

Changing Urban Waterfront Seminar Series Report

May 2008.

Toronto's Changing Waterfront: Society and Nature in Urban Transformations

2008 Seminar Series

Sponsored by City Institute at York University, University of Toronto Cities Centre, and the Changing Urban Waterfront Research Project.

Seminar Description:

The seminar series provided a forum for the presentation of research from members of the Changing Urban Waterfront research project. The project is a SSHRC funded research project that began in 2005, with faculty and graduate student researchers from the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, the York University Archives, the Department of Geography, University of Toronto, and the Department of Environmental Studies, University of Vermont.

Hosted in the third year of the research project's timeline, the seminar series focused on the central theme of the project - the interrelationship of society and nature in the historical transformation of Toronto's waterfront. This focus spans a chronological period of approximately one hundred years, culminating in the current redevelopment plans for the waterfront. The project's emphasis on the intertwined processes of social and natural transformations in the changing landscape of Toronto's waterfront suggests that political decisions, governance arrangements, engineering practices, and management techniques have a direct role in the shaping of natural places and forms. The natural landscape of Toronto's waterfront has been produced by multiple human interventions. This focus necessitates an interdisciplinary research approach where researchers address both social and natural processes in their specific substantive areas and geographical sites of waterfront research.

The seminar series was co-sponsored by the Cities Centre at University of Toronto and York University's City Institute. Administrative and technical assistance was provided by Pat Doherty, at the University of Toronto's Cities Centre, and Sara Macdonald at York University's City Institute. Dr. Larry Bourne, Director of the Cities Centre at the University of Toronto, and Dr. Roger Keil, Director of York University's City Institute, provided institutional endorsement for the series. Financial support for the seminar series was provided by the Changing Urban Waterfronts research project through Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada Grant # 410-2005-2071.

Summary of Presentations:

SEMINAR 1: Toronto's Changing Industrial Waterfront

Monday, February 4th, 2008 12-2 pm.
University of Toronto, Sidney Smith Hall, 100 St. George Street, Toronto.
Attendance: 30

Introduction to Seminar Series: Dr. Gene Desfor, Principal Investigator, Changing Urban Waterfronts Research Project

**Presentation 1: Michael Moir, University Archivist, York University Libraries.
Presentation Title: Shipbuilding and Toronto's Waterfront Plan of 1912**

Michael Moir's presentation examined the role of shipbuilding and industrial development in the sustainability of the Toronto Harbour Commission's (THC) Waterfront Plan of 1912. The chronological and archival nature and methodological evidence of the presentation provided detailed examples of the shipbuilding industry in early modern Toronto.

The presentation began with an overview of port activity in 19th century Toronto, starting with shipbuilding along the Humber River in the 1790s and extending to the late 19th century industrial period of industry and vessel development. Coghill's drydock (1880-1893), located at the north mouth of the Don River, and the passenger vessel *Garden City* (1892) were two examples of emergent shipbuilding activity along the waterfront. In addition, the Doty Engine Works were located near Front and Bathurst streets. The factory later became the Bertram Engine Works, which emerged as a well-known and cost-effective shipbuilding yard. The yard was subsequently purchased by the Canadian Shipbuilding Company in 1904. In 1909, the yard was sold and the lands became dormant. Another example of Toronto's role in shipbuilding was found in the production activities of the Polson Iron Works, founded in 1883.

The Toronto Harbour Commission's 1912 plan included a 'mixed-use' concept along Toronto's waterfront. Moir argues that while the plan was successful in terms of building a new waterfront through lakefilling, it failed to achieve sustainability through cost recovery due to the failure to develop industry on reclaimed land. Shipbuilding played a key role in this process. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 led to a pressing requirement for new vessels, and the emphasis of shipbuilding shifted to manufacturing naval and ocean-going cargo vessels. This demand expedited the construction of new dock walls, as well as the creation of new yards for the Toronto Shipbuilding and Dominion Shipbuilding companies. The armistice, however, brought a quick reversal of fortunes for Toronto's shipyards as the nature of the shipbuilding industry was cyclical and dependent on broader economic transformations and agendas. Long-term success was subject to regional, national and international demand for commercial tonnage, which fell dramatically during following the war. Preferential tariffs for railways and federal policies regarding awards of contracts for the Canadian Government Merchant Marine eventually combined to decimate the waterfront shipbuilding industry in Toronto by 1920, virtually eliminating a port industry that had previously buoyed belief in the sustainability of the THC's Waterfront Plan.

**Presentation 2: Dr. Gunter Gad, Department of Geography, University of Toronto.
Presentation Title: Manufacturing on the Waterfront in a City-wide Context**

Dr. Gad's presentation described the economic forces that shifted industrial development in the form of manufacturing away from the water's edge in central Toronto and towards other areas of the central downtown. While certain industries such as the Polson Iron Works had a dominant presence along the waterfront, much of the manufacturing industry was located north of Front Street, a geographical demarcation used by Dr. Gad for differentiating between a 'waterfront' and 'non-waterfront' location.

Dr. Gad's presentation asserted that Toronto's waterfront was not an important manufacturing district. In an extensive study based on archival mapping of manufacturing industries, the research findings demonstrated that 8 out of 26 major manufacturers, such as iron and stove foundries, file and saw cutters, agricultural implements, soap and candle manufacturers, and a large distillery, were located on the waterfront. Much of the manufacturing that did exist along the waterfront was in clusters in the central downtown waterfront district. There is no historical evidence of manufacturing on the waterfront east of Ashbridge's Bay or along the waterfront of Etobicoke. The manufacturers that did operate on the waterfront were Toronto Waterworks, Toronto Electric Light Company, and a coal fuelled power plant located south of Front Street that was dependent on the maritime shipment of coal.

Dr. Gad noted that Toronto's historical economic importance was based in its connection to the rural hinterland, specifically in the importing of goods and their dispersal to hinterland. This relationship necessitated a railway emphasis and not a maritime emphasis in terms of freight transportation. Pull of manufacturing away from waterfront by late 1890s into suburbs such as New Toronto and Leaside.

SEMINAR 2: Planning and Politics on the Waterfront

Monday, March 3rd, 12-2 pm.

York University, York Lanes 305, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto.

Attendance: 19

Introduction: Michael Moir, Special Collections Archivist, York University.

Presentation 1: Dr. Gene Desfor, Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University.

Presentation Title: Walking on Water: The Politics of Land Creation

Dr. Desfor's presentation examined the political and economic practices that were involved in the production of the Port Industrial District in the early 20th century. The presentation posited that the production of land for industrial purposes, created through

land filling practices, intertwined social and biophysical processes, or what can be conceptualized as 'socio-nature'.

Dr. Desfor noted that 85% of land on Toronto's central waterfront has been created by lake filling. In many port-cities, land reclamation has not been unusual, rather it has been a 'normal' process for urban development and city expansion. A major part of Toronto's land creation was initiated by the Toronto Harbour Commission. Its plan for the Port Industrial District was a central part of the 1912 Waterfront Development Plan and it resulted in the production of about 1200 acres of industrial land. In a critique of this approach, the presentation noted that the manipulation of natural landscape forms was a rich example of the commodification of nature.

The empirical evidence of the presentation, based upon archival research on the Toronto Harbour Commission's plans for filling and filling practices, was framed by a theoretical discussion that brought together the concept of 'socio-nature' (Swyngedouw) and regulationist notions of the 'spatio-temporal fix' (Harvey). Dr. Desfor argued that the creation of Port Industrial District constitutes a 'land creation fix'. It produced a commodity (land) that can be bought and sold and thus has an exchange value; the produced land has a use value as an input for production processes; and the territory created by the produced-land provides for new spatial relations in the city.

The establishment of the Toronto Harbour Commission in 1911 represented more than founding of a new organization that could solve a waterfront problem.

It exercised political power in specific social contexts, challenging the liberal representation of institutions as mechanisms that generate ideologically neutral decisions. The establishment of the new organizational structure with its special regulatory and development powers was integral to production of the Port Industrial District. It made possible the production of a major urban expansion through the creation of a new industrial form of socio-nature.

Presentation 2: Dr. Susannah Bunce, Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University.

Presentation Title: Planning and the Development of Sustainability on the Central Waterfront

The presentation examined the current redevelopment plans for the central waterfront area of Toronto's waterfront, which spans a geographic territory of ten kilometres from Sunnyside Beach at the western end and Ashbridge's Bay at the eastern end. Based on policy research, interviews with government officials, planning and design practitioners, and land owners, and case study analysis of two specific central waterfront redevelopment areas, the West Don Lands and East Bayfront sites, Dr. Bunce discussed how the concept of sustainability has been integrated into the current redevelopment plans for these sites.

Waterfront Toronto, formerly called the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corporation, is responsible for the creation of policy, plans and designs for the development of new mixed-use residential and commercial neighbourhoods in the West Don Lands and East Bayfront areas. Waterfront Toronto is also responsible for the appraisal of public land in these areas, and the coordination of land sales to private sector developers. With the formulation of a sustainability policy in 2004, the *Sustainability Framework*, that guides Waterfront Toronto's policy development, plans, and design specifications, Waterfront Toronto developed strong requirements for sustainable planning and design for private sector developers to integrate into the site plans and eventual construction of new development blocks in the West Don Lands and East Bayfront. The presentation provided an overview of the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) specifications that Waterfront Toronto is specifying in the plans and designs for property development.

Dr. Bunce's research findings demonstrated a difference in the level of sustainability requirements between the West Don Lands and East Bayfront sites based upon the presence of sustainable design premiums and their relationship to the land appraisal and land sale processes in these areas.

SEMINAR 3: Social-Natural Contexts of Waterfront Change

Monday, April 7th, 4-6 pm.

City of Toronto Archives, 255 Spadina Road, Toronto.

Attendance: 30

Introduction: Dr. Susannah Bunce, Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University.

Presenter 1: Dave Andrews, Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University. Presentation Title: Management of Cormorants in North America: Perspectives on Toronto's Tommy Thompson Park

Dave Andrew's presentation was based on research conducted jointly with Dr. Gail Fraser from the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University. His presentation examined the various management issues and conflicts related to the presence and breeding of cormorants in Tommy Thompson Park (Leslie Street Spit).

The double-crested cormorant is a colonial water bird, native to North America, which is found in both marine and freshwater habitats. Cormorants first started nesting in Tommy Thompson park in 1990. The park was designated an Important Bird Area in 2000. Due to a steady increase in cormorant presence, cormorant deterrents were implemented in the park in 2001. Dave Andrews suggested that the management of the cormorant population is based on a series of real and perceived conflicts over destruction of vegetation, impacts on other breeding colonial water birds, and effects on fisheries due to fish feeding by cormorants. Specifically, cormorants have impacted on tree health in the park, encroached on black crowned night-heron nesting areas, and have been blamed for the

decline of sport fish in the Great Lakes Basin and catfish aquaculture in the Mississippi River Delta during migration season.

Based on qualitative interviews with cormorant academics and wildlife managers and questionnaires, the research findings demonstrated in the presentation showed the reasons for cormorant management (86% of respondents suggested it was for the protection of fisheries by comparison to 29% for the protection of vegetation/habitat). Dave Andrews suggested that while the main goal of management plans was to reduce impacts on fisheries, only a few published case studies demonstrated a negative impact on fisheries by cormorants. This pointed to a discrepancy between academics and managers with respect to the extent to which management of cormorants is based on conclusive scientific findings by comparison with public opinion.

Presenter 2: Jennifer Bonnell, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

Presentation Title: Tracing the Social and Environmental History of the Don River

Jennifer Bonnell's presentation explored the history of social and environmental change in the Don River watershed over the 19th and 20th centuries. The presentation emphasized the cyclical relationship between human interventions in their environments and environmental responses—expected and otherwise—to human interventions. The Don River watershed is 38 km long in distance between the Oak Ridges Moraine and Lake Ontario. The east and west branches of the Don River meet at the “Forks,” approximately 7 km north of Lake Ontario.

Based on archival research, the presentation provided an exploration of key moments of environmental change in the Don River valley in the 19th and 20th centuries. Bonnell showed how present plans to restore the mouth of the river are rooted in a long history of “improvements”—what she called “imagined futures” for the river and its role in the development of the city. From John Graves Simcoe's choice of a town plot near the mouth of the Don in 1793, to a series of abortive plans to use the valley as a corridor for drinking water in the 1880s, the Don has featured large in dreams for the future of Toronto. Most famous of these “imagined futures” was the Don Improvement Plan of the late 1880s, which saw the river straightened and channelized south of Gerrard Street, and a new channel cut to the harbour. Marketed to the public as a solution to chronic flooding and public health concerns, the real impetus for the project lay in economic advantages for railway interests, who sought an eastern access route to the city, and for the municipal government, who hoped to lease new industrial lands on the river and on the waterfront near the river mouth. In 1950 a radically different vision of the role of the river in the city's development was presented by the Ontario Department of Planning and Development in their Don Valley Conservation Report. The report identified the Don Valley as a key provider of green space for recreation and wildlife habitat, and proposed the acquisition and restoration of valley lands for flood protection and public use.

Also highlighted in this presentation were aspects of the social history of the Don River. Documenting the historical tendency to perceive the river valley as a marginal space and a sink for urban wastes, Bonnell showed how the idea of the river valley as a “repository for undesirables” extended to “human undesirables” as well—from squatters in the 1830s to Roma families who set up camps in the upper valley in the early 20th century, the creation of a large “hobo jungle” in the lower valley in the 1930s, and finally the location of a prisoner-of-war labour camp in the valley during World War II. Running counter to this perception was the tendency through the late 19th and early 20th centuries to see the valley, as Ernest Thompson Seton and other naturalists did, as a “beauty spot” and a place for moral regeneration. The presentation concluded with a series of images demonstrating the role of the river as a historical actor in its own right—the ice jams, floods, and silt deposits that hampered human industry on the river well into the twentieth century.

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