

Exhibition Review

Your Home Our City: 100 Years of Public Control Over Private Space.
CITY OF TORONTO ARCHIVES, 255 Spadina Road, Toronto, Ontario, May 2001 – throughout 2002.

About ten years ago, the City of Toronto Archives faced a huge challenge. Something had to be done with the thousands of building permit application plans that had been submitted to the City's Building Department over the years. These plans had been mounting since the Great Fire of 1904 that had devastated a large section of downtown Toronto. With fire comes renewal, and since 1904, Toronto had seen an enormous amount of building.

The Great Fire had an additional effect. It prompted City officials to institute a comprehensive new by-law to regulate building construction. One of its principal goals was to prevent wildcat fires from spreading from one tinderbox to the next; hence the shift in preferred building materials from wood to brick, and the increased emphasis on planning and regulation to prevent urban congestion.

Toronto grew rapidly in the early twentieth century, and the City annexed many formerly remote areas to feed the demand for more land. A construction boom accompanied the increase in municipal boundaries. Along with each request for a building permit, be it for a new factory, school, church, house, or even a home addition, the applicant had to provide the City's Building Department with a set of drawings. The new by-law stipulated that the drawings had to be retained by the Building Department. Consequently, by the end of the last century, the number of architectural plans held by the City was both astounding and alarming.

Rolls and rolls of plans, tied up in huge plastic bags, were stored everywhere, even in the attics of Toronto's old City Hall. They were organized, to be sure, but hardly accessible. To deal with this problem, which was especially acute since these records were still operational, the permit applications and the plans were microfilmed. The microfilmed versions became the official

records, and the fate of the original blueprint, linen, and mylar drawings dating from 1904 to 1959 became the Archives' responsibility.

While the building permit application plans certainly represented a splendid collection, it was also overwhelming in its scope. The Archives' management now had to decide whether to save or destroy this massive legacy. Fortunately, they decided to keep a representative sample of the plans, and about five percent of approximately 120,000 rolls of plans were kept. This sample reflects all neighbourhoods of the old, pre-amalgamation City of Toronto, and all kinds of buildings.

Imagine the richness of this collection. The plans provide evidence of construction styles and trends, changes in code regulations, and patterns of city development. There are drawings of imposing buildings, such as the Pantheon-like bank at 205 Yonge Street designed by E.J. Lennox, or the Lumsden office tower, once the largest concrete-faced building in the world. There are also plans of more prosaic buildings, including gas stations, small local movie theatres, and apartment houses. Many of the drawings are beautifully rendered, with an artistic skill that is rapidly being lost in our age of computer-aided design. The plans also have an undeniable value in that they capture and document the architectural heritage of Toronto, a city that has shown scant interest in preserving buildings, whether humble or grand. It is a treat to look at drawings that illustrate, for example, small shops with deeply inset entrances allowing for large window displays, or Joy Oil gas stations that were designed to mimic French chateaux. These structures used to be commonplace in Toronto, but are so rarely seen now that they have become precious.

We all have the opportunity to look at some of the building permit plans in the City of Toronto Archives' fine new exhibit entitled, *Your Home Our City: 100 Years of Public Control over Private Space*. The story of the tension between the City's regulatory will and the freewheeling activities of development speculators shapes and defines this exhibit. Taking a chronological approach, the text and images walk the visitor through a tour of municipal controls and regulation over residential development in the City from 1834 to the present. In the nineteenth century, relatively little control was exerted by the City, though the need for housing was great. This led to a hodge-podge of development, sub-standard house construction and very crowded conditions. By the turn of the century, city limits were bursting, resulting in a push to annex many outlying areas. These areas, located north and west of the City, were dotted with small villages and individual farms, but the hinterlands soon fell victim to indiscriminate sub-division. Recognizing the problems inherent in such thoughtless development, Toronto government officials sought to exercise public control over competing private interests. The City petitioned the provincial government for legislation to regulate regional planning, which was granted in 1912.

Later examples of municipal intervention are also documented in this

exhibit. During World War I the City took action against serious over-crowding in downtown tenements. Acting on the recommendations of its Medical Officer of Health, it demolished 1,600 deteriorating dwellings. Despite these efforts, Toronto's housing stock continued to decline in quality. The formerly grand homes of Victorian and Edwardian days were converted into warrens of poor families, struggling with inadequate facilities. By the late 1930s the City found a method to effect housing standard reforms. It enacted the Standard of Housing By-law, allowing City officials to inspect homes and require that their owners meet the new standard. The federal government responded with legislation for home improvement loans, making it possible for many homeowners to repair or rebuild.

The conflict between social control and private development continued during the affluent period after World War II. The new social consciousness of municipal reformers led to the introduction of subsidized housing. The exhibit explores the rise of downtown public housing tracts such as Regent Park in 1947, followed by Moss Park and Alexandra Park in the 1960s. By the 1970s, however, many were questioning the wisdom of concentrating low-income families in downtown ghettos. The economic and demographic pressures behind the explosive growth of high-rise apartment buildings and suburban sprawl are also examined. Ending with a glance at the twenty-first century, we are presented with the conundrum of monster homes versus the shacks and tents of Toronto's homeless. The lesson of this show is that if we desire a safe and well-planned community, the competing voices of public and private interests must both have their say.

The history of urban planning is interesting to many people. However, the real appeal of this exhibit lies not so much in its message, but in the archival records chosen to illustrate it. As befits its title, *Your Home Our City* has a strong local focus, and hence will be particularly appealing to visitors acquainted with the city. Curator Patrick Cummins clearly understands the delight of recognition, and has mined the Archives' rich collection to find images of streets and houses that most Torontonians will find very familiar. It is fascinating to see side by side, a photograph of a house you know and the building permit application plan showing the front elevation or the floor plan for that very home. Cummins also has made good use of the streetscape to draw attention to the often incongruous mixture of housing styles that exist cheek by jowl in many Toronto neighbourhoods. Fire insurance plans, printed advertisements for housing developments, and aerial photographs add further context and depth to the pictures and plans of housing.

The local interest of *Your Home Our City* is continued in the display tables that focus on unique Toronto districts and expand on the themes of the main exhibit. Many visitors will already be familiar with the history of the struggling Toronto Island community. Less well known is the story of Wychwood Park, originally an artists' colony developed between 1907 and 1911. To this

day some artists still live in Wychwood Park, a nearly secret enclave of beautiful arts and crafts-style homes, located just minutes away from the Archives. The Guild of All Arts, on the Scarborough Bluffs, and the fabled “Bayview Ghost” are also documented with many interesting photographs and archival records.

The City of Toronto Archives is favoured with a purpose-built facility that has many amenities. Among these is the atrium, an open, airy space, dominated by a large, curving staircase leading up to the Research Hall and administrative offices. The atrium is well suited for hosting events and opening receptions, and it also serves as the Archives’ exhibition area. The challenge of this space for the exhibit designer is how to provide focus and direction. With its big, echoing hall and people continually moving up and down the stairs, one is tempted to look up and away from the displays, as intriguing as they may be. Holly Evers, the designer of this exhibit, has done an admirable job dealing with this problem. She has made good use of some newly opened-up window embrasures, placing much of the show within these quieter and calming nooks. Her choice of colours and layout are attractive, and the design illustrates a dash and flair not often seen in archival displays.

Curator Patrick Cummins, researcher Manda Vranic, and designer Holly Evers must be commended for their excellent job in presenting this interesting theme. It is not an easy task to make architectural drawings understandable and interesting to the lay visitor. If I have any complaint with this exhibit, it is that its focus on housing meant that only home and apartment plans made it into the show. One can only hope that the curators for upcoming exhibitions at the City of Toronto Archives will find some way to incorporate other selections from the Building Permit Application Plan series.

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