

# Planning in the Commonwealth

## Town Planning in Canada

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What is the condition of town planning in Canada? Is Canada an environment hospitable to the ideas and methods of planners? In answer to these questions I will try to give some broad impressions.

The literature of town planning is international and in all parts of the world planners share the same objectives in trying to improve the mechanics of cities and in trying to give some dignity and beauty to urban living. But the environments in which planners perform their professional services differ greatly. The ideas and practices of planners must adapt themselves in response to the political, economic and geographic climate. Apart from the fact that about two-thirds of the population of Canada speak a form of English as their native tongue (the rest speak French) it would be hard to imagine an environment more different from that of the British Isles.

### The planning environment

Canada has a population of 16 millions of which 10 millions are classified as urban. Our two largest metropolitan centres, Montreal and Toronto, each have a population of about 1½ million, the Vancouver area has a population of more than half a million, Winnipeg, Ottawa, Quebec and Hamilton each have populations of more than a quarter of a million. Since the war our towns and cities have grown rapidly and it is expected that the urban population will double in size during the next 25 years. There is a general recognition that planners will have an important role in directing this growth. But the planning profession and the systems of planning suitable for Canadian conditions are still at an early stage of development.

It was a misfortune of history that Canada entered the post-war period without the benefit of experienced planning staffs. During the previous period of urban expansion after World War I, town planning had gained some recognition and a small but vigorous Town Planning Institute was formed. This was partly due to the influence of the late Thomas Adams, who was retained by the Canadian federal government as an adviser before he gained greater fame in New York and Britain. This phase came to an abrupt and disastrous end in 1930, when Canada was crippled by the economic depression. It is interesting to reflect that during the following years in the United States a great stimulus was given to planning by the philosophy of the New Deal. President Roosevelt's personal interest in the conservation of physical resources gave prestige to planners in the United States and laid the foundation of their present position. During the same period Britain was evolving its planning legislation and planners gained operational experience in the slum clearance and public housing programmes of

that time. But Canada did not react to economic calamity in the same way. The country hove to and rode out the storm.

Canadian cities were consequently ill-prepared for the great wave of urban expansion which has swept them along in the post-war decade. They have been hard pressed to keep pace with the demands for sewers, streets and schools in the mushrooming suburbs. The small and overworked planning staffs have only been able to apply rudimentary controls on the use of land without having had time to prepare effective development plans. The post-war suburbs therefore bear all the marks of being hastily contrived within the framework of minimum standards and lack the graces which planners might have been able to give them under different circumstances.

With the achievements of the post-war decade behind us the prospects for effective town planning are now very much brighter, for a number of reasons. Most of the rapidly growing major cities have now established planning staffs. The housebuilding industry has matured greatly with emphasis upon quite large-scale land developments incorporating shopping centres, school and church sites, and open spaces. There is an aroused public interest in redeveloping obsolete central districts to improve housing conditions and open up the traffic bottlenecks in the approaches to business centres. The methods of reorganizing local government jurisdictions to contain the areas of urban growth have reached a realistic stage. For these and other reasons it is likely that the next phase of Canadian urban growth will produce some commendable achievements.

### No uniformity

In a country of such geographical variety and political diversity there can be no uniformity in the status and achievements of planning. Within the federal constitution land planning is in the jurisdiction of the ten provincial governments. The older towns in the Atlantic provinces, with their traditions rooted in the past, are less receptive to concepts of planning than the cities in the Western provinces, which have grown to maturity in the present age of industrialization. The French-speaking province of Quebec, in the great basin of the St. Lawrence River, has inherited its culture from the French settlers of the 17th and 18th centuries. Its population of 4 million is almost equal to that of Ontario but more widely distributed in smaller communities, each dominated by the spire of a Catholic church. Ontario has been more susceptible to planning concepts, as the result of its intimate contacts with the large industrial cities in the United States.

As a nation Canada has been continually preoccupied with problems of transportation and communication. A relatively small population has had to master a land of continental proportions. The historic nation-building tasks have been the construction of two transcontinental railways and the provision of highways to bridge hundreds of miles between neighbouring cities. Communications have been extended through the organization of a national air line and a national broadcasting system and by the present building of the St. Lawrence Seaway to

bring water transportation into the Great Lakes heartland of the continent. The relaying of power over great distances has brought about a vast network of hydro-electric power derived largely from the water run-off from the northern rocky expanses. The pipe-line now under construction from the oil-fields of the Western prairies to the manufacturing centres of the east is a further stage in tying together a continental national economy.

This preoccupation with problems of transportation and communication has undoubtedly coloured Canadian attitudes towards town planning. Emphasis has been placed upon overcoming the difficulties of getting initial access to land and making it habitable. Climate as well as geography have made this a formidable task. The extremes of temperature from 30° below zero in winter to the exposure under the clear hot skies of summer complicate every construction task. Roads must be rugged and cleared of snow, the foundations of buildings must be set below three or four feet of frozen soil, houses must be insulated and centrally heated for seven months of the year. To construct habitable cities in Canada is in itself an expensive task. More money must be spent, too, on food and clothing than is necessary to support life in a more gentle climate. So perhaps it is not altogether surprising that Canadians are better known for their ingenuity as engineers than for the elegance of their cities.

The high standard of living has made it the reasonable expectation of every family to own its own house and a car. Since the average house is now built on a lot 50 feet wide the amount of suburban land consumed is enormous and travel distances within the city are multiplied. The centres of cities have become more inaccessible and unable to absorb the volume of traffic. (After Los Angeles and Detroit, Toronto has the third highest ratio of cars to population among North American cities.) Consequently there has been a general dispersal of commerce and industry into suburban areas. Canadian families do their marketing in the new suburban shopping centres surrounded with acres of hard-surface parking space. Industries also have sought suburban sites where employees can enjoy similar parking amenities and where freight can be carried on high-speed through-ways.

The spreading suburbs of single-family houses are largely the products of speculative builders. The scale of their undertakings has increased considerably during recent years. Large-project builders now dominate the scene in the metropolitan regions, their land developments often being on a neighbourhood scale. The best and largest of these are based upon accepted concepts of community planning and have been designed by professional planners. A few recent good examples have had a favourable effect and it is evident that Canada is entering a new phase in the quality of its residential development.

#### Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation

The majority of these developments are financed under the terms of the National Housing Act. Mortgage loans are obtained from the chartered banks and insurance companies and these loans are insured by the federal government's agency, Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation. This Crown Corporation was established in 1946 and has been the principal factor in systematizing the process of housing finance and establishing standards

of construction. Since private developments financed under the National Housing Act are all reviewed by the Corporation there is also some control over the quality of residential land planning.

Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation has also played an important role in supporting community planning through the sponsorship of education activities. Fellowships and teaching grants have been made to aid the training of professional personnel. Substantial annual grants have been made to support the Community Planning Association of Canada, a national organization which publishes a monthly Review and conducts regional and national conferences on planning. The Corporation has also sponsored a Housing Design Council which is conducting a campaign to improve the quality of the products of the merchant builders.

Four Canadian Universities now offer graduate courses in planning (McGill University in Montreal and the Universities of Toronto, Manitoba and British Columbia).

#### Legislation

Perhaps the greatest difficulty in the advancement of planning in Canada lies in the fact that there are ten provincial governments responsible for planning legislation and supervision. The national government is constitutionally debarred from direct action in planning. It is obviously an expensive process to establish effective administration and supervision in ten provincial capitals; Canada has thus suffered from a dispersal of the forces to give leadership in planning methods. This is a problem inherent in the very nature of a country so widespread and with such strong regional characteristics.

To understand the status and opportunities for town planners in Canada it is necessary to appreciate the nature of the forces which are shaping a new country. Free enterprise is vigorous, intelligent and able to attract large capital funds from Canadian and foreign sources. The frontiers of settlement are still being extended as new resources of power and raw materials are explored. In this situation the role of government in planning, whether in an economic or physical sense, is not to supply the initiative but to establish limits and disciplines within which free enterprise can operate most efficiently and effectively. The converse is evident: the opportunities for planning design have most often been found in serving the institutions of private enterprise. Familiar Canadian examples of this are the building of Kitimat for the Aluminum Company in British Columbia and the building of Don Mills, a suburban community within the Toronto metropolitan area. A further reflection of this aspect of the Canadian scene is that large public enterprises tend to be organized on the pattern of private enterprise, using a corporate structure distinct from government administration. Publicly owned power and transportation authorities are, in their business methods, sometimes almost indistinguishable from private enterprises. This affects the planner both as a government servant and as a professional practitioner.

The Town Planning Institute of Canada now has a membership of about 200. Its members can look forward to a lively and active period in the forthcoming growth of our cities. Since the methods and objectives of their work have not yet settled into a familiar and recognized system they are likely to be engaged as much in the polemics of planning as in the routines of administration.