

# Exhibition Review

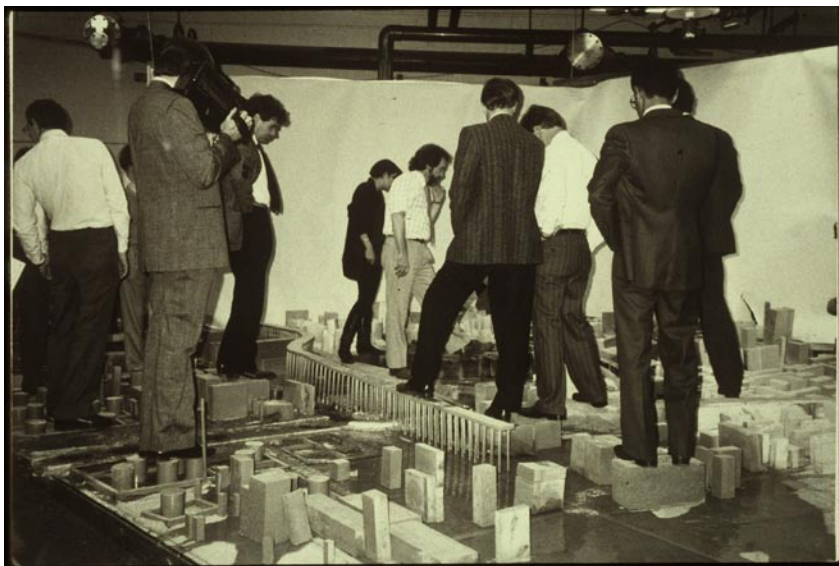


**No Little Plans: Alternative Building and Transportation Visions for Toronto.** CITY OF TORONTO ARCHIVES. 17 September 2015–30 August 2016. Curated by MARK OSBALDESTON.

The title for the *No Little Plans* exhibition comes from an apocryphal quote by the city planner and architect Daniel Burnham (1846–1912), who called on his comrades in the building trade to “make no little plans.... Make big plans; aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will never die, but long after we are gone will be a living thing.”<sup>1</sup> The quotation, reprinted in the City of Toronto Archives’ exhibition brochure, evokes a particularly archival sentiment: the dream of preserving the past as a living experience. Hence, the exhibition, in presenting records of an imagined future Toronto, as glimpsed through the plans and schemes of the past, affords the spectator a tremendously rich view of municipal history that moves beyond the typical checklist of historical progress, the mere notation of accomplishments from one outcome to the next, into the realm of unrealized dreams and ambitions. In this space, we are not surprised to rediscover that the problems of the urban experience in 2015 – affordable housing, urban density, public transportation, infrastructure, funding, and taxes – are also the problems of 1915, 1955, and the entire epoch of modern memory.

The exhibition presents a small selection of the projects explored in the two volumes of *Unbuilt Toronto* by Mark Osbaldeston, published by Dundurn Press in 2008 and 2011 respectively. The displays include units on housing,

1 The quote first appeared in print in a Christmas card issued by one of Burnham’s partners, Willis Polk, in 1912. Though the text is often attributed to a speech delivered by Burnham to the construction workers at the groundbreaking for the Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893, anecdotal accounts suggest that the quotation may have been retrospectively cobbled together from speeches delivered by Burnham on a variety of occasions. See Patrick T. Reardon, “Burnham Quote: Well, It May Be,” *Chicago Tribune*, 1 January 1992, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1992-01-01/news/9201010041\\_1\\_sentences-chicago-architects](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1992-01-01/news/9201010041_1_sentences-chicago-architects).



*Mayor and others reviewing Ataratiri model, ca. 1990* (Photographer unknown), City of Toronto Archives, Series 1465, File 636, Item 53

roads and transportation, elevated superhighways, and a final section on the new city hall and Nathan Phillips Square, which ties in with the 50th anniversary of the completion of this iconic city building. These units are presented utilizing a wide assortment of archival materials, including architectural drawings, artifacts, photographs, and city planning documents.

The unit on housing includes examples of more and less successful plans for public housing projects, some of which were partially realized and others that were repurposed in future projects. The Riverdale Courts, built prior to the First World War, became the Bain Housing Co-op, one of the city's longest-operating co-operative housing developments. The Ataratiri development in the West Don Lands was cancelled by the province in 1992, after assuming losses of over \$400 million because of flood and environmental remediation costs in a depressed market. The site was redeveloped into the athletes' village for the 2015 Pan Am and Parapan Am Games, an example of how earlier plans were later realized in next-generation projects. This contextualization of realized projects in contrast with failed projects illustrates the complexities of massive infrastructure developments in an urban centre. This is not an exhibition of nostalgic visions of the Toronto that could have been. Since 2005, large portions of the somewhat infamous social housing project Regent Park have been demolished for redevelopment. The buildings had fallen into disrepair and the area's physical isolation from the rest of the city

led to a perception of the ghettoization of public housing tenants. In stark contrast with the reality of inner-city poverty, with which the area became associated, the original late-1940s design sketches for Regent Park, which are presented in the exhibition, look positively Utopian, part of a grand vision for urban housing.

The cautionary theme carries through to the exhibit's second and third units: roads and transportation. The now crumbling Gardiner Expressway serves as an example against which we can evaluate the mid-century craze over elevated superhighways as a transportation model. Public opposition to the annexation of land, proposed routes, and construction costs led to the cancellation of the Crosstown Expressway, the partially built Spadina Expressway, and a proposed Scarborough Expressway. The push to build superhighways proved deeply unpopular among residents of affected neighbourhoods, reminding us of the power of public opinion in determining the course of infrastructure development. The exhibition's visually stimulating presentation of the proposed Crosstown Expressway, through eight linked plates, effectively maps out the full scope of the proposed route, which would have crossed over Dupont and Roxborough streets through the heart of present-day gridlocked Toronto.

Also presented in the roads and transportation units of the exhibition is a planned boulevard system connecting parks in the city, which features some of the drawings from architect Earle C. Sheppard's "City Beautiful-Inspired Vision" for Toronto, a grand boulevard plan from the early 20th century. The 1929 plan of the Advisory City Planning Commission included radial thoroughfare designs for a new Queen's Park Avenue and Vimy Circle, linking University Avenue to Union Station, the railway terminal, and a proposed Cambrai Avenue, which would have linked Union Station with another civic square, St. Julien Place, the current site of Nathan Phillips Square. As other building plans were approved on the sites where the commission had projected the grand boulevards, these radial thoroughfares and public squares were only partially realized in the extension of University Avenue to Union Station and the completion of Nathan Phillips Square with the construction of the new city hall.

The final unit of the *No Little Plans* exhibition concerns the construction of the new city hall, beginning with the city hall annex and demolition of portions of the Ward neighbourhood between 1940 and 1960, and culminating in the design competition of 1958. The exhibition presents the maquette for the winning design by Finnish architect Viljo Revell, as well as designs for all eight of the finalist presentations in the international competition. Presenting these designs side by side conveys the general preferences of the jury, but also highlights the many strengths of the winning design. Among the other finalists were notably modern rectangular designs with central courtyards, including a kind of interwoven wavy roof design (F-007) by John H. Andrews

and Macy DuBois, and the Perkins & Will (F-001) design with suspended glass platforms on elevated roman arches. The differences between Revell's winning design and those of the other finalists are immediately apparent. The Revell entry stands literally "outside the box," with its curved towers, freestanding circular council chamber, and elevated walkways.

Also highlighted are some earlier proposals, predating the competition; these include a neoclassical civic building with dome and cenotaph design from the 1940s, which would have incorporated the 1917 Registry Building, demolished in 1962 during construction of the new city hall. Another interesting design on display represents an unsolicited proposal to build a bank tower crowned with a giant radio spike, from a proposal submitted to Mayor Alan A. Lamport in 1952.

Additional displays in flat cases along the length of the exhibition space augment the wall displays and include examples of alternative proposals for the Bloor Street Viaduct, a 1915 plan for a "semi-rapid transit" radial system for streetcars, and the preliminary and semi-final maquettes for the winning city hall design. Those interested in delving further into the subject of Toronto's unbuilt architecture will find extensive examples in Osbaldeston's volumes, which include a broad array of photographs, illustrations, and building plans for other city features not covered in the exhibition, such as parks, monuments, church buildings, towers, and a wide array of public works, commercial buildings, and arts and leisure facilities. Osbaldeston is set to release *Unbuilt Hamilton* next, scheduled for publication in October 2016.

In addition to the *No Little Plans* exhibition, the City of Toronto Archives also had several smaller exhibitions on display at the time of review. The south wall featured 19th-century photographs of Toronto by Armstrong, Beere & Hime. Items regarding Toronto's bid to become the capital of Canada were in a separate display case. An interactive table display on the First World War in the news included a large bound volume of the *Daily Mail and Empire* newspaper, which visitors could leaf through. This uncommon invitation to patrons to touch (with care) period artifacts provides an example to other archives of how published materials can be incorporated into a tactile exhibition that otherwise showcases unique or fragile documents from the main collection. Osbaldeston's exhibition also ties in thematically with other City of Toronto Archives web exhibits, such as *A Work in Progress* and *A Step Forward in Time: Toronto's New City Hall*.<sup>2</sup>

The focus of *No Little Plans* on the decision-making process moves the viewer away from a retrospective evaluation of the past simply in terms of

2 City of Toronto, City of Toronto Archives, "What's Online: Web Exhibits," accessed 28 January 2016, <http://www1.toronto.ca/wps/portal/contentonly?vgnextoid=7a27bcf5a1d21410VgnVCM10000071d60f89RCRD>.

“good” and “bad” decisions. We examine instead a kind of spectrum of decisions and compromises by juries, experts, consultants, designers, and sometimes even the wider public, that go into creating something like a consensus of the public sphere. The full range of archival records represented by the City of Toronto Archives’ wide-reaching municipal mandate are purposefully drawn upon to reveal the range of circumstances – political, practical, social, environmental, and economic – that influence the urban planning process. What is most evident from the exhibition is how enormously difficult it is to realize big plans, moving from the page to the material world. Maybe in the end we get something like the city we wanted: not quite always the best we could have been, sometimes better than we might otherwise have expected, but pretty much just about what we needed and could all agree to live with. “Toronto the Good,” as it was nicknamed in the 19th century, might come out looking like “Toronto the Good Enough.”

**Simon Patrick Rogers**  
**John M. Kelly Library**  
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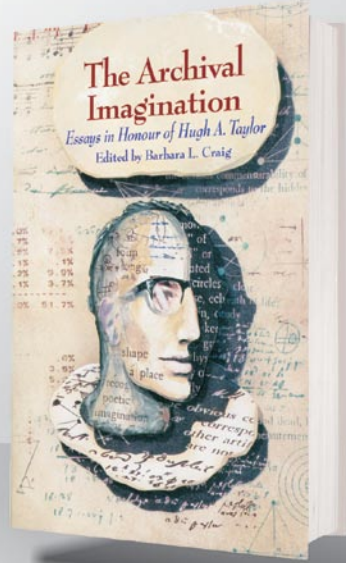
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