structure) in a particular place and often at a particular time. Attempts to generalize on that basis are hazardous. The principals were successfully riding horses they were as yet unable to define.

All the papers in the session on "Politics and the Provision of Services" concentrated quite closely on the principal actors in the internal dynamic. Pat Roy focussed on Mayor Oppenheimer, of Vancouver. His identification of personal and community interests in utility development may (given further comparative research) prove typical of turn-of-the century Canadian cities. The evolution of Toronto's water-works by Douglas McCalla and Elwood Jones again demonstrated the close inter-weave of personality and politics in the provision of a local service; as likewise Terry Copp in the relationship of Montreal Mayor Camillien Houde to the provision of relief in the depression. None of the principals postulated great transcendent forces of change as the chief factors in the development of services, and none went very far to suggest an over-arching theory of urban evolution. But three excellent monographs are now available, just about doubling the existing literature.

The session on "The Cities and Local Government" proved disappointing primarily because the principals failed to make a timely provision of their papers to the discussant. Otherwise J. E. Rea's "paper" of an "Analysis of Leadership of Winnipeg Civic Politics, 1943-1970", was impressive in its demonstration of persistent political alignments in Winnipeg's city hall. A further effort to tie issues and

¹"Politics and the Provision of Services in Cities" with Pat Roy (History, Victoria), Douglas McCalla and Elwood Jones (History, Trent), Terry Copp (History, Wilfrid Laurier); "The Cities and Local Government", with James D. Anderson (Political Science, Alberta) and J. E. Rea (History, Manitoba).

political alignments to the social, spatial, and economic structure of the city would have perhaps been more impressive than the effort made to generate prescription from analysis.

James D. Anderson's study of "Municipal Reform Movements in Western Canada" was provocative in terms of the material apparently available, but little of the material was developed.

Additional analysis of the structures, issues, and politics of cities would have been invaluable to most of the papers on planning. These papers were typical of academic pioneering in (more or less) a vacuum. Most of the virtues and excitement of such research was evident, as well as most of the warts.

Enormous gaps and discrepancies quickly became evident as the papers were presented, but so was the confusion and clash of new research. The history of urban "planning" is far from a state of clarity or consensus. Debate was thus fresh and fundamental and was the anti-thesis of the inevitable and soporific hair-splitting common to more established areas of research. Eight scholars over four sessions had an opportunity to lift their heads from their desks and present their work and ideas, perhaps for the first time, to each other.

In the event, a division of the chronology into periods (and at that vague) proved perhaps the single source of agreement. Planning in a formal sense in Canada seems to have emerged sometime in the first decade of the twentieth century and undergone a re-orientation during or just after the First Great War. Subsequent re-orientations also seem to have followed in the late 'thirties or early 'forties and again in the late 'sixties according to Brahm Wiesman (Community and Regional Planning, UBC). But planning in its roots, philosophy, supporters and dynamic, are perhaps less clear as a result of the conference than they were previously.

Scholars were clearly generating their conclusions from

specific foci² (a single city, like Vancouver, or a single problem, like housing, or both), from specific evidence³ (like trade journals or legislative statute), or, in one case, from a specific pre-disposition.⁴ Four principals showed considerable caution in generating broad conclusions from their case studies, but four others attempted broadly-guaged explanations.

Despite these attempts at higher levels of conceptualization (or perhaps because of them), it is clear that the grand synthesis is some distance away. Gunton and Moore postulated Hegelian engines for the planning dynamic: Gunton in the ideas of rural collectivists and urban liberals and radicals; Moore in the tory and populist notions of Toronto politicians. But as commentator Hans Blumenfeld (Planning, Toronto) noted in the case of the latter, zoning is not planning, but protection, and its ideology more Jacobin than Tory. In both cases, as with Van Nus' study of the transition, in the twenties, of planners from idealists to administrators (and his rather Marxian interpretation of the change), Blumenfeld remarked on the failure to perceive the city, itself, as property-owner (primarily as a beneficiary of land rent through taxes) as a major determinant of municipal policies. None of the generalizations had a ring of authority about it. Part of the problem no doubt stems from the attempt to generalize from a single case by dressing the case study in a theory taken "off the rack". The "fit" proved questionable.

²Especially Deryck Holdsworth (Geography, UBC), "Corporate Images of Suburban Homes in Vancouver"; Shirley Spragge (History, Queen's), "Early Housing Reforms in Toronto"; Peter Moore (Geography, Toronto), "Zoning and Planning: The Toronto Experience"; Oiva Saarinen (Geography, Laurentian), "The Influence of Thomas Adams and the British New Towns Movement in the Planning of Canadian Resource Communities".

³Walter Van Nus (History, Concordia), "Towards the City Efficient: The Theory and Practise of Zoning in Canada, 1919-1939"; Tom Gunton (Community and Regional Planning, UBC), "Aspects of the Development of Canadian Planning Thought"; and Brahm Wiesman (Community and Regional Planning, UBC), "Provincial Planning Legislation, 1909-1976".

⁴P. J. Smith (Geography, Alberta) "Early Conceptions of the Public Responsibility in Urban Planning in Alberta".

The conceptual super-loads, of the three papers, once removed, produced some informed and fascinating case studies in three of the four cases. The fourth, "Early Conceptions of the Public Responsibility in Urban Planning in Alberta" in addition seemed to require a re-orientation to get to hard pan. The real thrust of the paper concerned the transmission of British planning ideas and their adaptation to Canada, apparently in the form of a "frontier utilitarianism". But early urban planning in Alberta represents only about four pages in a forty page paper. Little of it sustains the major object of the presentation, which is excellent, regardless, or says much about early planning in Alberta.

As case studies, the eight papers demonstrate that a multitude of occupations, classes, ideas, and interests were involved in the development of the planning process in Canada and it did not spring phoenix-like from the crinkles of Thomas Adams' cerebrum, as made clear from Saarinen's paper and Smith's comments. At the least, liberal professionals, businessmen, bureaucrats, politicians, corporate executives, women, and unionists, as well as imported exotics, like Adams, were involved. And it is hard to say that all fall under the single rubric of bourgeoisie except where the term is stretched to the point of inutility. Political pre-dispositions seem equally mixed: tory, populist, jacobin, liberal and socialist all seem to have played a role. Likewise one finds individualism, collectivism, corporatism, and humanitarianism among the motives of the planners as well as a fair share of the cynical vested interest of both the planners and the propertied classes.

The papers also demonstrated that the ties to more general economic, political and social developments of the early twentieth century are not completely understood, whether in a specific locality, a region, the nation or in the international context. At this point we have no "Laurentian Thesis" of city planning, but rather some very "limited identities". Nonetheless, some important intersections of "interests" and ideas were investigated in detail: the collective and private interests in Toronto public housing (Spragge), the ethic of individualism and the corporate provision of housing in Vancouver

(Holdsworth), the corporation and utopian community in Temiskaming (Saarinen), self interest and "utility" (Smith, and, in a somewhat different context, Van Nus).

To some degree the (read) comment of Leonard Gertler (Urban and Regional Planning, Waterloo) that Smith's paper was "rather monolithic" applies to all, as does the question Lorne Russworm (Geography, Waterloo) asked of Wiesman's paper: "What does it tell us about urbanization and attempts of planners to deal with it?"

As a final point, at the HUNAC Conference in 1973⁵ Canadian participants were bothered by the assumption of many speakers from the United States that the Canadian urban system was a mere extension of the U.S. system. At the CUP Conference at Guelph only Michael Katz seemed to reflect this same assumption as he talked briefly about proposed work on Buffalo and Hamilton. Other than this, however, there were few references to the U.S. scene. Some mention was given to the transfer of ideas from both the U.S. and especially Britain, but, generally speaking, almost exclusive attention was paid to Canada's urban past. Be that as it may, as we look to the future, we can wonder if we must be on guard against our focus becoming too inward, for more still needs to be known about the differences and likenesses between urban experiences in Canada and elsewhere. Most certainly, as sound research continues to develop an understanding of Canadian urban development, our experience should no longer merely stand as a footnote (or an omission) in North American or broader cross-cultural examinations of historical urban development. Perhaps, in addition to holding further interdisciplinary conferences on Canada's Urban Past, the time has come for Canadians to organize another HUNAC-like conference, or even better, a broader conference to include Australia, New Zealand, India, South Africa, etc. either in Barbados in February, or Guelph in May.

⁵David B. Knight and John Clarke, "Some Reflections on a Conference on the Historical Urbanization of North America", Urban History Review, No. 1-73 (June, 1973), pp. 10-14.