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To cite this article: Richard White (2018): A case study in early urban design: Toronto, 1966–1978, Planning Perspectives, DOI: [10.1080/02665433.2018.1493394](https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2018.1493394)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2018.1493394>



Published online: 17 Jul 2018.



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A case study in early urban design: Toronto, 1966–1978

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ABSTRACT

This is a study in the practice of postwar urban design in Toronto, Canada, based on archival documents and interviews with participants. The narrative begins with the hiring of one British-trained architect/urban designer, Raymond Spaxman, by the City of Toronto Planning Board in 1966. Spaxman then set up a new division of staff that he filled with five or six other architect/urban designers of various national and institutional origins. The study describes the work carried out by these urban designers, identifies the principle themes apparent in it, and relates this to published literature on the founding principles of postwar urban design. In most ways, the study's findings fit the current understanding of the early discipline – concern for pedestrians, sympathy for historical preservation – but in others not – it was different from but not antagonistic towards planning. The findings are then considered as an example of the international transfer of postwar planning ideas. The process of idea transfer in this case looks to have been more chaotic, and less definable, than existing paradigms suggest, but this might have been fairly common in second-rank, immigrant-receiving cities.

KEYWORDS

Urban design; Toronto; townscape; central area; 1970s; 1960s; international transfer of planning ideas

Introduction

The definition of urban design, one leading analyst has written, remains ‘elusive’,¹ an observation one must bear in mind when exploring the profession’s history. The central cause of this surely is its relationship to urban planning, and to some extent architecture, with both of which it shares certain elements while also being fundamentally distinct. Some have gone so far as to characterize urban design not as a discrete discipline but simply as a ‘way of thinking’ that can inform the practice of architecture or planning,² an appealing compromise that obviates the need for a precise definition; yet something as amorphous as a ‘way of thinking’ rarely forms the basis for concrete things like university programmes, scholarly journals, or professional associations – which urban design does. Then there is the complication of when the profession emerged: some of what is now considered urban *design* was in fact being done, right through to the early twentieth century, by practitioners we call early urban *planners*.³ ‘Elusive’ does indeed seem to be the right word.

Yet one soon realizes that, for better or worse, most present-day analysts of the profession have set aside this definitional/historical problem, and when commenting on urban design – though they

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¹Marshall, “The Elusiveness of Urban Design.”

²Marshall, “The Elusiveness of Urban Design,” 55; Brown, “Urban Design at Fifty,” 82; and Krieger, “Where and How Does Urban Design Happen?” 129.

³Orillard, “The Transnational Building of Urban Design” offers new, original insights.

may glance back to nineteenth-century ‘Historical Precedents’⁴ – they are referring quite unambiguously to a particular approach to creating and enhancing urban spaces that emerged in the 1950s. Eric Mumford provides its foundational narrative: urban design was conceived at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design primarily by Josep Lluís Sert, whose central role, Mumford contends, reveals the discipline’s ties to European modernism. Sert envisioned the new profession as an amalgam of planning, architecture, and landscape architecture.⁵ Its scope was the city, not the suburbs, and it was thus something of a reaction, or at least a counterpoise, to America’s postwar rush to the suburbs. Its *métier* was physical design, in the architect’s three dimensions not the planner’s two, but of urban environments not individual buildings, and it thus paid particular attention to relationships between buildings and to the spaces around them. Others see things slightly differently – Peter Laurence portrays it as a reaction to destructive urban renewal⁶ – but this account of the profession’s emergence is generally accepted.

The study presented here makes no effort to challenge this account and in fact uses it as a premise, in a sense. What follows is a study of a small group of urban designers who practised in Toronto from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, making them, according to this narrative, the first generation of working urban designers. They are not among the profession’s creators, so this is not a study of the profession’s genesis, *per se*, but they are among its first practitioners and the study examines them and their work with this in mind. What professional training did they receive? What did they call themselves? What was their relationship to planning, and to architecture? What principles informed and guided their work? Where did these ideas originate and how did they come to Toronto? And what, all told, might the answers to these questions contribute to our understanding of the emergence of present-day urban design?

This is, unapologetically, a case study analysing the actions of a few individuals in one place at one time, and some comments on this methodology are in order. The study is offered not because Toronto itself is especially important; the city is neither influential – it has been a receiver, not a generator, of new ideas – nor representative, though its representativeness is broached in the conclusion. The study’s value rests on two other points.

First, local studies can penetrate deeper into source material than can studies of a broader scope, and as such can bring a researcher closer to what actually happened. Research of this sort is, admittedly, usually done by humanistically inclined historians who cannot fully suppress their interest in individuals and human dramas, rather than by those of a more social-scientific inclination who prefer to infer from the impersonal aggregate. But one should not be too quick to disparage the humanist’s approach, especially in the history of the professions where sharply focused research can get beyond the rhetoric of professional literature, which is usually profession-wide, or even national, in scope and not always grounded in the realities of actual practice. Second, a local case study cannot prove any general truth – nor does it seek to – but it can raise questions. To discover, as this study does, that landscape architecture played no part in Toronto’s early urban design does not prove that Sert’s vision was unfulfilled, or unworkable, but it might prompt one to ask whether this was so elsewhere. Finally, it must be said that although this study recounts details of Toronto’s planning history it does so primarily to portray the context in which the urban designers did their work; that is to say it is offered not as a case study in the history of Toronto and its planning – something fully covered in other publications⁷ – but as a case study in the history of urban design. Nor is it intended as a lesson

⁴Larice and Macdonald, *Urban Design Reader*, Part One.

⁵Mumford, *Defining Urban Design*, 102–13; Mumford, “The Emergence of Urban Design”; “The First Urban Design Conference.”

⁶Laurence, “The Death and Life of Urban Design.”

⁷White, *Planning Toronto*.

in effective planning and design. Toronto has an international reputation as a successful city; whether it deserves this reputation, and if it does what role planning has played in the city's success, is for other studies to address.

Urban design in Toronto

The history of urban design in Toronto actually begins some ten years prior to arrival of any urban designers, with the appointment, in 1955, of Matthew Lawson as the city's chief planner. Lawson was a Scot, trained initially as a civil engineer in Glasgow during the Second World War. He had gone on to study planning at the government-run School of Planning and Research for Regional Development in London where, although he obtained no further degrees, he absorbed many of the ideas of postwar British planning. He also made personal connections that served him well, notably with Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, Director of Studies at the school.⁸ In 1947 Lawson emigrated to Canada, first to Vancouver, where he worked as a consultant and taught for a few years, and then to Toronto to study and work with Tyrwhitt, a visiting professor at University of Toronto setting up a new planning programme in the School of Architecture. Two years later he was hired by the City of Toronto as its chief planner – an unprecedented move by the City, which to that point had never had a trained professional planner on its staff.

This is not the place to consider Lawson's career in any detail. The pertinent point is that Lawson, having learned his planning in postwar London, had evidently adopted the pedestrian-oriented, inner-city-focused urbanism that CIAM-connected planners such as Tyrwhitt had espoused and that Eric Mumford has shown to be among the founding principles of postwar urban design. These ideas suffuse Lawson's work in Toronto, most vividly in his plan for the city's downtown, presented to the public in 1963 but under development for several years prior to that.⁹ One of his chief collaborators in this was none other than Gordon Stephenson, another notable CIAM associate, who was living in Toronto in these years and who advised Lawson (on a fee for service basis) on the downtown plan, particularly on pedestrian routes and movement.¹⁰ All of this is to say that Lawson, although trained as a civil engineer and subsequently hired as a planner, was something of a proto-urban designer – though he seems never to have used the term.

Lawson would leave his position with the city in 1967, striking out on his own as a consultant, but about a year before leaving he hired another British planner, Raymond Spaxman, to serve essentially as his second in command, and it was Spaxman who brought urban design to Toronto. One should not get the impression that Toronto was being overrun by British planners. Lawson also hired planners who were Canadian or American trained, and *Metropolitan Toronto*, the newly formed (1954) municipality charged with planning and managing the city's outward growth, had a planning office staffed largely by Canadians and Americans.

Raymond Spaxman had initially trained as an architect at the University of Nottingham in the 1950s, but after a few years of work and, in his recollection, growing dismay at how little heed architects paid to the surroundings of their buildings, he became interested in planning.¹¹ He first studied it at the Regent Street Polytechnic in London while doing his national service. He found himself

⁸Shoskes, "Jaqueline Tyrwhitt," 74–7, 89–90.

⁹CTPB, "Plan for Downtown Toronto"; also Toronto, *Advisory Committee on the Urban Renewal Study*, "Urban Renewal"; and CTPB, "Plan for the Don."

¹⁰Stephenson, *On a Human Scale*, 164–6.

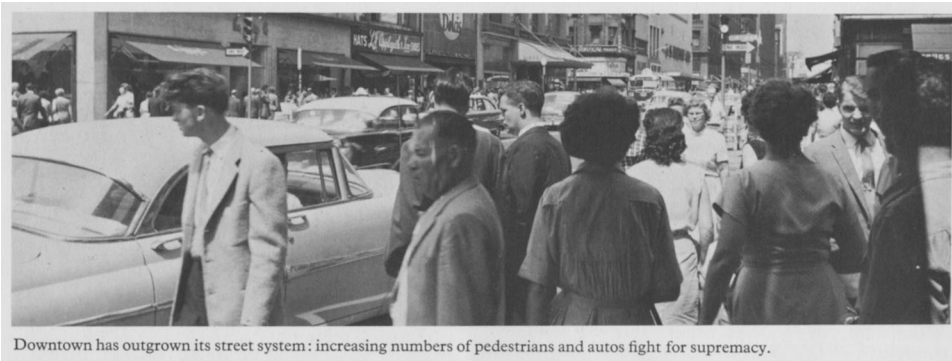
¹¹There is no published biography of Spaxman; personal details here are drawn from interviews and follow-up correspondence.

drawn towards something called urban design – though he is not sure when he first heard or used that term – and then went on to complete a formal degree in planning at University of Birmingham in 1961. He remembers being inspired by Gordon Cullen’s *Townscape* (1961), but he also believes that his early life in old British towns and cities, with their central squares, perimeter walls, and imposing cathedrals, taught him as much about quality urban form as books or formal studies. With his new credentials, he secured a job as a planner in Liverpool, although by then he saw himself as an urban designer – he recalls teaching the subject, by that name, at the Liverpool College of Buildings – so he was not yet comfortably settled.

At some point in 1966 a colour poster of Toronto’s spectacular new City Hall found its way onto a wall in the Liverpool planning office, catching young Spaxman’s eye, and soon after this an advertisement for a planning job in that very city came to his attention (Figure 1). He applied, on a whim, and to his surprise several months later was summoned to London for an interview with Toronto’s Chief Planner, Matthew Lawson, and the Head of the Royal Town Planning Institute, whom Lawson presumably had brought in to assist in the recruitment. Spaxman got the job, and before long was in Toronto beginning what would be a long, illustrious career as a Canadian planner. He recalls being astounded by the activity and opportunities all around him; he concluded, after adding up numbers in planning reports, that Toronto had built more commercial office space that year than Liverpool hoped to build in the next twenty.



Figure 1. Toronto City Hall on opening day, 1965. The unorthodox design of this major public building, though resisted by many locals at first, soon became a symbol of the new, cosmopolitan city; its silhouette is still used as a formal city icon. Source: City of Toronto Archives (Series 395 File 795).



Downtown has outgrown its street system: increasing numbers of pedestrians and autos fight for supremacy.

Figure 2. Toronto's city planners of the late 1950s could see the city growing and took it upon themselves to explain to residents, in free publications, the many changes that would accompany this growth and prosperity. Source: CTPB, 'The Changing City', 1959.

Toronto was indeed booming in the 1960s. Unlike many North American cities, postwar Toronto had not hollowed out. The suburbs had grown, and were still growing, but not at the expense of the city: property assessments were rising, population remained stable, central public spaces and institutions were well used and maintained, many inner-city industrial establishments persisted, and slum districts, though a serious concern, functioned well enough that no large-scale clearances were being considered. So a Toronto planner's job was essentially to devise improvements for a healthy, functional city, not a task that called for drastic action. Yet like most large cities in the post-war era Toronto was changing.¹² Its central core was now downtown for a metropolitan population that had doubled since the end of the war, and its inner-city facilities and services were being strained accordingly (Figure 2). Affluence and demographic change had generated a demand for apartment-style, non-family housing in residential areas. Governments had begun spending money to improve urban environments. Managing and controlling all this change fell largely to the planners, and it was no simple job.

It was a New World for Spaxman in more ways than one. Although he had several years of English work experience, he knew not a thing about influential American commentators such as Jane Jacobs, Kevin Lynch, or Saul Alinsky. He would learn of them soon enough, however, from the North American trained planners in the Toronto office, some of whom he hired. Not being in charge of the planning operations his arrival had little immediate impact. But once Lawson resigned in 1967, though Spaxman was not promoted into Lawson's job, Spaxman began gaining influence. His first major move was to create, in 1968, what he called the Central Area Division of the planning staff, putting himself in charge and moving about a dozen existing planners and technical staff into it. Until then divisions of staff had been by type of work (research, zoning) or by individual project, but this group would be defined by location, and would handle all aspects of planning there. Spaxman explained to his superiors that it would permit better co-ordination of planning in the part of the city where most of the action was, which no doubt was true, but by focusing on the central area he was also acting on his urban design principles.¹³

Even more consequential, however, was the fact that as Spaxman added planners to his new division he hired mostly architects, like himself, trained in or conversant with urban design.

¹²CTPB, "The Changing City."

¹³City of Toronto Archives, City of Toronto Planning Board Minutes, 14 May 1968, "Central Area Division: Objectives."

He claims to have had no fundamental transformation in mind but just felt that, one by one, the best candidates for new jobs were usually urban design architects (especially anyone who could sketch like Gordon Cullen, he recalls). Whatever his intentions, Spaxman created a division of the city's planning staff that, while not exclusively an urban design group and not formally labeled as one – it included conventional planners as well – was dominated by urban designers who saw themselves as such.¹⁴ Moreover, to be an architect trained in urban design in the late 1960s meant, in most cases, being a graduate of a high-status university, probably outside Canada, where an urban design programme had been established. So into the Toronto planning offices came graduates of Columbia, Pennsylvania, McGill, and by 1969 University of Toronto where an urban design programme had been established under the direction of architect Jack Diamond, a recent (1962) Pennsylvania graduate, as well as graduates of universities in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and South Africa.¹⁵

It is in the work, as well as the biographies, of these new 'planners' – as members of the city planning staff they generally called themselves planners¹⁶ – where their urban design inclinations show. One of the first projects they undertook was an analysis of the downtown pedestrian environment to, in the words of their report, 'establish design principles for developing pedestrian facilities'; the author of this was a recently hired graduate of Columbia University's urban design programme, Anthony Coombes.¹⁷ Coombes also played an ongoing role, along with Spaxman, in a project on the future of Dundas Street, a major east–west artery through the central city that the metropolitan transportation planners intended to widen. Coombes and Spaxman, arguing in defence of the street's local functions, wanted to ensure that widening would be compatible with, and perhaps even provide benefits to, the 'environments along its route'.¹⁸

The most striking of their undertakings in these first years was a novel urban renewal scheme – never implemented – for the entire south-east quadrant of downtown, an old, mixed-use area with numerous historic buildings and a large public market.¹⁹ They labeled their project urban renewal because its objective was, essentially, renewal of a declining urban area, and probably also to make it eligible for government funds, but it was far from urban renewal as the term is now understood. It called for minimal demolition and no public housing. Its final report, released in 1971 after several years of preparation, is rich with urban design ideas: enhance pedestrian environments and other public spaces, identify and protect important sight lines, preserve historic buildings, and maintain functional diversity (at ground level and on higher floors).²⁰ The scheme was initially worked up by various staff in the Central Area Division, but the designs were refined, and the final report prepared, under the direction of Anthony Coombes, introduced above, and a newly appointed urban designer named Dallard Runge, an architect trained at University of Manitoba who, after a few years of practice in Montreal, moved to Toronto in 1969 to do the new graduate programme in urban design.²¹ Though never put in place, in fact never even brought to council for approval. It is nonetheless an intriguing piece of work: urban renewal conceived by urban designers (Figure 3).

¹⁴Personnel records are not extant; Spaxman, email to author, 4 April 2017.

¹⁵Interviewee recollections; educational backgrounds are not on record.

¹⁶They are identified in this study as either 'Central Area planners' or 'urban designer(s)', depending on context.

¹⁷CTPB, "On Foot Downtown"; Coombes had been initially trained as an architect in Sydney, Australia.

¹⁸City of Toronto Archives, CTPB Minutes, Meeting of 17 August 1971, memorandum, 16 June 1971, "The Future of Dundas Street."

¹⁹CTPB, "South-East Downtown Urban Renewal Scheme."

²⁰*ibid.*, Figures 11 and 12.

²¹Coombes interviews.

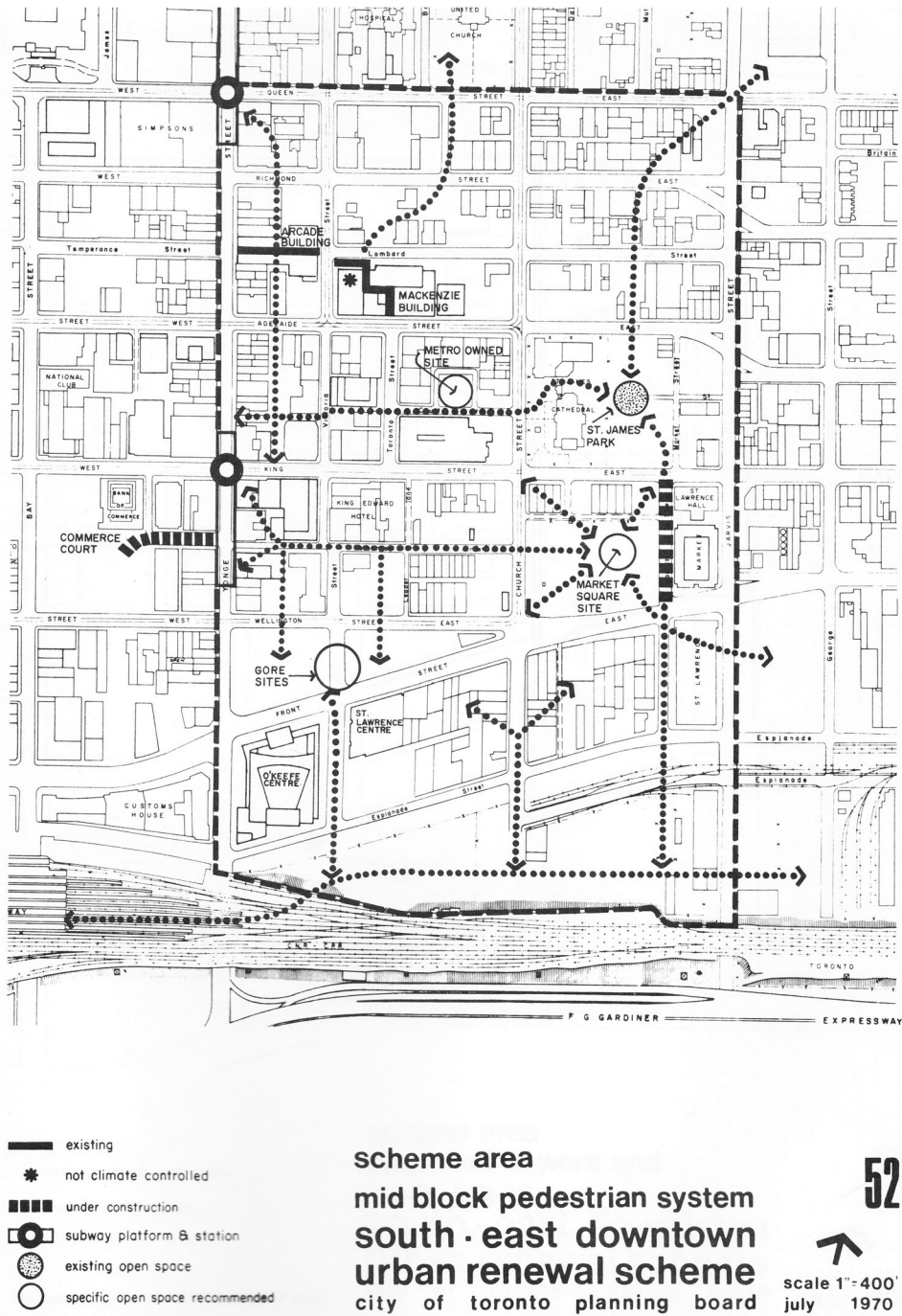


Figure 3. Urban renewal by urban designers: a map revealing the designers' careful analysis of pedestrian behaviour and their comprehensive approach to the district. Source: CTPB, 'South-East Downtown Urban Renewal Scheme'.

Urban design and Toronto's reform era

By the end of the 1960s, nearly all redevelopment in Toronto was being contested. Residential urban renewal projects, modest though they were, were meeting stiff resistance from residents and social activists; ratepayers groups in middle-class areas had banded together to fight high-rise apartment intrusions to their neighbourhoods; several downtown commercial redevelopment projects were being challenged by preservationist groups. These were major public issues, covered in local newspapers and debated not just at the planning board but at city council. The city's planners were immersed in it, notably in the high-profile urban renewal projects, but it is not easy to discern what role the Central Area planners played.

One contentious downtown project for which there is evidence of their participation is the Eaton Centre shopping mall, debated from the late 1960s until finally approved and built in the early 1970s. Initially conceived as a suburban-style mall, with extensive parking, Spaxman and Coombes both recall meetings at which they argued for a more compact form, compatible with its inner-city location, and for having both ends of the linear mall linked underground to existing subway stations, as was being done in the Urban Design Manhattan project in New York, with which Coombes was fully conversant from his time at Columbia.²² Eaton Centre's final design, by architect Eb Zeidler, utilized both these ideas, though how much direct impact Spaxman and his staff had is impossible to determine (Figure 4).

Discontent over the city's rapid redevelopment reached such heights that in late 1972 voters brought about a political sea-change in the city, electing a reformist new mayor, David Crombie, and a council dominated by reformers firmly opposed to redevelopment of the old, existing city. The new mayor and council, aware of the mandate they had been given, applied the brakes as quickly as possible, affecting city planning in two fundamental ways.

First, the new council established what it called a Neighbourhoods Division of the planning staff that would be responsible for, and in truth would impede the redevelopment of, the older, mostly run-down residential neighbourhoods surrounding downtown. A group of such planners had emerged during the urban-renewal battles of the late 1960s and had remained an informal faction of the planning staff, but the new council formalized its existence and increased its budget. Here, in this division, community-based, highly participatory, advocacy planning would take root, led by planners who were not usually planners at all but community activists of a decidedly New Left persuasion.

Second, and more directly relevant to this study, the new council also gave a big boost to Spaxman's Central Area Division where urban designers still predominated. Council fully supported the division's goal of making the central area a more liveable urban environment, and to help the planners achieve this council enacted a bylaw, applicable for just two years (to protect it from legal challenge), that limited the height of new buildings in the entire central area to forty-five feet – rash action indeed for a booming North American downtown.²³ Council was giving the Central Area planners time to prepare a set of formal amendments to the city's Official Plan that would definitively, and legally, entrench the planning principles necessary to achieve their objective of a livable central area.

The central area plan

So began the job of creating what is known locally as the Central Area Plan, a task that would be the culmination of work by this cadre of early urban designers. Circumstances had changed substantially

²²Okamoto, *Urban Design Manhattan*.

²³Crombie, Coombes, Hefferon interviews.



Figure 4. Eaton Centre, as built in 1977 to the design of Eb Zeidler, looking south-west. The mall itself is the linear structure middle left, terminating first in a large mid-rise department store and then an office tower. The urban designers of the Central Area Division did not design this, but they fought for this intensive land use and compact form. Source: Ryerson University Library and Archives, Canadian Architecture Collection.

in the previous year. First, Spaxman left in late 1973 to take a new job in Vancouver. How much difference this made is hard to say since the new head of the division, Anthony Coombes, shared Spaxman's vision, though he was perhaps a little more pugnacious. Second, the issue of controlling downtown development had moved into the legal realm. Council's height bylaw had been challenged by a group of commercial property developers who claimed that it unfairly reduced the value of their property. An initial judgment agreed with the challengers, and the bylaw was struck down, but only briefly because it was promptly re-instated by a higher authority – the key being its temporariness – but the episode showed that this matter was likely to be settled by lawyers, not planners or councillors. Third, the reform council had created, in late 1973, a new city Housing Department with a mandate to build thousands of units of central-area housing, a portion of which would be made affordable for low-income residents; though the planners had not initiated this policy, they supported it and would assist in its implementation.

The planners completed their Central Area Plan within the time allotted and presented it, in the form of a set of proposed amendments to the Official Plan, to council in October 1975, as the deadline (January 1976) approached. This left only three months for review, time for just a few public meetings, none of which had much impact. Council debated the package up to the deadline, and passed it the night the temporary bylaw was set to expire.

Their plan proposed fundamental change.²⁴ It called for removing the forty-five foot height restriction only in the established commercial core, while retaining it basically everywhere else in the central

²⁴CTPB, "Central Area Plan Review: Proposals"; the only significant study of this is Frisken, *City Policy-Making*.

area, permanently lessening the value of a considerable amount of commercial property (Figure 5). It also, rather ingeniously, proposed tying all future commercial development in the central area to public transit: additional office space would be permitted only in proportion to new transit capacity, of which none was planned. In both of these one sees their commitment to making the central area more livable. Residential development, unsurprisingly, was to be actively promoted – the proposals called for 30,000 new central area households in the next ten years – both in the core, for which it introduced a new mixed commercial/residential zoning category, and in the outer parts of the central area (over which the Neighbourhoods Division had planning authority) (Figure 6). But development in the latter was to be tightly controlled: the proposals explicitly stated that areas of existing low-density housing could no longer be used as a source of land for new high-density housing.²⁵

The proposals also contained a large section titled ‘Physical Form and Amenity’ which stated the importance of architectural heritage, pedestrian environments, and streetscapes, and laid out design principles pertaining to light and shade, wind and calm, and quiet and noise.²⁶ Much of this section, which more than any other reveals the urban design orientation of its creators, drew from a background study that the Central Area planners, mindful of demands on their own time, had commissioned from a group of recently trained and newly arrived urban design architects in private practice. The study’s report – entitled ‘onbuildingdowntown’ to show, at a glance, the importance of compact development in central urban areas – was a major pioneering work that, on its own, enriched the city’s urban design scene.²⁷

To nobody’s surprise, commercial property owners once again launched a formal objection, and this held back final approval. But after a hearing that lasted nearly two years, the tribunal that reviews and judges municipal disputes in the province of Ontario, the Ontario Municipal Board, concluded that the package could stand.²⁸ Toronto’s Official Plan was amended accordingly in June 1978, some five years after the task began. The event was marked with celebrations by those who had pushed it through, but it is clear in historical perspective, as it probably was to the participants, that this victory marked the end. Soon the urban design architects responsible for the Central Area Plan, nearly all of whom Spaxman had hired, had moved on – several of them, interestingly, to private development corporations. The Central Area Plan they had created, however, would live on, its impact on the city substantial.

Working principles

What can be said about the work of these early urban design practitioners? What themes stand out in their work and how does this square with what is known about the early discipline more generally?

First, the planner who laid the foundation for it all, Matthew Lawson, deserves a note. Before the term urban design was being used in its current sense, and well before it arrived in Toronto, Lawson – a planner steeped in British postwar modernist urbanism – introduced elements of urban design to Toronto planning. And he would personally select a new second-in-command with training in and a proclivity towards urban design. There was, then, both continuity and change in Toronto’s adoption of urban design in the later 1960s, providing a small piece of evidence in support of Eric Mumford’s claim of a direct connection between 1940s modernist urbanism and 1960s urban design.²⁹

²⁵CTPB, “Central Area Plan Review: Principles,” 54.

²⁶CTPB, “Central Area Plan Review: Proposals,” Section B6 and Introductory Summary, 7–8.

²⁷CTPB, Design Guidelines Study Group, “onbuildingdowntown.”

²⁸Ontario Municipal Board, “Central Area Plan: Decision”; Feldman and Goldrick, *Politics and Government of Urban Canada*, 235–54.

²⁹Mumford, *Defining Urban Design, Passim*.

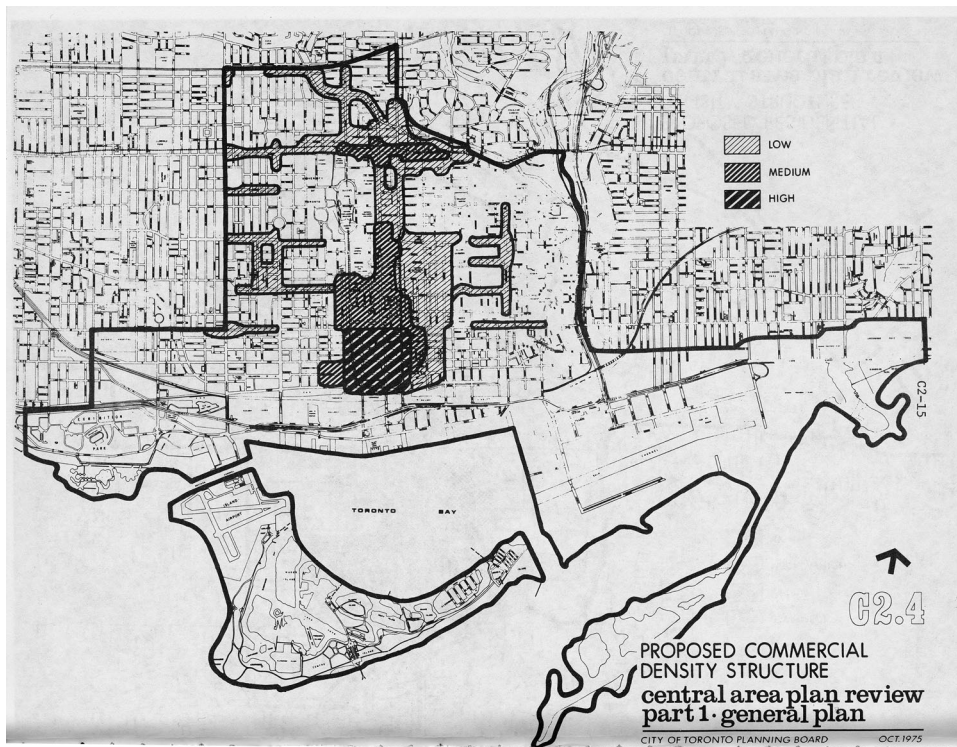


Figure 5. The Central Area Plan permitted tall office towers in one multi-block square of lower downtown, mid-rise buildings immediately north of that, but only low-rise buildings on large stretches of commercial property both adjacent to and apart from the central axis. Source: CTPB, 'Central Area Plan Review: Proposals'.

Turning to Raymond Spaxman, the man who initiated the events related here, one might note, first, the centrality of 'Townscape' in his turn towards urban design in England; this movement has not received much attention as a tributary to early urban design, but perhaps it should.³⁰ Equally striking is the complete absence of Jane Jacobs, or for that matter of any of the Harvard activity that Mumford cites as the foundation of the new discipline, from Spaxman's professional apprenticeship in England. The urban design that Spaxman encountered in London in the early 1960s may well have been influenced by what was happening at Harvard, but if so the influence was not overt enough for him to have noticed. This suggests little more than the origins of urban design in Britain being different from those in the US, which is no surprise, but it also reveals something about the international migration, or in this case non-migration, of ideas in the discipline's early development.

As for the work done in the division Spaxman directed, what first stands out is its *raison d'être* – its focus on the city's central area – something quite in line with what is understood about the early discipline. According to Mumford, Sert had fully espoused CIAM's postwar 'heart of the city' principles, and that the programme he established at Harvard reflected 'the importance of design in retaining and redesigning central urban areas'.³¹ One might ask why this was so, why urban design

³⁰Orillard, "Tracing Urban Design's 'Townscape' Origins" is an important exception; Cullen, "Introduction," in Larice and Macdonald, *Urban Design Reader*.

³¹Mumford, *Defining Urban Design*, 149, restated in "The Emergence of Urban Design"; also "The First Urban Design Conference: Extracts."

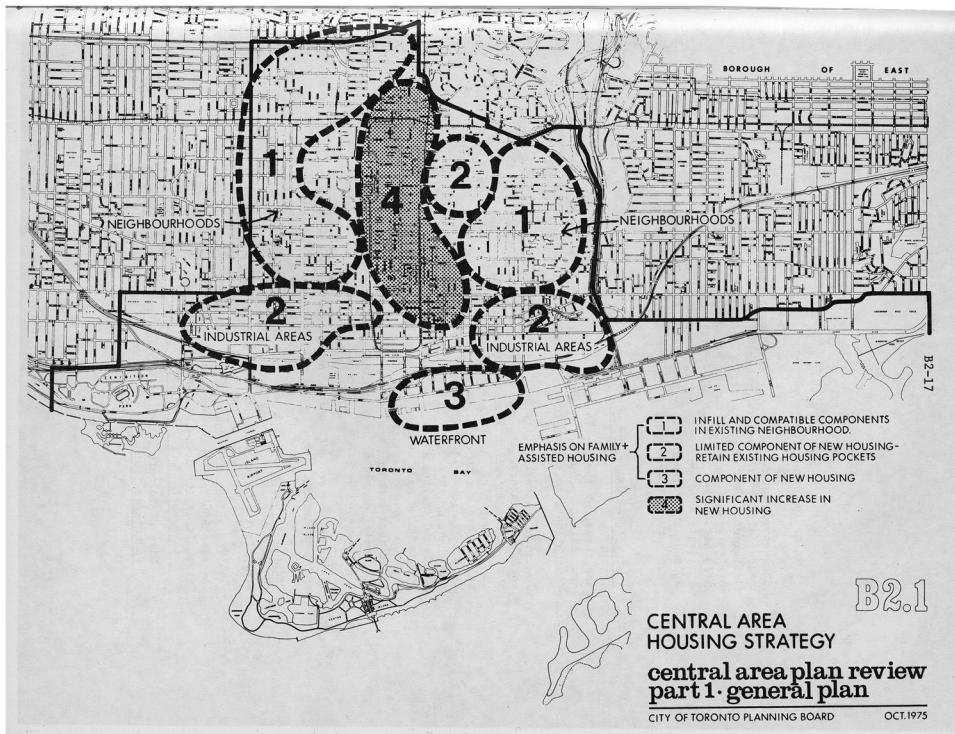


Figure 6. The Central Area Plan called for major increases in housing all along the central axis of Yonge Street, identified here by dark shading and the number 4; the northern half of this area did indeed see major increases in residential population in the 1970s and 1980s. Source: CTPB, 'Central Area Plan Review: Proposals'.

should have ignored the urban periphery at a time when so much of what was being built in American cities was outside central areas. And in fact both Mumford and Richard Marshall, in his work on Sert, relate that two of the six projects analysed at Harvard's third Urban Design Conference, in April 1959, were peripheral New Towns (one in Toronto, devised by a Harvard-trained planner).³² Nevertheless, whether this was sound thinking or not, urban design was conceived with the central city as its focus, and the work programme of Spaxman's Central Area Division is fully consistent with this.

Concern for pedestrians, another widely acknowledged aspect of early urban design, certainly stands out in their work as well – pedestrian routes, views, and experiences were the heart of nearly everything the Central Area planners did.³³ A wish to enhance open space also stands out, and it too is a recognized tenet of the early discipline. An entire section of the Central Area Plan 'Proposals', sixty-six pages in all, is dedicated to it, but equally pertinent is the handful of specialized studies that the Central Area planners commissioned on the subject.³⁴ Open space is central to the seminal 'onbuildingdowntown' study.

³²Marshall, "Josep Lluís Sert's Urban Design Legacy," 117; Mumford, *Defining Urban Design*, 143–4; "The First Urban Design Conference: Extracts," comments by Rodwin, 7, and Bacon, 12–13; Barnett, *An Introduction to Urban Design*, 12 includes rural areas in his definition of the discipline.

³³Mumford, *Defining Urban Design, Passim*, but especially 80–99; CTPB, "Central Area Plan Review: Principles," 53.

³⁴CTPB, "Central Area Plan Review: Proposals," B 3-31.

It should be noted that concern for pedestrians and open space in the inner city is also apparent in the Plan for Downtown prepared by Matthew Lawson (with Gordon Stephenson's help) some fifteen years earlier, revealing the continuity noted above between the planning generations. But there is a critical difference between the two: Spaxman's urban designers of the 1970s considered not just the city's conventional *downtown*, as Lawson had, but the entire *central area*, including residential areas adjacent to the downtown proper. These urban designers had a broader conception of the inner city as a complete urban environment.³⁵

Perhaps less often acknowledged as a tenet of early urban design is the principle of mixed use, but Spaxman's Central Area planners certainly followed it. Signs of it are in the unrealized urban renewal scheme – the recognition of different ground and upper floor land uses is especially intriguing – but it is nothing less than foundational in the Central Area Plan, which pushed hard for combining commercial and residential land uses.³⁶ Of course urban designers were not alone in espousing mixed use in the early 1970s. The notion was at the heart of the emerging new planning paradigm. Community planners in the Neighbourhood Division adopted it too, partly because removing non-conforming uses would have been so disruptive but also because commercial, as well as industrial, land uses within residential areas allowed for local employment. But this does not make it any less important to the Central Area planners, for whom it was essential.

Historical preservation is another theme in their work.³⁷ Their commitment to it, however, seems to have been rooted more in a respect for existing urban fabric than in a love of old buildings. In fact the two most consequential preservationist campaigns in Toronto in these years, those for Old City Hall and for Union Station, were initiated and led by citizen groups not by planners of any sort. In the case of Old City Hall, demolition of which was proposed in the original Eaton Centre project, the Central Area planners critique of Eaton Centre was directed more at the mall's relationship to the street and its connections to public transit than at the demolition of adjacent historic buildings it called for. Preservationism looks to have been compatible with but not central to Central Area planners' objectives.

The scope of their work – limited in some ways but broad in others – warrants attention. The central area, though it contained the key planning issues of the day, was not the whole city and certainly not the entire metropolitan area, and because of this Central Area planners were sometimes at odds with those who planned and built infrastructure meant to serve the entire urbanized region. Conflicts – such as the Dundas Street widening – were usually productive because both perspectives were legitimate. But at times their focus on the central area did limit the value of their work. Transportation planning for just the central area of a growing metropolis is nearly pointless, and what little the Central Area planners did had little effect.³⁸ And in their quest to make the central area more livable they proposed diverting office development out to the suburbs – no easy chore at the best of times – but with no authority outside the central area their suggestions were largely ignored.³⁹ At the same time, the scope of their work was much broader than the aesthetic approach that began dominating urban design in the 1980s and for which it would be criticized.⁴⁰ They had their minds not on light standards and street furniture but on the multifarious functions and spaces

³⁵This is clear in CTPB, "Open Places in South Midtown."

³⁶CTPB, "Central Area Plan Review: Principles," 53.

³⁷CTPB, "South-East Downtown Urban Renewal Scheme," Figure 19; CTPB, "Central Area Plan Review: Principles," 52; and Barnett, *An Introduction to Urban Design*, 37–53.

³⁸Read Voorhees & Associates, "Central Area Transportation Study" and White, *Planning Toronto*, 296–97, 342–57.

³⁹CTPB, "Central Area Plan Review: Principles," 17–27.

⁴⁰Relph, *The Modern Urban Landscape*, 229–31; Brown "Urban Design at Fifty," 76–7; and Taylor, "Legibility and Aesthetics in Urban Design."

of the entire central area; in doing so they were fully in step with the original conception of urban design as a true multi-disciplinary endeavour.⁴¹

Something there is no sign of in their work is landscape architecture. Sert's vision of urban design as an amalgam of landscape architecture with architecture and planning never materialized in Toronto. This absence may be connected to the focus on the central city, where new, large-scale open spaces, in view of their cost and disruption, were out of the question. The sort of open space envisioned by the Central Area planners and the consultants who advised them was small-scale – courtyards, playgrounds, even rooftops – for which landscape architects might not have been necessary. This raises questions about the compatibility between a concern for open space and a focus on the central city, two founding principles of the discipline. Of course there is no reason why a small-scale open space cannot be designed by a landscape architect, but it seems not to have happened in Toronto at this time.

There is also scant evidence of the urban designers in the Central Area Division challenging or being in conflict with planning as it was then being practised, certainly much less than one might expect in view of what others have said about the discipline's genesis. Marshall writes that in founding the new discipline Sert was 'rescuing the city from the social science positivism endemic to planning at the time'. Michael Sorkin sees Sert as responding to planning having become 'preoccupied with economic, social, policy, and other "non-architectural" issues'. The editors of a recent collection of writings, in introducing one of their pieces, refer to urban design as fundamentally 'a critique of the city planning profession for its growing lack of attention to urban physical form in favour of social planning'.⁴² There is little of that here. The urban designers did put some distance between themselves and a few of the older planners on staff, but their real opponents were the city's commercial developers, along with councillors who supported and enabled them, not the planners. The social turn that the above writers refer to was happening in Toronto, but concurrently, and often in harmony, with the work of these urban designers.

Pursuing this further, one might ask where Toronto's Central Area planners stood with respect to modernism. One modernist planning principle they unequivocally rejected was the separation of uses, which to them stood in the way of downtown residential development and, in general, of urban vitality. On this, they stood as one with the planners of the Neighbourhoods Division. But it is hard to find evidence of them rejecting other modernist principles. They often opposed high-rise redevelopment, which at first glance might look anti-modernist, but a closer look reveals that it was redevelopment they were opposing, not modernism; high-rise apartment buildings were fine, in fact desirable in places, as long as they did not replace older low-rise housing.⁴³ One modernist principle they clearly did not oppose was technical expertise. They neither consulted with, deferred to, nor advocated for the local citizenry.⁴⁴ In developing the Central Area Plan they did make use of a citizens' body of sorts called the Central Area Task Force, but this was a body of like-minded citizens appointed by city council, well-stocked with professional expertise, the members of which met with themselves not with the citizenry. A revolution in citizen participation was underway in Toronto planning at this time, but, as noted, it was occurring within the Neighbourhoods Division of the planning staff not the Central Area Division. The urban designers in

⁴¹Marshall, "Josep Lluís Sert's Urban Design Legacy," 113; Bacon, "Upsurge of the Renaissance," 7; and Barnett, *An Introduction to Urban Design*, uses this comprehensive definition throughout.

⁴²Marshall, "Josep Lluís Sert's Urban Design Legacy," 111; Sorkin, "The End(s) of Urban Design," 156; and Jacobs and Appleyard, Introduction to "Towards an Urban Design Manifesto," 218.

⁴³Sommer, "Beyond Centres," 143.

⁴⁴Mumford, *Defining Urban Design*, 176–93.

the latter, still believers in ‘top-down’ planning, had not climbed far up Arnstein’s ladder.⁴⁵ Though not unregenerate modernists, they were modernists.

One final observation about work done by these urban designers is that it was indeed ‘diluted and transformed by a myriad of local practitioners’, in Rosemary Wakeman’s recent words.⁴⁶ But the main local interlopers were not other design professionals – to which Wakeman is mostly referring – but elected councillors, especially after the reform victories of 1972 when several new councillors rolled up their sleeves and essentially became part of the planning team. Unelected activists took part too, notably housing advocates, representatives of ratepayers’ groups, and committed individual citizens. Then once the Central Area Plan battle entered the legal realm, lawyers moved in. So the local people and local circumstances did have an effect, but in ways that go well beyond the planning and design professions.

Conclusions

As a case study in early urban design practice this history offers no major surprises. Who these urban designers were, what they did, and what they thought is largely in keeping with prevailing understanding of the profession. They were graduates of urban design programmes. They focused on the central area rather than peripheral suburbs, paid close attention to the pedestrian experience, believed in mixed use and a multi-functional urban fabric, concerned themselves more with the big picture than with small aesthetic details (reflecting Sert’s initial conception of the discipline), supported though did not necessarily promote historical preservation, retained some connection to modernism, and planned in a top-down manner. They came from architecture, not planning, which is notable but may reflect Raymond Spaxman’s personal preferences and experience more than anything else. They had moved decisively into urban design and seem to have identified individually as urban designers, and the focus of their work differed significantly from that being done by others, but the fact that they worked in a planning department alongside other planners and often called themselves ‘planners’ cannot be entirely overlooked. It is hard, all told, to see their practice as entirely distinct from planning, and Richard Marshall’s notion of urban design as a ‘way of thinking’ seems, in this case, to be closer to the mark.⁴⁷

Two observations might be slightly surprising: the complete absence of landscape architecture, possible reasons for which are offered above, and the reasonably harmonious relationship between the urban designers and the planners. This latter point may say more about Toronto than about early urban design. The aspects of planning that urban designers elsewhere found wanting, at least according to the commentators cited above, never predominated in Toronto, while the course of Toronto’s political history was such that both the New Left social planners and the urban designers were brought to the fore by the same reform movement and, for a time anyway, pursued kindred goals. But it does raise questions about the fairly widely accepted notion of urban design being a reaction to planning having gone astray. Might its genesis be a reaction to problems in cities rather than problems in the planning profession?⁴⁸

A challenge in assessing the work of by these urban designers is that they actually did very little urban design, in the sense of altering Toronto’s physical landscape. One must look hard to find improved streetscapes, preserved/restored historic districts, or greater urban ‘legibility’ resulting

⁴⁵Arnstein, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation.”

⁴⁶Wakeman, “Rethinking Postwar Planning History,” 155.

⁴⁷Marshall, “The Elusiveness of Urban Design,” 55.

⁴⁸Laurence, “The Death and Life of Urban Design” suggests this.



Figure 7. St Nicholas Street, the early 1980s, a residential enclave a few short blocks from busy commercial streets, with restored townhouses on the left, modern replicas of them on the right, and high-rise apartment buildings not far off. This area, south midtown, contains perhaps the purest expression of the Central Area planners' principles. Source: City of Toronto Archives.

from their work, the legacy one would expect urban designers to have left behind. There is some. Areas they labeled 'mid-town' (north and south) show their legacy, probably because they were being redeveloped while the Central Area planners had their greatest influence (the residential population of south mid-town increased 50% from 1971 to 1975)⁴⁹ (Figure 7). A few elements of their south-east downtown urban renewal scheme did find their way into private redevelopment of the area in the 1980s – though a fine run of nineteenth-century commercial storefronts in the area was preserved mostly through the efforts of the historical board and its staff. And they did influence the design of Eaton Centre, at least to some degree. But a visitor needs an open mind and a persuasive, well-informed guide to find and see this legacy.

This is not to say they had no impact on the city. They helped bring streetscapes, sightlines, and the feel of urban spaces into the political discourse of the city's reform era.⁵⁰ Their Central Area Plan put policies in place that gave Toronto an early start in the international 'back to the city' movement of the late twentieth century. Some of their written reports remain vital to Toronto urbanists – the 'onbuildingdowntown' design guideline they commissioned is still on course reserves in the University of Toronto architecture library. And the city did establish a formal Urban Design group in the early 1980s that, arguably at least, owed something to the work of these by-then departed pioneers; this group initiated a programme of photographing city streets and intersections, from various vantage points, producing thousands of images that reside today in the City of Toronto Archives.⁵¹ But it

⁴⁹CTPB, "Open Places in South Midtown."

⁵⁰CTPB, Core Area Task Force, "Report and Recommendations"; Crombie and Sewell interviews.

⁵¹City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 200, Series 1465.

is to say that their legacy is more in attitudes, policies, and perhaps institutions than in the built environment.

This is a curious legacy of for a profession whose *raison d'être* was the physical design of urban environments. But there is an important point in this – the implementation of urban design in a fully built, flourishing city with a democratic polity and private property rights is no easy task. The curricula of university programmes and the designs of visionary practitioners provide one window on the early urban design profession, but the actual work of a group of urban designers provides another. One is left pondering how many early urban design graduates never did any urban design.

What does this study reveal about the international transfer of planning ideas? It is not an easy question to answer for events here do not fit well in current analytical paradigms. This is not a case of an identifiable concept like the neighbourhood unit or the New Town crossing national borders, or of a celebrated planner travelling abroad and launching a transformative new programme – big names like Tyrwhitt and Stephenson appear but play little part – and it has uncovered no clear transnational institutional connection and no formally organized study tours. It does have a trans-Atlantic British planner, but no real sign of British *planning* being imposed on Toronto.⁵² Nor is there any sign of Toronto planners holding up British planning as an ideal to emulate.⁵³ What we do have, in essence, is one British planner crossing the Atlantic and gaining enough authority to introduce one important idea – employ urban design to make Toronto's central area a livable urban environment – that is rooted, broadly speaking, in what he learned in his homeland. This one person and one idea made a difference, but labeling it a 'transatlantic transfer of planning knowledge' seems overly grand. One wonders if Carola Hein, in calling for studies of 'second-tier' planners, had a planner as minor as Raymond Spaxman in mind.⁵⁴

But accepting that we do have some sort of intellectual transfer here, it will be useful to try fitting it into Stephen Ward's well-conceived schema for such transfers. Might this be what he labels the 'borrowing' of foreign planning ideas?⁵⁵ It is certainly not the 'undiluted borrowing' of British planning he claims was common in 'white, settled Dominions of the British Empire' like Canada.⁵⁶ Spaxman may have had British Townscape ideas in his intellectual baggage, but he seems never to have put them on offer in this North American city with no aversion to high-rise office towers. There would have been no point. Nobody wanted to borrow them. Spaxman's national and professional background gave him a predisposition towards a liveable, multi-functional inner city and a preference for urban design architects over planners to help create that, and both his predisposition and his preference had an impact on Toronto. But that was the extent of the international transfer. Spaxman's ideas were swamped, diluted beyond meaningful potency, by local circumstances.

So might we have Ward's 'synthetic borrowing', in which planning ideas are borrowed but re-forged by forces in the receiving country?⁵⁷ Perhaps, but even this might be overdrawing the magnitude and coherence of the ideas being transferred. It is also somewhat misleading since the local people and ideas that did the re-forging were mostly American – although this, in turn, raises the question of whether American ideas are truly alien in Canada, the two countries being so closely linked in the realm of professional institutions and practice, and even to some degree their urban form.⁵⁸

⁵²King, "Writing Transnational Planning Histories."

⁵³Joch, "Must Our Cities Remain Ugly?" 179–80.

⁵⁴Hein, "The Exchange of Planning Ideas" 146.

⁵⁵Ward, "Re-examining the International Diffusion of Planning."

⁵⁶Ibid., 49.

⁵⁷Ibid., 45.

⁵⁸White, "Toronto, An American City."

A close look reveals something more chaotic. Spaxman the Englishman learned about the American author Jane Jacobs from a Canadian architect trained at McGill University, about Urban Design Manhattan from an Australian architect schooled in urban design at Columbia University, and about Saul Alinsky and community organizing from local political activists fighting Toronto urban renewal – who had been inspired by American student radicals. And he brought in a Polish architect, recently graduated from Harvard School of Design, who could sketch like the Englishman Gordon Cullen. And on it goes. What we have here is a hodge-podge of planning ideas from hither and yon, many with no clear national identity, being sucked into the vortex of booming postwar Toronto – a process all but impossible to categorize.⁵⁹ Yet it might well have occurred in growing mid-sized cities everywhere in these postwar years, especially in immigrant-receiving countries. Toronto’s multi-national, multi-directional transfer of planning ideas, though hard to name, might have been fairly common.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Abbreviations

CTPB = City of Toronto Planning Board

UTL = in holdings of University of Toronto Library

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