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<!-- It contains information about your site's posts, pages, comments, categories, and other content. -->
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Hamilton's Art Crawl

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Hamilton's Art Crawl occurs on the second Friday of every month. My wife and I try to go to it every month. What attracts us is not the only the art, which can sometimes be quite interesting, but also the street life and crowd scenes that the crawl attracts. These types of crowds we find very enjoyable. There is a variety of people who form these crowds: young hipsters, middle-aged people with interest in art or culture, people who happen to be walking by and those who simply wish to enjoy the streets of Hamilton.

The Art Crawl is located on James St North--the heart of the historic core of Hamilton. On its route are the Hamilton Armory and the Anglican Christ's Church Cathedral--two of the more attractive architectural landmarks in downtown Hamilton. Along the route there is some retail, several galleries, a few restaurants. The Mixed Media store at the corner of James and Cannon is a major crowd attractor. In the galleries not much art appears to get sold. On the surface not much money appears to be changing hands. At times other than during these once-monthly events, the neighbourhood goes back to its normal role as a downtown street with shops, sports bars and restaurants that serves a lively, mostly Portuguese community.

Art crawls provide not only a means to revitalize a city but also provide glimpses of alternative lifestyles. One group found at the Art Crawl are young people trying to establish identities as artists or designers, or to flirt with the possibility of creative, possibly unconventional lifestyles. In larger cities, with well-established cultural industries, the sight of such young people are commonplace. In Hamilton, they are a new development.

Such young members of the 'creative classes' I think are important for the future of Hamilton. In the current Canadian economic climate, which does not favour Hamilton's economic base of heavy industry and manufacturing, an Art Crawl appears to be a low cost way to experiment with possible futures. It will not provide all the answers, but it does provide new ideas for a city dependent on declining smoke-stack industries.

If I were someone who wishes to invest money in the Art Crawl (as opposed to merely attend them) I would think about some of the following issues:

<h2>The Art Crawl only happens once a month. Is that enough to make a real impact on the city?</h2>

In my mind the Art Crawl is a big development in the cultural life of Hamilton. By their nature Art Crawls can't be continuous events, since then there wouldn't be time for artists to produce art or put together new shows. Art Crawls depend on the production of new art to remain interesting and authentic. In a city like Hamilton there is only a limited supply of such work.

<h2>Where could the Art Crawl lead for Hamilton?</h2>

The Art Crawl will likely have the effect of bringing development to James St North. If this development process is successful, practising artists who are dependent on cheap rents may eventually be driven out. In Hamilton's case though, James St North is adjacent to regions of Hamilton such as the Beasley and Barton Street that should have cheap rents for the foreseeable future; a stone's throw from James St North are some of the most poverty-afflicted urban areas in Canada.

What Hamilton needs are not just areas that might support development or gentrification (which is not necessarily a good thing) but in the creation of cultural industries where people might be able to find stable employment. In this respect I think the Art Crawl is very promising.

<h2>Should Art Crawls be about art or can they be generalized to other things?</h2>

Art Crawls depend on the existence of artists studios, galleries and other aspects of cultural production to become viable.

Doors Open events on the other hand depend on the existence of a body of architectural and urban design resources that can be visited. They could be called 'Architectural Crawls.'

Other possible types of crawls might be:

- Crawls within and between neighbourhoods (e.g. Jane's Walks)
- Crawls between bars and restaurants (Pub Crawls)
- Crawls that show the inside of factories or other workplaces (Factory Crawls)
- Crawls between houses of worship (God Crawls)

What is common to all of these is that they involve people willing to engage in their city and to interact in a way that may not have been possible without them.

<h2>Art Crawls are cool and fun, but do they actually earn anyone any money?</h2>

Art Crawls are initially intended to support artists and galleries. It is usually the arts communities that initially promote them. If they become popular and start attracting crowds then these crowds can be put to many uses.

One of the most common side-effects is that they can increase property values in artists districts, which often has the effect of eventually displacing artists from these districts. I think the potential to create new markets for cultural goods is real yet the probability that artists will necessarily benefit from this process is uncertain.

Art Crawls are like websites that provide a service of real value yet are free to users. The initial goal is to attract an audience. Often the revenue stream that might be derived from this audience is not always clear at the beginning.

<h2>Are Art Crawls elitist events; do they alienate as well as attract segments of the population?</h2>

To become excited about an Art Crawl one presumably needs to have some interest in artists, galleries and cultural expression. This will likely remain a minority interest in an industrial city like Hamilton. Yet, being a minority interest is not necessarily elitist.

There appears to be no attempt by most participants to gain extra privilege by attending these events. Most participants just seem to want to enjoy art. People who enjoy art are not necessarily members of an elite group despite fine art's occasional connection to those with power and influence. In fact, artists are often among the lowest paid members of society.]]</content:encoded>

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Hamilton to Buffalo

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I am lucky to live in a border region of Canada. Over the weekend I visited some old friends in Buffalo, NY. Driving to Buffalo takes about an hour from my home in Hamilton. Passports are now required for travel into the States. This prevents those without passports from making the crossing. This tends to discriminate more against Americans than it does Canadians, since the proportion of Americans without passports is higher. Going into the USA from Canada is a more unsettling experience than the reverse journey (regardless of your nationality). The heightened American border paranoia discourages casual tourism between the countries and overall this policy of treating all visitors with heightened suspicion appears contrary to American interests. But they do let me in.

<h2>Quality of architecture</h2>

Buffalo has a reputation as being an iconic rust-belt city whose fortunes have fallen on hard times. It tends to reinforce the Canadian attitude towards the States as a place where social and political problems somehow seem more intractable. However, from an architectural perspective it might surprise some that Buffalo contains many architectural jewels. The eras before and after the Gilded Age have been kind to Buffalo, at least for buildings you might find in architectural guide books. Outstanding architects such as Wright, Richardson, Sullivan, Upjohn and Olmsted left their mark in way that cannot be matched on the Ontario side of the border, even in the larger cities such as Toronto. Whatever appeal Canada might have does not appear to be caused by the quality of its architecture or urban planning.

<h2>End of Steel</h2>

Despite its wealth of architecture, Buffalo appears to suffer from the processes of post-industrialization much more severely than does Ontario. In Buffalo and nearby Lackawanna (the Buffalo equivalent of the East End of Hamilton), the mills pulled out quickly, leaving behind a wealth of industrial ruins, which are photogenic in that post-apocalyptic style I so admire. As in its sister city of Pittsburgh, the steel producers decided very quickly that there was no point in pretending that steel production had a future there. In Ontario, they apparently didn't make such a decision and the steel factories continue to belch smoke and to provide employment. The industrial districts of Hamilton continue to appear much like Lackawanna did thirty years ago. It is not at all clear why the two nations have had this different trajectory despite being located in what seems to be similar geographical and market contexts.

<h2>Geography</h2>

Buffalo, even though it is the second largest city in New York state, is an outpost for the state on Lake Erie. It is separated from the main population centres in eastern New York state by the Appalachian mountain range. Buffalo faces the sometimes obscure northern country of Canada and depends on the Great Lakes for its water-bound transportation. A major factor in Buffalo's history was the construction of the Erie Canal system, which connects the inland waterways of the Great Lakes to the Hudson River. When the canal first opened in 1825 it provided a direct link to the fast-growing regions of the West. This geographical advantage, which encouraged the early growth of Buffalo, has now disappeared. Canada is a country for which proximity to the USA is a fundamental factor in development. The USA has a huge internal market. This means it's not too dependent on exposure to its northern neighbour.

<h2>Population and population decline</h2>

Ontario is the centre of population density in Canada. Hamilton is near the geographic centre of the so-called 'Golden Horseshoe' area of Ontario, situated at the western end of Lake Ontario. It is part of one of the few regions in Canada that approaches the population density of the eastern seaboard of the USA. Hamilton not only functions as an industrial centre [in probable decline], but also as a city which is in commutable distance to several dynamic, growing cities in the region, such as Toronto and Waterloo. Hamilton is geographically at the centre of its own national context whereas Buffalo is off to one side. Buffalo, like Pittsburgh and other rust belt cities has suffered de-population due to the processes of de-industrialization. This appears to be a major factor in the overall morale of the city. It is harder to feel good about your city if your friends and neighbours are continually 'voting with their feet.' Hamilton has not experienced such de-population and

its morale seems correspondingly higher.

<h2>Race Relations</h2>

Hamilton has a predominantly white population and has, until fairly recently, been populated predominantly by those of European descent. This is now changing after the introduction of more equitable, colour-blind immigration policies in Canada in the 60's and 70's. Hamilton now sees the growth of new communities by immigrants from Asia, Africa and the Middle East. If immigration trends continue Hamilton will follow the lead of Toronto and increasingly have a foreign-born population whose ancestral ties are not with Europe. This demographic change is welcomed from most quarters and adds to the attractiveness of the city for both investment and daily living.

In Buffalo, there is a similar population of Europeans who were attracted during the last century to jobs in industry, as can be found in Hamilton. An important aspect of American social history is the Great Migration of blacks from the southern states to work in northern industrial cities such as Buffalo. This internal migration, which has had such a dramatic effect on racial politics in the USA, has no equivalent in Canada.

In Hamilton, as in Buffalo, there are blighted neighbourhoods where property values are low, environmental degradation is severe and overall morale and opportunities are limited. What appears to be different is that in Hamilton the racial composition of these neighbourhoods does not appear to be a factor in their blight. In Buffalo, and in other American cities such as Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Detroit, the racial composition of neighbourhoods plays an important role in urban geography.]]></content:encoded>

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Art Barker: Standing-Seam Roofer

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This week I had the unpleasant task of telling Art Barker, a local roofer who specializes in standing-seam roofs, that I would not be using him to replace our roof. The reason that it was unpleasant was not only the disappointment that Art would feel for not getting the contract but also because I *really* wanted a standing-seam roof for our home [specifically, a mill finish Galvalume Plus standing-seam roof]. I had searched far and wide for the best roof available and I had found it.

Art certainly seemed like a talented, responsible roofer who had a real love of fine roofs. Art sold me on the benefits of standing seam roofing, but I was not too hard to convince. I was already convinced before I had even talked to Art. He had just confirmed my suspicions that standing-seam was perhaps the most attractive roofing technology available for pitched roofs.

Standings-seam roofs are common in commercial and institutional buildings but are rare for houses in this country. The reason I couldn't get a standing-seam roof for myself is that I couldn't afford one; they are more expensive than other roofs. Standing-seam roofs are the top of the line. The Cadillac solution. There are other metal roofs available that attempt to duplicate the quality of a standing-seam roof without having to mechanically bend metal during installation to form the standing seam. These, however, do not seem nearly as elegant as a well-installed standing-seam roof by someone like Art.

Metals such as lead, copper and galvanized steel have been used on roofs for a long time. St Paul's Cathedral in London has a beautiful lead roof that withstood the Blitz. At Dundurn Castle, near our home in Hamilton, some of the roofs there have beautiful copper and lead detailing. Slate tiles are also a traditional choice for high quality historical roofs in the area. Slate though costs a fortune and requires a much stronger roof structure.

Galvalume, which is an aluminum-zinc alloy coating over a steel core, seems like it would last forever. Standing seam creates a mechanically-fixed layer of solid metal over your whole roof. Art would supply hidden fixings for the metal panels. Installing a standing-seam roof is like sewing a fine suit. Its quality depends not only on the quality of the material but on how well the material is bent and stitched together. I was convinced, and remained convinced, that a standing-seam roof would indeed last forever.

Why do I prefer standing-seam roofs? Two main reasons: Longevity and other green factors, and Appearance.

<h2>Longevity and other Green Factors</h2>

Your typical asphalt or fiberglass roof lasts possibly 20-25 years. Even though 40 or 50 year shingles are advertised I don't buy it. A standing-seam metal would last at least twice that of an asphalt roof. I think a roof by Art would last 75 years, long after the house we live in has new owners. Standing-seam roofs have inherent mechanical advantages over shingle roofs. That means they should survive high winds, bright sun and freezing rain much better than a few layers of gunk-infused fiberglass with a light gravel coating. Things that last a long time have an inherent quality about them. The 18 year old Toyota Tercel that is parked on our street has such a quality. It's almost like you become a more responsible citizen by purchasing such a product.

A standing-seam roof is built of recyclable material, none of which should end in a landfill after it is replaced. Metal appears to be much more chemically inert compared to asphalt and does not leach toxic chemicals. The higher reflectance of a metal roof reduces cooling loads in the summer.

When an asphalt roof fails and must be replaced all of its material goes straight into landfill. It is not-recyclable. They probably leak toxic waste once in the landfill. The rain that falls on them before that must also leach toxic chemicals, which mixes with groundwater.

Appearance

Metal roofs can come with a mill finish, for those who favour an industrial look, and also in many colours. The quality and longevity of coloured coatings can vary. The darker the colour, the lower the solar reflectance and the higher the cooling loads.

A mill finish Galvalume roof does not appeal to everyone. It looks shiny and its industrial look does not suit all styles of buildings. It might look a bit like a barn but that is fine by me. It looks like the kind of roof that architects would put on their own home. I expect a mill finish Galvalume roof would start shiny but would age over time to a medium grey patina.

Asphalt shingle roofs look fine when they are new. However, when they are at the end of their lifespan they curl and fade and do not look very good. A journey through some of the poorer neighbourhoods of Hamilton or Lackawanna, NY will show you how age treats older asphalt shingle roofs: they do not age gracefully. I have seen asphalt roofs that are only eight years old that have begun to take that slide into decrepitude. This seems like very poor value for your money.

Disadvantages of metal roofs

Admittedly, there are some real disadvantages to metal roofs:

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- Expense: they always are going to cost more than shingles

- Availability: it takes some effort to find a roofer who can install one

- Noise: if there is a gap between the roof deck and metal a resonating chamber could form that can make quite a racket during a hail or rain storm

- Prominence: metal roofs, especially if they are shiny, will make your house stand out from others on your street

- Snow shedding: snow on your roof can form a large mass which could slide from your roof all at once and damage vehicles or people beneath

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Why are asphalt shingle roofs so common on houses in North America?

If you look over the residential roofscapes of Hamilton, or any other North American city, all you see are asphalt shingle roofs. Why is this? Hamilton is a steel city that even produces Galvalume sheeting in its steel mills. Where are all the metal roofs?

Some possible reasons why asphalt shingle roofs are so common:

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- Expense: asphalt roofs for normal residential buildings are the cheapest solution. Initial costs are a deciding factor for many

- Shifting the expense to the next owner: people put on new roofs and anticipate that they will not own the house when it is time to replace the roof

- Familiarity: everyone seems to get a asphalt shingle roof when they need to replace a roof

- 'Big' asphalt and availability: roofers who can re-roof your house quickly with asphalt shingles are everywhere. Standing-seam or other metal roofers are much less common and much harder to find

- Home building industry: new home builders like to reduce their costs, in the absence of a perceived demand for a higher quality product

- Absence of green policy: lack of government or policy incentives to encourage greener, longer-lasting residential roofs

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More expensive but not *that* much more expensive

Art's price for standing-seam was about 25% more than the highest quote for a conventional roof. This doesn't seem like much more to pay for what seems like a much higher quality product, especially when the environmental benefits are factored in.

By way of example, you can buy an inexpensive new car for about \$14,000. 25% over that price would be \$17,500. Say you were deciding between a cheap car for \$14,000 or \$17,500 for the greenest car available, which would last two or three times as long and establish you as a person who votes for green initiatives with their wallet. I think most people would go for the more expensive product, if they could afford it.

What surprised me with my experience of pricing standing-seam roofs was not how expensive Art's roof would be but rather how small the difference would be over a conventional shingle roof. If I had just a little bit more money - and it disturbs me that I don't - I would spring for Art's standing-seam roof. I have chosen instead to put on a much cheaper metal roof (almost half the price of Art's). This roof will look similar in that it is made of Galvalume Plus but has exposed fixings. This means that across the roof there are holes in the surface of the metal, as opposed to concealed fixings where holes are hidden beneath a layer of metal. Metal roofs with exposed fixings are commonly found on barns in rural parts of Ontario. If I'm lucky this roof should look fine, keep out the rain and may last about 25 years.

For those in the Hamilton or Niagara region of Ontario looking for a top-quality standing-seam metal roofer, I suggest you call Art Barker at (905) 296-2102.]]></content:encoded>

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Velomobiles near the tipping point

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On Sept 19, 2009 the boys and I attended a gathering of the Human Powered Transportation Association (HPTA) at Reg Rodaro's property near Niagara-on-the-Lake. Here we saw several velomobiles up-close, both hand-made and factory-built. The Toronto firm Bluevelo had an excellent showing of their wares. The crowd was extremely friendly and welcoming. We had to leave early but would have liked to have stuck around. In the brief time we were there I had several stimulating conversations, plus the barbecue scheduled later in the day looked very promising.

Velomobiles are fully enclosed bicycles, or more commonly tricycles. They solve two problems with cycling: getting wet and cold in bad weather, and falling over when you stop moving. Currently, they are still a bit of a fringe pursuit but I predict this will soon change, especially if they become a bit less expensive (they now cost about \$7,500 CAD and up). Otherwise, they look and perform like something that many thousands would love to own. They are practical, green vehicles, especially in places with little snow and ice. Due to their aerodynamic shape, they make cycling much easier, especially at speeds over 25 kph. They require no license or insurance and are classified as bicycles in Canada.

The production costs of velomobiles would decrease if demand for them increased. If ten times as many people wanted them, then economies of scale would start to take over. Research and development in the human-powered transportation sector is important to giving this industry greater resources and industrial credibility. Governments should encourage such research. Another way to reduce costs is to support those interested in building kit bodies on top of factory-built recumbent trikes (which are more common than velomobiles).

Development of recumbent trikes (the inner workings of most velomobiles) is well advanced. It seems like it's the bodies that need a bit of work (although the body on the Quest model by Velomobieli.nl is oh-so-gorgeous). Many of the technologies applicable in building kayaks are transferable to the building of bodies for velomobiles. Canada has a long history in the building of kayaks, and the velomobile market could conceivably be a larger market than that for kayaks. Kayak-building techniques such as molded fiberglass, Kevlar, skin-on-frame, and stitch-and-glue seem promising.

<h2>Possible business models for Velomobiles</h2>

As mobile billboards: velomobiles generate considerable interest when driven around town: "Buy a velomobile. Lease out advertising on both sides <your web address here!> and cover the payments for the velomobile through advertising rents"

As tourist attractions: "1 hour in a velomobile for only \$25!"

As amenities for green hotels: "Guests can ride our complimentary velomobile!"

As attractions at street fairs: "See the amazing velomobile rodeo!"

As basic, green transportation: "Carry all your groceries, laugh at the rain and smirk at the snow!"

As an industry that might convince people that Canada actually has green aspirations: "Ontario, now with a velomobile industry second only to the Netherlands!"

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Pittsburgh and Deindustrialization

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Every once in awhile a newspaper article is published that extols the charms of Pittsburgh as a tourist destination. I enjoy reading such articles because Pittsburgh is wonderful city for which I feel great affection. However, lately, there is a sameness to the articles and their manufactured, somewhat contrived message that now seems a little suspect.

Usually these articles go something like this:

<blockquote>You might think that Pittsburgh is a real stinking dump but this no longer true! It is actually a very liveable city with some colourful restaurants, great museums and lots of people who don't seem to mind living there at all! When the Steel mills were operating Pittsburgh was known as 'the Smoky City.' Air quality was terrible and they had to turn on the street lights at noon. Then all the mills shut down in the 70's and now the air is much better. There are lots of new industries such as health care, research and robotics. Pittsburgh really is quite a cool city--even Andy Warhol came from there!
</blockquote>

All of the above is true. The Pittsburgh revival is real and it is a city filled with interesting, friendly people. Its universities can be excellent (e.g. Carnegie Mellon). The museums are well worth a visit, for example, the Warhol, the Carnegie and the Children's Museum. Some of its neighbourhoods are very attractive and vibrant. As in Buffalo, it is surprising just how beautiful some of its architecture is.

<h2>The conventional interpretation</h2>

What these articles tend to suggest is the following: that dirty industries and the jobs they provide are bad, while clean, white-collar research jobs are much better--for all concerned; that the steel industry left town all at once in the 70's. This was bit hard at first but it appears that it's been a good thing in the long run; that the dirt that the steel industry produced was an inevitable outcome of steel production and that the only way to clean up the environment was to get rid of that type of industry entirely; and finally, that whatever was lost during the period of de-industrialization during the 70's and 80's has been replaced with something of equal or greater value.

<h2>Some things to consider</h2>

What these articles tend not to mention is that one of the reasons that housing is so cheap and artists' studios in cool industrial spaces are so available in Pittsburgh is that hundreds of thousands of people left town, never to return. De-population of the once vibrant industrial city of Pittsburgh was an extraordinarily painful process for many, especially for those unlikely to find work in any type of new, research-based economy. This dislocation of one group of people with another, where the overlap between the two groups is minimal, was a socially corrosive experience for those made redundant.

Many neighbourhoods in Pittsburgh have yet to recover from de-industrialization. These may be far from the relatively urbane ones such the Golden Triangle (downtown), Lawrenceville, or Bloomfield, where some new investment has trickled in. The pain in less-glamorous neighbourhoods, such as Munhall, Wilmerding, or McKeesport, still appears raw and unresolved.

Pittsburgh still tends to be a highly segregated city according to race. The Hill District, for example, is essentially a black ghetto within walking distance of downtown. It attracts little investment, is not a place you want to explore late at night and is under no danger of being gentrified anytime soon. The racism which presumably perpetuates such ghettos is as powerful a force as recent attempts at civic reinvention.

The speed at which de-industrialization occurred to the steel industry in Pittsburgh always seemed a bit fishy. Why did it happen so quickly? Can it be explained by market forces (e.g. cost of labour, materials or transportation) or are there other,

possibly more sinister factors such as avoidance of environmental regulation, or the desire to set up shop in locales without pesky, activist unions? If Hamilton, Ontario can still be making steel, why is it that thirty years ago Pittsburgh decided that it couldn't do the same?]]></content:encoded>

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Hamilton and Burlington: a tale of two cities

<link><http://michaelcumming.com/2009/10/hamilton-and-burlington-a-tale-of-two-cities/></link>

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[caption id="attachment_170" align="alignleft" width="240" caption="Dogs on roof in Hamilton, ON"][/caption]

Hamilton has the reputation of being a classic rust-bucket city with an economy excessively dependent on heavy industry. It is seen by its critics as an unclean, rough and slightly dangerous place, where reckless civic decisions are made behind closed doors. It is the Golden Horseshoe's version of the dark Satanic mills of industrial England combined with the inter-ethnic tensions of a seething, immigrant-fueled city like Chicago.

[caption id="attachment_166" align="alignright" width="240" caption="Mall parking lot in Burlington, ON"][/caption]

Burlington on the other hand is a classic North American bedroom community, where the ills of post-Victorian society have been scrubbed clean and suburban comforts can be enjoyed guilt-free. In Burlington, civic decision-making is seen as more sober, with less chance of overt corruption. By moving from Hamilton to Burlington people could avoid industrial blight, poverty, intractable social problems and historical decay. Hamilton has industrial production, including steel, as its native industry. In Burlington the native industries are suburban tract housing and real estate development. Hamilton is left-leaning politically while Burlington is right-leaning. Hamilton is Scorsese's *Mean Streets* while Burlington is more *Leave it to Beaver*.

History of building

One important axis in which Hamilton/Burlington differ is that of history. Hamilton has lots of history while Burlington appears to have very little.

In Hamilton, history cannot be marginalized simply because there is so much of it. From mid-Victorian churches, to worker's cottages, to aging factory complexes, history--as far as architectural infrastructure is concerned--is in great supply. However, demand for this history does not correspond to the abundance of its supply.

As in many historical industrial cities, the historical richness of the place is confounded with its current, marginal economic value. This tends to grossly undervalue these resources. With diminished value, old dilapidated buildings are destroyed without outcry. A movement to create money from these old bricks, say, through industrial tourism as found in England and Germany, has yet to appear.

Burlington was purposely built to escape history and to start afresh. Nowhere in Burlington is there much evidence of settlement prior to, say, 1900. Burlington first grew as a post-war bedroom community to Hamilton. It has shifted its focus to being more a bedroom community to Toronto, or a viable edge city in its own right. Burlington also has a surprisingly diverse industrial corridor along the busy QEW, which divides Burlington in two.

Burlington is presented as a modern solution to a traditional Victorian city like Hamilton: in order to build the modern city it was necessary to escape the burdens of the past. Burlington encourages one to forget about history and focus more on consumption. Residents move there not in spite of the lack of historical context but rather because of it.

<h2 style="text-align: left;">History of ethnic enclaves</h2>

When immigrants move to a rough and tumble place like Hamilton, the resources provided by ones ethnic community and church are a vital source of support. In the absence of money, support comes from the community. Immigrants often live near their supportive communities in urban enclaves.

Hamilton has the remnants of urban enclaves, such as the Italian and Portuguese North End. However, these are losing its ethnic flavour as residents acquire sufficient mobility to move to cleaner, relatively bucolic suburbs like Burlington. As older communities move on, newer ethnic communities like the Vietnamese or Somalis take their place.

Burlington was from the start a post-ethnic type of place. In Burlington, support comes less from community and more from cash-in-hand. In Burlington, the average household income is much higher than in Hamilton. The more money you have, the less dependent you are on support from your community.

In Burlington there is ethnic diversity in the population, since like Hamilton, it has inflows of immigrants. But you would not know this from driving around town. Neighbourhoods in Burlington tend to look all the same. There is some differentiation in neighbourhoods, but this is caused more by variations in income than in ethnic make up.

<h2>Avoidance of poverty and ambiguity</h2>

To move to Burlington, due to its elevated property prices, you need to earn a certain income. This is a crude stereotype, of course, but as a general rule being a resident of Burlington indicates a certain base household income. This means that if you move to Burlington you can successfully avoid much contact with the urban poor. For some, this is an attractive proposition.

In Hamilton, the chance of poverty avoidance is much reduced. Hamilton, like Buffalo and Pittsburgh, has lots of poor people. But there are also considerable numbers of not-poor people too. Therefore, saying you are a resident of Hamilton imparts less information than saying you live in Burlington. In Hamilton you might be poor, or you might not be. You might be living there because you have no other options, or you might be there by choice. This ambiguity of rank and position creates opportunities to move between social strata.

In larger cities such as Toronto and New York, enormous wealth lives side by side with striking poverty. Diversity of income and circumstance are the marks of most traditional cities. Hamilton is traditionally urban in this respect: if you want to avoid poverty then Hamilton is not your kind of place. Burlington is the opposite: if you want to avoid poverty, Burlington might be just the place for you.

<h2>Property maintenance and social diversity</h2>

One striking difference between Hamilton and Burlington is their approach to property maintenance. Hamilton is full of buildings that require huge amounts of maintenance. Their bricks need re-pointing, parapets are falling down, flashings are corroded and need to be replaced. Typically, this maintenance work is done inadequately, presumably because of the huge expense of doing it well.

Burlington, on the other hand, is perhaps overly-maintained--despite being a place where low or no-maintenance finishes such as vinyl siding are common. Burlington is full of house-proud home-owners who edge their lawns and power-wash their car-ports to an itch of their lives. There is a great sense of keeping up your property so that the neighbours have no reason to complain. In Burlington, with its relatively homogeneous population, there is concern about what neighbours might think.

In Hamilton, with its more diverse population, there is less concern to conform in this way because there is less likelihood your neighbours are similar to you.]]></content:encoded>

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Nuit Blanche Toronto 2009

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Toronto's Nuit Blanche happened on the night of October 3-4. It was a great success. We saw some good art and left feeling happy.

<h2>Crowds</h2>

It is the density of crowds that makes Nuit Blanche a worthwhile event, almost regardless of what is exhibited in the galleries. The event attracts crowd-lovers and repels crowd-haters. The crowds are diverse in age, but the physicality of the event tends to favour the young. Black is a common colour of dress. Brightly-dressed individuals stand out from the crowd.

The density of sidewalk interactions in Toronto is usually fairly modest. Nuit Blanche ups this density considerably, for a limited time. But the scale of Nuit Blanche is so vast that this density occurs only in relatively small pockets of the city. In the rest of town it is business as usual.

<h2>Physical exertion</h2>

To attend Nuit Blanche involves strenuous, physical activity. It takes lots of energy to visit the various venues and districts. We stayed in one district only (Queen St West near Ossington), left early (2am), but even this was tiring.

At Nuit Blanche, walking is the preferred mode of transportation. Leave the bicycle or car at home this night, since these become cumbersome when the crowds become dense. The distance between districts in Nuit Blanche is so great that walking between all of them would exhaust most people. Therefore, an all-night Transit pass is a good investment.

However, even with a Transit Pass, Nuit Blanche has become an event so large that it can't really be experienced in total by one individual. It's just too physically exhausting to see it all.

Attending Nuit Blanche means staying up late. This is hard on some people's bodies. I found it difficult to assemble enough energy to leave the house, at a time when my thoughts focus more on slipping into bed.

A good idea is to eat a substantial meal during the middle of Nuit Blanche so your body has more to work with. There were several attractive restaurants on our path and we ate in a good Chinese one.

<h2>Costs of success</h2>

Nuit Blanche is a large, far-flung event that is growing quickly. In Toronto, there is high demand for what it offers, within a certain segment of the population. As Nuit Blanche grows and becomes more popular, some people may become troubled by its scale. With this scale it is difficult to know what to do because there are so many options. Given a set of interests, it is difficult to know what particular events are best-suited to these interests.

Distance is also a potential weakness of Nuit Blanche. Walking is the only feasible means of transportation within each district. Yet, it can be physically exhausting to travel between districts. Therefore, a comprehensive shuttle system is needed between districts, beyond that which is offered by public transit. In this respect Nuit Blanche could become a huge, metropolitan version of what is currently offered by Hamilton's Art Bus.

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Some thoughts on writing and editing

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<h3>Express yourself first, edit later</h3>

Don't expect the first expression of an idea to be elegant, well-formed, or to make any sense

Through skillful editing, silk purses can be made from sow's ears

The writing/editing process is highly iterative; don't be surprised if it takes time

<h3>Writing as a tool for thinking</h3>

As you write you might start to think about things in a new way

It may be difficult to predict where a document might lead before you actually write it

This emergent aspect is what makes writing exciting

<h3>Mechanical editing</h3>

A large part of editing is mechanical or technical and thus could, in theory, be automated (that is, any monkey could be trained to do it)

Such editing need not be too difficult conceptually

<h3>Good content requires more than technique</h3>

Even with perfect technical editing, there is no guarantee that the content of writing will have any value

<h3>Number of words</h3>

If you can express the same thought in fewer words, then use fewer words

However, don't be too miserly with words; excessive density or compactness of writing should be avoided

<h3>Contiguity of similar ideas</h3>

Put ideas that are similar, next to one another, using cut and paste

If there is repetition, then get rid of something

Don't say the same thing in different parts of the same document, except occasionally for rhetorical effect

<h3>Order and flow</h3>

Often, sufficient ideas are present in a document but are not in the proper order

Put ideas in the proper order so that they flow well and unfold elegantly

<h3>Conclusions</h3>

If you make a conclusion using words such as 'therefore' or 'so', you should support your conclusion with a progression of plausible assertions

- Don't assume, as a given, what you are trying to prove
- Sometimes lines of reasoning lead to crazy conclusions; sometimes such conclusions turn out to be true

<h3>Avoid conclusions if necessary</h3>

- Often the available evidence is too sketchy or ambiguous to make firm conclusions
- Asking the right questions might be a worthwhile contribution

<h3>Back to front structure</h3>

- If you come to an interesting conclusion at the end of a document, it might be a good idea to put that idea at the beginning so people have some idea where you are headed

<h3>Hidden assumptions</h3>

- Hidden assumptions are things assumed to be true without their existence being acknowledged and with no evidence of their truthfulness provided
- Try to identify and examine hidden assumptions; this can often be an interesting and fruitful enquiry

<h3>Knowledge as 'frozen ignorance'</h3>

- Often things that 'everyone knows' turn out not to be true
- Assume that your ignorance of the world is much greater than your knowledge

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Participatory art: loot conquers all

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During last Saturday's Nuit Blanche in Toronto, my wife Cornelia Peckart taught me some interesting lessons about participatory art events and art 'happenings.'

Cornelia's idea was to create an art event that involved people walking by, in which participants were rewarded for their participation. The reward was a 'loot bag,' much like those given out at children's birthday parties. The event in which people were encouraged to participate involved drawing with chalk on the brick wall along the east side of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, at the corner of Queen St West and Shaw in Toronto. Prior to the event, Cornelia did not request permission from the institution to chalk up their wall (it is easier to ask forgiveness than to get permission).

The event was almost completely spontaneous. Cornelia didn't know if she would have enough nerve to go through with it just moments before she set up and began to rally the crowds. She didn't know where she would set up until she happened to see an available wall. The time from when the project was first conceived to when it occurred was very short--only a few hours. Due to the enthusiasm of Cornelia, which is usually seen as a gift given freely, the event was a success. My role was as the event photographer. It was fun for me as well.

Here are some of the lessons I learned, which I believe are applicable to a wider context:

<h2>Tangible rewards encourage participation</h2>

People who are accosted and asked to participate in an art happening during events like Nuit Blanche may be reluctant to do so unless they are assured of a few things: that they will not be too embarrassed by the experience, that they will probably have some fun, and that there is some tangible award for participating (although this reward need not be substantial). Having this reward made the difference between people walking by and people deciding to take part.

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<h2>Crowds can form and disperse very quickly</h2>

[caption id="attachment_290" align="alignright" width="240" caption="Crowd scene at Queen and Shaw, Toronto"][/caption]

One the most interesting aspects of the experience was just how quickly crowds formed once people figured out that something was going on. It didn't require a long build-up time or an organic period of growth. It happened almost instantly and it disappeared just as quickly as it appeared. It was a completely ephemeral event. It took about 45 minutes from start to finish. Once all the loot bags were given out then the event was over and no one knew that anything had happened, besides chalk scratchings on the wall. Despite this ephemeral quality we got the sense that people valued their participation, that their interaction was meaningful to them and their apparent enjoyment was genuine. After the event, we continued on our way and explored more of Nuit Blanche, like nothing had happened.

<h2>The Power of Charisma</h2>

One of the reasons that the event was a success was that Cornelia was charismatic and attracted a crowd, simply through her interactions and presence. This factor was crucial. This skill in rallying crowds quickly is found in few people. If I had attempted a similar event it wouldn't have worked at all.

When it comes to art events, appeals to reason are often much less powerful than appeals to having fun and getting a little bit of loot.

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Your piece below is also very timely.

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First Hamilton Supercrawl

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Unfortunately, the weather didn't cooperate in the least. It was raining heavily all day. After listening to music for a short time at the Supercrawl and visiting a couple of galleries, I walked home because I was getting cold. I have heard from others that it was a good party. I had obviously left much too early.

For the Supercrawl, James St North was closed to traffic between York/Wilson and Cannon. This moved the centre of gravity of the event a couple blocks south. Usually, most Art Crawl action happens between Cannon and Barton. Moving it southwards made the Sonic Unyon building on Wilson feel more central, which during normal crawls feels like an outlier. Several live music stages had been set up. Covered stages were necessary that night because otherwise musicians and equipment would have become completely drenched. The wet weather discouraged crawling along James St. It appeared that fewer galleries than normal were open. The Loose Canon Gallery, as is usually the case, had some of the most interesting art on display. The you me gallery, which is often our first port of call, was closed.

The Art Crawl is primarily a linear event, much like that portion of Nuit Blanche that runs along Queen St West in Toronto. On the strip lots is going on. Off the strip the neighbourhoods are quiet. In my opinion the Art Crawl should include more of James Street, both North and South. It should stretch all the way between Liuna Station at Murray to St Joseph's Hospital. In this way it would include most of the urban highlights of downtown Hamilton, including Gore Park. The Art Crawl has a way to go before there are sufficient attractions to encourage people to tramp all this way, but one can dream.

To attract crowds to the Supercrawl (which it sounds like they were successful in doing) live music became the main attraction. Overall, this made it less of an art-focused event. This may have been because of the weather or it may have been by design. Although live music is enjoyable to see anywhere in the city (the Locke St Festival is especially good in this respect) I'm not sure how successfully live music on fixed stages relates to the pedestrian movement inherent to an Art Crawl. With an Art Crawl you want people to promenade and explore art venues; with fixed music stages you want people to stop and listen to music. Therefore, the Supercrawl for me was like a regular Art Crawl, but with less crawling and less art.]]></content:encoded>

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Doors Open Smithville

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The weekend of October 17-18, 2009 was the last weekend of Doors Open 2009 events in Ontario. The boys and I decided to visit the small town of Smithville, which is a small farming community on the upper plateau of the Niagara Escarpment about 12 kilometers south of Grimsby. In Smithville, among the open sites, were the Smithville Train Station and the Smithville Presbyterian Church.

<h2>Smithville Train Station</h2>

[caption id="attachment_358" align="alignright" width="270" caption="Smithville Train Station"][/caption]

The Smithville Train Station was a typical Doors Open site with guides who explained how the train station served the town well over the years, next to the tracks of the T,H & B (Toronto, Hamilton and Buffalo) Railway, later CP Rail.

The station had an attractive circular turret and an interior lovingly restored by the townspeople. It had been moved 50 feet from its previous location, which was directly adjacent to the tracks. Originally, the station had two waiting rooms, one called the Men's Smoking Room and another for women, children and non-smokers. Each waiting room was heated by a pot-bellied stove.

The station did give the impression as being a special place of transition for the town. Most major arrivals and departures of the town occurred through the train station. It was where soldiers departed to fight in overseas wars and where farmers transported their goods to centres of population. You could imagine how immigrants felt when they hopped off the train at Smithville, to start a new life in the wilds of Canada.

The train station obviously holds great resonance for the town and many have devoted countless hours to its restoration. In the basement several women were busy maintaining the town archives. It was obvious that the people of Smithville were proud of their history and took it seriously.

A frequent lesson derived from attending Doors Open events is that maintaining a link to the past through architecture is a meaningful occupation and pastime for many. It adds meaning to their lives, and as a visitor it adds meaning to our lives as we witness people constructing meaning in theirs.

<h2>Smithville Presbyterian Church</h2>

[caption id="attachment_355" align="alignright" width="270" caption="Smithville Presbyterian Church"][/caption]

The second site we visited, the Smithville Presbyterian Church turned out to be one of those special Doors Open sites in which we walked out feeling completely satisfied, indeed almost overwhelmed by the experience. With Doors Open, you never know quite what you are going to get and the visit to the Smithville Presbyterian Church was a prime example of this. We went in with no expectations and were rewarded with a rich, yet compact experience.

At the door, several friendly church women greeted us. We then proceeded to a display that honoured the men and boys who had left Smithville to fight in overseas wars. Included was a display of military rifles with fixed bayonets, which greatly

impressed the boys.

Later, I spoke with two church elders [meaning, a couple of guys about my age] about the history of the Presbyterian Church, its origins in Scotland and how branches of this Protestant denomination went through a dizzying array of splits, secessions and mergers.

In the 19th century the Presbyterian Church was the most important Protestant denomination in English Canada. Many parts of English Canada were settled by people of Scottish descent. Usually these Scots were Protestants. Scottish Protestants built some very handsome limestone and brick churches in Ontario, like the one in Smithville.

Then we discussed the architectural history of the main Presbyterian churches in nearby Hamilton. There are three important Presbyterian churches in Hamilton: St Paul's Presbyterian on James St South at Jackson, MacNab Street Presbyterian on MacNab near the train tracks, and the large Central Presbyterian at Charlton and Caroline. Central seems to be the largest of the three and the one most successful in maintaining a healthy congregation. All three are architecturally and culturally significant and are well worth a visit during Doors Open events. The stained glass windows in St Paul's and MacNab are particularly noteworthy.

An important event, apparently, in Presbyterian Church history, was the formation of the United Church of Church in 1925. The majority of Presbyterians at that time decided to join the new church. But some decided not to join and remained as Presbyterians. It is unclear what sorts of people stayed compared to those who left.

I think it is this aspect that makes the history of the Presbyterian Church in Canada difficult for outsiders to comprehend. Like in many Doors Open events, a glimpse is given of a world you realize you know next to nothing about.

After my discussions with the elders, I had several questions which would have taken them a long time to explain to me adequately:

How did the Scottish Protestant church relate to the Roman Catholic church at the time of the Reformation--why were the ideas of John Knox or John Calvin so revolutionary at the time?

What issues of faith and worship inspired factions to break away from established Protestant churches?

What did the formation of the United Church of Canada mean to the established churches of the time?

What sorts of Presbyterians decided not to join the United Church of Canada?

I guess what I'm looking for is a book called a Scottish Protestantism in Canada for Dummies that might explain these issues for me.

After my discussion of church history with the elders, which lasted some time, some other women demonstrated the beautiful late-Victorian pipe organ, built by Edward Lye & Sons, which has been in continuous operation since 1891. The boys had a great time working the manual bellows (an electric blower was later installed) and in pounding the keyboard of this organ. Liam was especially impressed by the organ's foot pedals and how it was possible to play a tune just by using your feet.

Since the organ still has manual bellows it can be played without electrical power--as happened during a concert in the middle of a power outage in 1999. The majestic sound coming from a church organ was impressive. The organ and its lore occupied the boys for a long time and I think it will be something they remember.

Lastly, the event which cemented this visit as being an important event in Doors Open for us (and the last event we attended in 2009) was the free lunch given by the church ladies in the second floor balcony. There, the boys and I could choose from four different types of soup, eat as many sandwiches and dessert squares as we wanted, drink pots of coffee, tea or juice, all for free. There is little that gives a more positive impression for the boys and me than tasty, free food.

At Smithville Presbyterian Church we got to enjoy interesting church history, play with on an historic church organ and then get a full meal at the end of it. This hospitality we found was almost overwhelming. It was an excellent advertisement for small-town Presbyterianism as a purveyor of local history and as a place to find a warm, supportive community.

Despite its cultural attractions, there is a sense that this church community is in decline. Enrolment is declining

precipitously in mainstream Protestant churches in Canada. There seems to be a lack of young people required to sustain these communities in the years ahead.

Many potential church-goers are probably happy to visit church buildings and to participate in a supportive community, but lack the Christian faith needed to worship in a Christian church.

But, we didn't get the impression that the people we met at the Smithville Presbyterian Church were friendly to outsiders because of their possibly declining congregation--we got the impression that this was just the way they behaved.]]></content:encoded>

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Doors Open events in Ontario. The boys and I decided to visit the small town of Smithville, which is a small farming
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McMaster Innovation Park Open House

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The McMaster Innovation Park (MIP) had its official opening on October 26, 2009. I took a tour with several others and found the experience enjoyable and interesting.

MIP is a research park and technology transfer facility whose goal is to take technologies developed at McMaster University and transform them into viable businesses. MIP joins dozens of other university research parks in Canada.

The main building in which the opening took place will be known as the Atrium @ MIP. This renovated building was the former headquarters for the former Westinghouse/Camco facility. In the Atrium the commercialization firm Trivaris is an important tenant, under whose umbrella several local start ups have found support.

A new CANMET (Canadian Centre for Mineral and Energy Technology) building is under construction next door to the Atrium. In this new building CANMET's Materials Technology Laboratory will be housed. This lab appears to be an excellent tenant and anchor for the MIP and will produce over a hundred high-quality research jobs. Such stable, federal agency jobs are a great find for Hamilton and may help turn this part of West Hamilton into a little slice of Ottawa or Kanata.

<h2>Observations</h2>

The Atrium is an attractively-renovated industrial building with a large, bright atrium. It appears to provide high-quality office and workshop space in a convenient location. The Atrium already houses several high-value and viable-sounding businesses.

The site plan for the MIP appears ambitious. It may take awhile to build out the entire MIP site since it offers lots of land for expansion. Its proximity to McMaster University, to attractive residential areas, and its convenient highway-side location are advantageous.

MIP represents the capital-intensive end of business development: the kind of innovation that requires significant investment from government, universities or venture capitalists to bring to fruition.

Currently, from an urban design perspective, MIP is relatively isolated from surrounding urban areas. If MIP's site were connected to Frid St it would become much more accessible to the residential and industrial neighbourhoods that lie to the east.

The ideas that appear to motivate MIP are the following:

Utilize McMaster R&D as a business resource

Focus on areas for which McMaster has research expertise, such as engineering, material science and medical technology

Support, through R&D, traditional Hamilton industries such as manufacturing and steel production

Take an entrepreneurial approach to business development

Provide support and infrastructure to growing businesses

Follow a business development model of incubation, acceleration and ongoing support.

Some of these strategies rely on the prediction that manufacturing and steel production have a future in the region. This, I think is plausible, despite the fact that manufacturing and steel production in the region have been severely hit during the current recession.

I'm not sure, though, that all eggs should be placed in that one basket.

Innovation

The word 'innovation' takes on a slightly civic-booster quality at the MIP. When the word 'innovation' is used in a general, non-specific way it can become a motherhood-type issue that loses meaning and significance. The word 'excellence' is in a similar category: nice to have but just saying it doesn't make it so.

Remember too that innovation is not always required to make money and to create employment. Stelco may not have been the most innovative steel producer in the world but it did employ many people.

If you are trying to establish a successful university research park, of course, what you profess to encourage is innovation. In all of the other university research parks in Canada innovation is also the method for creating value. But if everyone is doing it, then there is little differentiation from your competition.

Getting true innovation started in a place like MIP is tricky to design and depends on fortuitous blends of interesting research, discoveries that are commercial exploitable and the overall business and social climate in the region.

Innovation also depends on the type of people who end up working at MIP. If they are motivated, connected, well-trained and interesting then innovative work might result; or it might not. Innovation is a difficult quantity to conjure on demand.

In academic settings and in industry innovation is not always encouraged, but combining academic research with industrial production can be a potent combination, as witnessed by successful research parks near Stanford, MIT, Cambridge, Tokyo, etc.

Lacking a real insider's perspective on what is going on at MIP, it is difficult to assess whether what I saw on the tour was innovative or not [with the exception of [Crazy Daisy](http://www.crazydaisy.org/), a firm that links awareness of mental health issues with floral design--now that's a cool idea].

What MIP lacks

[caption id="attachment_366" align="alignright" width="300" caption="View from the Atrium building to CANMET"][/caption]

At MIP, there was little mention of green development or alternative technologies. Canada currently is very weak in these areas, despite the fact that green technologies will likely provide substantial future employment in all developed countries. It is this exclusion that makes the MIP seem much less interesting and progressive than it could have been.

At the MIP Opening there were few cultural, social or community aspects to the project beyond the display of art on the walls. The art I did see seemed like a token inclusion.

What would have been interesting is to see an art installation, involving technology found at MIP, that occupied the entire building atrium.

Technology and business development appear to be king at the MIP. It appears to be a button-down kind of place. Scruffy artist types, or grad students with wild hair were nowhere to be seen.

MIP is focused on domains such as material science and biomedical engineering. These are inherently less glamorous and engaging to the popular imagination than research areas such as media arts, green design, artificial intelligence, robotics, etc.

However, investment and employment growth do not always require glamour. Many cities earn lots of money working on the dullest things.]]></content:encoded>

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26, 2009. I took a tour with several others and found the experience enjoyable and interesting. MIP is a research park and technology transfer facility whose goal is to take technologies developed at McMaster University and transform them into viable businesses. MIP joins dozens of other university research parks in Canada.]]></excerpt:encoded>

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The Aldi model of retailing

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In North America, choice is important. If you want breakfast cereal, then the consumer is given dozens of choices of cereal -- all supposedly differentiated from one another. In the Aldi world, this pattern is reversed and consumers are given extremely limited choice. In many product categories, there is only one offering. For example, if you want a dark chocolate bar, then there may be only be one dark chocolate bar on offer. The brand of this chocolate may not be familiar to you but usually the quality would be comparable, or superior, to brand-name products.

<h2>Definition of the Aldi Idea</h2>

The Aldi idea is that when shopping for groceries you don't need to have the choice of dozens of similar goods; all you want is one quality product of at a reasonable price. As a result of this restriction of consumer choice Aldi can discount their prices (and reduce their costs) substantially.

The amount of groceries we could buy for 50 euros at Aldi in Rotterdam was substantial. As a result, grocery shopping for many items at Aldi seemed much more affordable than here in Canada. However, at Aldi the quality of fresh produce was much less than what we find at Lococo's (a local Hamilton grocer).

The Aldi approach to retailing:

Shoppers don't need a large choice within each product category; they just need one high-quality alternative at a reasonable price

Excessive choice, when it comes to groceries, does not bring happiness or empowerment, it brings confusion and unhappiness. This aligns with what the sociologist Barry Schwartz calls the Paradox of Choice

Brand-name products are no better than generic alternatives if the quality of the generics is equal or superior

Shopping at a discount grocery store is acceptable to shoppers of various incomes if the quality of the goods is not compromised

Rules of retailing common to North America can be completely reversed and yet still produce incredible profits for multinationals

<h2>Applying the Aldi Model to other areas</h2>

Here, More is Less

Corn-puff cereals

Formulaic pop songs

Sitcoms involving blended families

Cars on the road

People living on earth

<h2>Areas where the Aldi Model works less well</h2>

Here, More is More (or, the more the merrier)

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  <li>Consumers for your books and ideas</li>
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Sesame Street meets VeggieTales

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This year for Hallowe'en Ben decided to be a Pirate Pickle, while Liam dressed as the Sesame Street character Elmo.

Ben may have been inspired from the VeggieTales series, or he may have come up with the idea all by himself.

By dressing as Elmo, Liam was motivated by a desire to 'leave childhood behind.' We remain unclear how dressing up as Elmo will further this goal. Liam apparently doesn't even like the Elmo character. We suspect he is working at an ironic level that is beyond our adult understanding.

The Pirate Pickle had been sprayed with an eco-friendly spray paint applied to bubble-wrap. This paint continues to flake off as we speak, while the Elmo costume was cleverly recycled from a cat costume. To maintain the Pickle's bright green sheen (so it lasts until tomorrow) we may have to re-coat the pickle with eco-unfriendly paint, such as car enamel.

After much late-night handiwork by their mother Cornelia, Ben and Liam showed these costumes to their public this morning at school. When dropping off the boys at school it quickly became apparent that a Pirate Pickle held much more resonance with its Grade Four audience than did Elmo (which was discreetly stored in a plastic bag). Ben was like a rock star the instant he stepped out of the car [we chose to drive them to school because of the difficulties in transporting an over-sized Pirate Pickle by foot]. Ben hoisted his Pirate Pickle costume on a stick, like a medieval Crusader entering the gates of Jerusalem (which may be an appropriate simile given the Christian message behind the VeggieTales franchise).]]></content:encoded>

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Evidence-Based Medicine

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I knew little about EBM before I read the article, however, the concept of evidence-based practice (not necessarily as it applies to medicine) is something I have been thinking about for awhile. The EBM concept can probably be applied to all sorts of things.

EBM is based on the primacy of empirical findings, as opposed to other forms of reasoning. Evidence, as I understand it, forms the foundation of the scientific revolution of the 17th century, following the work of Francis Bacon, René Descartes and others. Evidence is at the root of science. If there is no empirical evidence then there is no science.

What was interesting about the article is that initially EBM was a controversial idea. It sounds like it remains controversial in some circles. This is surprising. Naively, you might think that EBM would be welcomed with open arms everywhere. For those with no background in medical diagnosis, it is difficult to conceive of a credible alternative to EBM.

Why then was EBM controversial? The article quotes Sackett:

<blockquote>"...all the old guys rejected it [EBM] because it challenged them. All the young guys loved it because it gave them a way to challenge their seniors in a more polite way, instead of telling them they were out of date. In addition, people who are wed to certain policies, if they have already decide what the answer is for an individual or a community, the last thing they want to hear or see is evidence."</blockquote>

As Sackett suggests, some factors that may impinge on the rational aspects of scientific practice are patriarchy: older men wanting to maintain their authority regardless of the evidence; careerism: people wanting to promote their careers; and indulgence of egos: placing personal egos above efficacy of treatment or quality of ideas.

Scientists usually try to project an image of rationality--that the scientific method forces them to work strictly from available evidence. This is obviously an idealized portrayal of scientific practice. The work of Popper, Kuhn, and Feyerabend shows how scientific practice can be much messier than the idealized portrayal would suggest. For those familiar with the history of science, it should come as no surprise that people working within scientific domains can sometimes be no more scientific than any other segment of the population.

Scientific evidence often works against our intuition. Evidence can reveal the strangeness and unpredictability of the world. The way the world works is often more complicated than we we usually feel it should be. Truth can often be counter-intuitive. If you rely more on evidence rather than on preconceptions of what ought to be true, then you have to deal with a more complex world.

In addition, there is always the possibility that what you feel you 'know' is built on incorrect ideas or theories. In this case, in order to move forward you may have to takes several step backward and perhaps revise fundamental scientific theories. The history of science is not a linear, progressive cakewalk towards the truth: there may be lots of creative destruction along the way.

Most fields, whether scientific or not, depend on evidence to some degree. Architects bring in evidence that suggests their designs will help rather than harm the communities in which they are situated, politicians use evidence to corroborate that their policies will have good consequences rather than bad ones, business people use evidence that their business plans will

end in profitability rather than bankruptcy.

In any field this evidence can be manipulated, misrepresented or simply disregarded. Quite often there is available evidence to inform a decision but there is little desire to search for this evidence if the evidence may prove inconvenient for preconceived policies. Scientists are not the only ones who can behave unscientifically.]]></content:encoded>

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Fall of the Berlin Wall

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I visited East Berlin several times when I was living in West Berlin. East Berlin was a strange but fascinating place. At that time I never thought the Wall would fall. I thought that this was just how Berlin was always going to be: a divided city with a curious no-man's land snaking right through its centre.

Checkpoint Charlie, which was the main crossing into the East, was a wonderfully arcane place of switch-back paths, barbed wire, clanking doors and stern-faced East German border guards. It was like a movie set for all the bad Cold War movies you had ever seen. Checkpoint Charlie was a bit frightening, but it was also so comically repressive it almost fell into self-parody. You almost expected the Monty Python gang to burst in at any moment to perform the Spanish Inquisition sketch.

Once you got into East Berlin, there was an eerie quiet and sense of paranoia. Few people were out on the streets. The goods in the shops were minimal--except that slightly stale loaves of heavy dark bread seemed to be in abundance. The locals were drably dressed and looked at Westerners with suspicion.

In West Berlin the scene was completely different. It was spread out, almost in a North American style, and had surprisingly large amounts of green space (it still does). It had some comfortable leafy suburbs such as Tegel and Dahlem. The ritzy neighbourhood of Charlottenburg formed its cultural centre. But West Berlin as a city seemed a bit unfocused, in spite of its dominant urban axes such as the Ku'damm and Bismarkstrasse. That was because the true jewels of the city lay east of the Brandenburg Gate in East Berlin. East Berlin held the historical, central core of Berlin and was where most of the grand, old buildings were situated. This is something I had little knowledge of prior to my first visit there.

In the central district of East Berlin called Mitte there were neoclassical treasures such as the Museum Island and Schinkel's Altes Museum. You ran into these monuments after about a ten minute walk from Checkpoint Charlie. For a naive Canadian the existence of so many massive, historical buildings was very surprising and a bit humbling. But beyond the architectural and urban attractions of the east, East Berlin didn't mean that much to me beyond being a Cold War theme park. I never felt that atomic annihilation between East and West was imminent. I never thought that the Communists were a serious threat to Western Europe. I believed that the next zone of world conflict would be far from the pleasant plains of central Europe.

But like most other people, I was astounded when the Wall fell.

Right-wing politicians like Reagan, Thatcher and Bush pretended to play some pivotal role in the whole process of the Fall of the Berlin Wall. But I think they just happened to be in power at the time when Communism was falling all on its own. Communist regimes were notorious for their internal weaknesses such as low productivity, low worker morale, environmental degradation, the high cost of feeding an expensive military/police state, and their isolation from natural markets and investment capital in the West. In my opinion, Communism fell because it was spectacularly unsuited for generating wealth and in creating acceptable standards of living for ordinary people, not because of anything ideologically-driven politicians from the West may have said or done.

In its time though, the Berlin Wall did create much misery. Many who tried to escape over the Wall were shot in the back. The Wall was there to keep East Germans in, not to protect them from outsiders. Life in East Germany was oppressive for

all except those with the greyest of personalities. Even more surprising was the fact that East Germany was the most advanced and prosperous of the Communist countries. If life in East Berlin was bad, just imagine how miserable life in Minsk or Wroclaw must have been.

Almost everyone was overjoyed when the Wall fell in 1989. However, as many commentators have noted, even though the disappearance of the Wall itself was undoubtedly a good thing, the reunification of Germany and the social impact of this reunification has not been all good for all concerned. We could see this foreshadowing during the time we spent in the newly-unified Berlin in 1991: not all was right about reunification, or how it had played out in Berlin.

When the Berlin Wall fell, my wife and I were living in Toronto. About a year later we decided to move to Berlin, which we did in the Spring of 1991. We stayed about six months and then moved back to Canada. We lived in the former East Berlin in an apartment at [Erbeskopfweg 11](#), in the Berlin suburb of Nordend, just north of Pankow. It was a charming place in its own way. Our neighbours there had not seen too many Canadians so we were a bit of a novelty.

The fall of the Wall meant that one political system had been taken over completely by another. It was not two systems getting together and working out what would be acceptable to both sides. It was one side having all the cards with the other side having none. A sense of triumphalism emanated from the West: the Communists had lost and the West had won. This sense infiltrated ordinary people, on both sides.

Triumphalism tends to be a negative emotion. When one country triumphs over the other, the sensibilities of the losing side tend to be given short shrift. The Easterners had suffered since WWII in an unusually repressive police state. Now--even though they could buy as many bananas as they wanted--they had to suffer some more, under their sometimes boorish western neighbour.

We were shocked that the dominant emotion of West Berliners seemed not to be sympathy or compassion for those in the East for having the misfortune of living in a police state for the last 45 years, but rather that of pity or disgust. Time under Communism was seen as wasted time regardless of what people had spent their time doing. How were these poor Ossis going to cope under the so-called rigours of capitalism? Their experience under Communism was considered less than worthless. The failure of the Communist state became the failure of its citizens, regardless of whether they had participated in the repressive regime or not. Victim or oppressor, East Germany had instantly become a country full of losers.

In the West the fall of the Berlin Wall is usually portrayed as the Easterners rejecting Communism and accepting Capitalism wholeheartedly. Yet, at the time Easterners had little knowledge of the West and the West little real knowledge of the East. East and West Germany had grown apart in the intervening years and had developed strikingly distinct civic cultures.

Curiously, after the Wall, both sides took it as an article of faith that the model for both sides would be the Western model. This I believe was a mistake. A much happier outcome for both sides would have worked from the premise that despite the horrors of Communism, it was a bit insulting to assume that your marriage partner-to-be had lived a complete lie for the last half-century of her existence. The idea that the West had 'won' and that the East's traditions were of no value lead to some humiliating and corrosive social policies. A stable and equitable union of different peoples should not have the flavour of a shot-gun wedding.

What then could have made the transitions less painful for the East? For one, there should have been negotiations in which both sides had some say about the direction the future union would take. They didn't seem to take nearly long enough in creating a mutually agreeable 'pre-nup.' What could have been a joyous reunification of a divided country to me seemed more like a semi-hostile takeover of one country by another with little concern about the feelings of the weaker side. For some reason, at the time it seemed like most East Germans were fine with that. I suspect this was because they were so demoralized by their experience under Communism that they naively believed that the West held all the answers.

In the end, perhaps they shouldn't have even joined together into a single state so quickly. If the Czechs and the Slovaks can live reasonably happily in separate countries, why not the East and West Germans? Union and amalgamation sometimes creates as many problems as it solves.

When we lived in Berlin in 1991 a young Ossi shopkeeper in Prenzlauer Berg asked what we thought of the East. We both replied that the Easterners seemed nicer--much more unassuming and gentle, while many West Germans seemed a bit too loud and arrogant for our taste. I think many people would have felt the same way if ideology were taken out of the equation and the rights and aspirations of ordinary citizens were taken into account. Just a little respect for the lives and traditions of the East by the West would have gone a long way in making German reunification more palatable and less painful for ordinary people.]]</content:encoded>

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Charles and Camilla visit Hamilton!

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Hamilton proved not to be a hotbed of republican sentiment last week on November 9, 2009 when Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales and his wife Camilla, the Duchess of Cornwall, visited Dundurn Castle.

Dundurn Castle (completed 1835) was built as the stately home of Sir Allan MacNab, an influential and wealthy settler of Hamilton who just so happens to be the great-great-great grandfather of Camilla. Dundurn Castle is now a well-loved civic museum in west Hamilton. It is one of the most attractive 19th century buildings in Canada and as a museum gives an excellent idea of the upstairs-downstairs life in an early Canadian estate.

Dundurn Castle is located a few blocks from where I live, which made it for me the most convenient royal visit ever. I simply had to stroll over to its grounds and wait for the royal excitement to build. And build it did. Hamiltonians, as it turned out, were very excited to see Charles and Camilla.

We don't get many royal visits here in Hamilton so we didn't know quite what to expect. Would we be dazzled by the celebrity status of the visiting royals [yes!], would the royals make us feel unworthy and unloved and treat us like residents of a simple steel town [no!], would we tire of the artificiality of an heir to a foreign crown visiting a former colony [not at all!]. We lapped it all up. There was nary a voice of dissent; no discouraging words were heard. Overall, it appeared to be a very successful visit.

I think the fact that Dundurn Castle has a direct family connection to Camilla had a positive effect on the mood of the visit. I think it would be impossible to predict this result prior to their visit. Through skill, some shared history and good luck, Charles and Camilla struck gold this time. They encountered something for which all royals must occasionally yearn: an adoring crowd of loyal subjects.

I am by no means a monarchist but I must confess I too enjoyed the royal visit. I enjoyed the fact that it brought publicity and recognition to the charms of Dundurn Castle and Hamilton. Charles and Camilla appeared to be a stable middle-aged couple who are happy in their own skin. They are not glamour-pusses in the manner of Diana but they appeared to be quite skilled at small-talk with the locals, of asking pertinent questions and of understanding to perfection their mind-numbingly ceremonial role.

In anticipation of the royal visit to Canada there were several newspaper articles detailing how Canadians were quite apathetic about the monarchy, didn't think much of Charles, or had no idea that Canada was configured as a constitutional monarchy. But based on my experience during the royal visit, I don't think Charles should worry about his family's future prospects in Canada. Canadians are clearly in no hurry to get rid of their monarchy. There is a greater chance that Canada will vote to become a Vegan Republic or a Bolshevik Protectorate than that it will cease to be a parliamentary democracy with a British monarch as Head of State. The concept of the 'Crown' is deeply embedded in the Canadian system of government and psyche; it would be hard to imagine Canada without it, regardless of what its citizens might think about any one particular heir or monarch.

The whole concept of a 'constitutional monarchy' seems to be a little counter-intuitive. You would think that monarchies would tend to be deeply conservative places, but there are so many exceptions to this rule (e.g. the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, etc.) that it doesn't appear to hold water. Republics are not necessarily more progressive and can sometimes veer in odd directions, as our neighbour to the south demonstrates. There is some

evidence that Canada's position as a stable, sometimes progressive democracy is not only in spite of its monarchist history but also because of it. Or maybe this is just the Kool-Aid talking.

[caption id="attachment_456" align="alignleft" width="300" caption="Prince Charles meeting the crowd at Dundurn Castle"][/caption]

Charles is the scion of a wealthy, multi-national corporation who has spent most of his life waiting to become a king. It appears though that he spends his money in interesting ways. In architectural circles he is notorious for his interventionist and anti-modernist stance, but overall as an heir apparent, he seems harmless enough--perhaps even progressive in some ways. He is a patron of many causes, some of which could directly benefit Canada, such as heritage architecture, urban sustainability, environmentalism, support for disadvantaged youth, organic farming and alternative medicine. Interestingly, the current Conservative government in Ottawa has absolutely no interest in such causes. Clearly, their brand of conservatism is quite different from Charles's.]]></content:encoded>

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Torturing Afghan Detainees R Us

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For all those who had trepidation about the moral implications of Canadian participation in the Afghan war became more nervous with yesterday's headline in newspapers:

"All detainees were tortured, all warnings were ignored"

Wow. This testimony was given by Canadian diplomat and whistle-blower Richard Colvin, to a parliamentary committee in Ottawa. Colvin had served in a diplomatic capacity in Afghanistan for 17 months. This is the first time a government official has made such far-ranging allegations of complicity in torture by the Canadian Forces and the Canadian government.

There has been suspicion for some time that some Afghani detainees may have been tortured after they were transferred from Canadian to Afghan Army custody. Colvin's testimony suggests that the transfer of detainees -- to probable or certain torture -- was a widespread Canadian practice. If true, it would greatly discredit Canada's conduct in Afghanistan and reduce its legitimacy as an occupying force.

The Canadian Forces apparently detain larger numbers of people in their military operations than do their allies. A large proportion of these detainees may be innocent of any crime.

Clearly, complicity in torture is a war crime. Armies of occupation such as Canada's must follow rules as defined in part by the Geneva Conventions. If Canadian Forces were complicit in the torture of detainees, were aware of their involvement and still allowed the torture to occur, they are guilty of war crimes.

The Conservative government has experienced little political cost from previous torture allegations -- or indeed from the entire Afghanistan war -- from either the Canadian public or the opposition parties. The issue, oddly, gets little traction in Canadian politics. Previously, the Conservative government has managed to sweep all allegations of complicity in torture under the rug. It is unclear whether, with these new allegations by Colvin, they will be able to continue to do this.

What these allegations mean for Canada is that they reflect poorly on the political leadership of Canada, on the Canadian Armed Forces and on Canada as a whole. They conflict completely with the commonly-provided narratives about the roles Canadians play in Afghanistan.

Canadian politicians see these allegations as a domestic political issue and have failed to acknowledge their international implications -- such as severe risks to Canada's reputation.

This head-long rush to possible pariah status is an odd, self-defeating behavior on Canada's part. It has similarities to the Canadian government's recent policy on greenhouse gas emissions, which many view as obstructionist, disingenuous and fundamentally lacking in leadership.

One of the main reasons that the Canadian government has given about why Canada invaded Afghanistan in the first place was to raise the human rights conditions for its residents. At first this did not appear to be difficult to achieve given that the previous Taliban regime had an abysmal human rights record and was itself a pariah regime within the international

community.

It now appears that the Karzai government in Afghanistan is breathtakingly-corrupt and has little interest in improving the human rights conditions of Afghans.

The NATO occupying forces in combination with the Karzai government may have achieved what would seem to be impossible -- to create a regime worse for the average Afghan than was the previous Taliban regime.]]></content:encoded>
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Pittsburgh and its Golden Triangle

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Our family spent the US Thanksgiving weekend in Pittsburgh. We booked a hotel on priceline.com (highly recommended) and managed to get a very reasonable deal. Luckily, the hotel--the Renaissance Pittsburgh--turned out to be stunning as well as affordable. It was by far the best hotel we have every stayed in--or ever expect to stay in. The boys were ecstatic when they saw the sumptuousness of the lobby and the fluffiness of the pillows on our king-size bed. This hotel had been recently restored and had an impressive glass dome in its lobby and marble balconies worthy of the palace of Versailles. We couldn't afford to eat any food in its restaurants or, as it turned out, to use its telephones even for local calls but overall the value was impressive. We suspect that something must be deeply wrong with the new world order when people like us can stay so comfortably in such a fine American hotel for so little money.

Our hotel was in an ideal, downtown location along the Allegheny River waterfront called the 'Golden Triangle.' It was the first time we had ever stayed in downtown Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh has an unusual urban configuration in that its central business district--the Golden Triangle--is relatively isolated from the rest of the city. The Triangle is where the two rivers meet to form the mighty Ohio. As we told the boys, this is where in the old days people drifted lazily down the river--Huck Finn style--all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. Even though Pittsburgh is a northern city, this access to the Mississippi River basin does add some romance to the city's narrative. At one time, Pittsburgh was the 'Gateway to the Continent.' It held a similar role to that of Buffalo--as a trans-shipment hub for a nation bent on Manifest Destiny.

What is striking about Pittsburgh, which you tend to forget when you've been away from it, is its stunning topography. Pittsburgh is extremely hilly outside of its downtown core. You soon get into the rhythm of driving through valleys, around hills, along ridges and on top of cliffs. Houses in some neighbourhoods are perched precariously on hillsides, which gives them aspects similar to the Amalfi Coast in Italy or those Greek monasteries built on cliffs. At first this topography is disorienting, then you get used to it. When I look at online maps of Pittsburgh I forget how the neighbourhoods I knew are interrelated, but when I am driving around in them, I can remember where routes lead based on muscle memory.

Pittsburgh has the policy of fixing up its downtown core to make it the most attractive part of the city. This policy seems to have worked out well. Fortunately, there were many splendid, historic buildings in the core to fix up. Pittsburgh has re-branded part of its downtown as the 'Cultural District.' There, they have renovated several old movie and vaudeville houses to become venues for live theater and music. The Cultural District holds Pittsburgh's major cultural attractions such as Heinz Hall--home of the Pittsburgh Symphony, the Benedum Center, Byham Theater and the O'Reilly Theater. These venues happened to be a block from our hotel.

[caption id="attachment_493" align="alignright" width="480" caption="Heinz Hall Staircase"][/caption]

In downtown Pittsburgh there are many instances of interesting civic sculpture and the quality of new and renovated architecture is generally very high. In addition to restored buildings, there are also other civic improvements such as sculpture parks, river walkways, and new state-of-the-art sports stadiums along the Allegheny river. Overall, Pittsburgh has done a very good job of fixing up their downtown and I would say that the quality of design and execution is superior to

most things you see in Toronto or Hamilton. Pittsburgh can be a very classy place, which is something that many outsiders might not realize.

In Pittsburgh's Golden Triangle, the remnants from previous eras when Pittsburgh was incredibly prosperous, are everywhere to be seen. Some buildings have splendid cast bronze sculpture, or intricately carved stonework in the Gothic style. Others are clad in cream-coloured terracotta--an extraordinarily elegant and long-lasting building material. These buildings were obviously built to communicate a level of cultural sophistication on the part of their builders. They are as impressive as buildings you might find in New York, Boston or Vienna.

They were built by names such as Carnegie, Frick, Mellon, and Heinz. These are the people who in old cartoons dress in top hats, wear cashmere overcoats and smoke fat cigars. They made incredible amounts of money when Pittsburgh was the centre of steel production for a rapidly-expanding continent. At the time they may have been 'new money' but now they seem as old as the Medici. They built some splendid buildings for their city and therefore gave back to the city in a physically-enduring way. This is somewhat of a different practice than what is done by today's obscenely wealthy, for which these forms of architectural philanthropy are less common. As an architect I enjoy visiting such buildings despite misgivings about the economics and labour relations of Gilded Age capitalism.

If you live in Pittsburgh and don't work downtown then you probably will not spend much time downtown, even if you have interest in the urban attractions that the downtown has to offer. The suburbs of Pittsburgh spread for miles and this is where most people live. In general, these suburbs are similar to those in any other American city and have little in common with the hard-core urbanity of the Golden Triangle. The people who tend to frequent the downtown seem to be well-off people who work in corporate offices and drive Audi's, poorer black people who also work downtown and who take the bus, and those who attend cultural and sporting events such as football games, plays, and concerts. This gives the tourist a slightly skewed demographic impression of the city.

Pittsburgh's downtown is busy during the work week but it tends to empty of people when the work week ends. Very few people appear to live in the Golden Triangle itself. It lacks the high density pedestrian traffic or residential amenities you might find in Toronto or New York. There is some evidence of higher-end residential development for those who work in corporate towers and wish to live adjacent to their work, but this is a tiny portion of the population. The Golden Triangle seems to lack some basic services for residents. For instance, it does not appear to have many (or any) grocery stores.

[caption id="attachment_495" align="alignright" width="480" caption="6th Street, Pittsburgh"][/caption]

Despite the overall attractiveness of the Golden Triangle, it is unclear whether it will ever become a compelling place to live. One reason is that Pittsburgh has many residential neighbourhoods that are attractive, inexpensive and full of residential-type services such as shops, schools and synagogues. Pittsburgh prides itself on the warmth and sociability of its neighbourhoods. The Golden Triangle may be stunning from an architectural perspective but seems to lack this home-town warmth and practicality. Since the border between adjacent neighbourhoods and the downtown is so distinct in Pittsburgh, to live downtown people have to be hard-core urban homesteaders to make that jump>. In fact, we know no one who lives or has ever lived in the Golden Triangle. This is why staying there briefly, in a fancy hotel, was such a novelty for us. It is an experience that many Pittsburghers have also never had.

Pittsburgh is now a largely post-industrial city with little evidence of heavy industry in its city core. It is unclear what the city makes its money doing these days beyond the usual sources such as universities, hospitals and financial services and whether Pittsburgh is still running on old money or whether new fortunes are being made.

Despite the fact that its downtown is very attractive and they have managed to convert the Smoky City's downtown into a show place that rivals midtown Manhattan, Pittsburgh is not always an optimistic city. It has the typical rust-bucket maladies of declining population, pockets of extreme poverty, racial segregation and flat employment growth. I sense that the attractiveness of the Golden Triangle may not be indicative of the health of the rest of the city.

Travelling to the USA from Canada is interesting because it is so different from what we are used to. This feeling of difference occurs the minute we cross the USA-Canada border. On one side of this border is one set of rules and expectations and on the other is another. America gives the impression of promises of great wealth and comfort for those

who succeed, but also great pain and degradation for those who fail. The wealthier seem wealthier but the poor seem poorer than in Canada. Not being too clear about which of these two categories we fit into, makes us hesitate to move back to Pittsburgh.

One does get the impression that in parts of the USA during this current recession some of the working population is in absolute crisis--more so than in Canada. The USA has never been known for having much of a safety net and this recession seems to be more severe than previous ones. There is greater fear this time that not only is the American economy in rough shape, but also that the position and status that the USA has enjoyed up until now is in some jeopardy.

Pittsburgh derives part of its power simply from being situated in the USA. Pittsburgh has direct access to American markets and to American economies of scale. The USA does have a population and an economy that dwarfs that of Canada. As we often thought when we lived in Pittsburgh, the USA may not be better than Canada but it sure seems bigger.]]></content:encoded>

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Donald W. Cumming born 1925

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Afghanistan: escalate at your own risk

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Quagmires are usually created by modes of thinking that ignore basic aspects of geo-political or common-sense reality. This appears to be the case with the Western-led war in Afghanistan.

Why do I think it is a bad idea to escalate this war?

 War is violent and dehumanizing by its nature and escalating a war tends to increase suffering, destruction and injustice

 War waged on the premise that it helps those it is directed against is nonsensical

 The war lacks public support in all countries in which it is being promoted

 The war is unlikely to be won by Western forces

 Governments friendly to occupying forces (such as Karza'i's tend to lack basic legitimacy within their own populations

 The war is unaffordable for the USA -- a country that is quickly running out of cash and credit

 It is unrealistic that a Western-friendly government - with any chance of longevity - will be formed in Afghanistan

 The war could easily escalate into a wider regional conflict involving the much more populous country of Pakistan

 The war lacks legitimacy -- it is not a just war and never has been one

We have had seven years of punditry concerning the situation in Afghanistan. This commentary encouraged Western troops to invade an obscure, mountainous and poverty-stricken country in central Asia. Let's review how we got there.

After 9/11, most people were shocked that such an attack could happen to the most powerful country in the world.

It became clear that given the state of American politics at the time that in response some act of butt-kicking would likely be performed by the US military. There was some concern about preventing future attacks, but simple vengeance was an important motivator right from the start. If you provoke the boss, expect some payback. The myth of redemptive violence, which so animates American popular and military culture, was in full swing.

The rhetoric at the time was that the USA had the right to 'act out' in some way that would involve its matchless armed forces. This was done without excessive concern about the legality or social propriety of its actions. This type of behaviour coincides with one definition of 'acting out':

<p style="padding-left: 30px;">acting out: a (usually irritating) impulsive and uncontrollable outburst by a problem child or a neurotic adult [thefreedictionary.com].</p>

The USA has a powerful military, but often fails to consider how its military actions are viewed within the society of nations. This tends to encourage it to pursue armed conflicts that appear contrary to its own best interests -- even commercial or diplomatic interests. This is one aspect of US exceptionalism that many in the rest of world find disturbing: its military power appears unconnected to any sensible rationale other than the projection of its own power.

Being currently the sole super-power, the USA is frequently given a free pass to do whatever it pleases when its military is concerned. Despite being enormously expensive, the US military is seen as a guarantor of American freedoms and prosperity. However, it increasingly appears to be source of weakness for the USA in that its use tends to obscure new geo-political realities not wholly based on military power, such as the rise of China and other BRIC nations. Not

all problems are ones that can be solved with military force.

As well, the US military is fiendishly expensive.

One law even more iron-clad than the efficacy of military force in inflicting pain is that if you run out of money and credit, your position in the world can diminish quickly and substantially. You do not need to spend much time reading Victorian novels to understand the indignities that lack of cash can bring.

The USA, despite being a productive and creative society, does not have unlimited cash and credit. Eventually, debts come home to roost. The US military certainly attempts to serve the interests of Western capitalism but this assumes there is sufficient cash earned elsewhere to maintain this military. If the USA spends too much money in 'saving' failed states, it may just become one itself.

As it turns out the invasion of Iraq was based completely on lies, while the invasion of Afghanistan continues to be represented as a 'just war.' This is what gives Obama some cover when he decides to escalate the Afghan war. All wars though, even the most egregious, are portrayed as just wars. It is only much later that historians untangle the lies that may have lead to that impression.

If someone attacks you, you sometimes have the right to attack back if your attack prevents some greater evil from taking place. But the inconvenient truth about the Afghan war is that the Taliban didn't attack the USA. Al-Qaeda did.

The Taliban -- a particularly odious and fundamentalist regime, which most of the world considers a loathsome carbuncle on the face of the world politic -- had the temerity to lend support and provide sanctuary to Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The Taliban's guilt was one of association rather than commission.

Clearly, Al-Qaeda and Taliban are separate entities. Al-Qaeda is a trans-national Islamic militant organization committed to the use of terrorism to forward its political goals, while the Taliban is a fundamentalist movement with a power base almost entirely within the Pashtun tribal areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Taliban appears to lack trans-national ambitions of exporting terrorism or of influencing politics outside its core region. Al-Qaeda on the other hand is expert in doing just that.

Al-Qaeda continues to be a threat to the West, while the Taliban continues to be a threat to Western interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan as long as the West occupies Afghanistan. Clearly, you don't want to mess with the Taliban, but then you probably don't have to unless you make the mistake of invading their homeland based on justifications not quite found in international law.

Al-Qaeda conspirators spent time conspiring in various places including San Diego, Hamburg, and at flight schools in Florida. Fifteen of the 9/11 hijackers were from Saudi Arabia. Why didn't the USA attack those places instead? Because it would have been seen as ridiculous to do so. It is usually not seen as practical or moral to attack a whole country if a tiny minority within that country has behaved badly.

Gangs, cults and militant forces exist in most countries of the world, which if given the right opportunities could inflict serious damage to polite society. This is not just in failed states such as Somalia or the Congo, but also in places such as Idaho and southern Ontario. I bet if you travelled 100 kilometers down the road from Hamilton a group of radical bikers with a penchant for meth, murder and mayhem could be found. Fortunately, Canada is in no danger of being invaded by foreign forces to alleviate this security threat.

Why then were the Taliban conflated so seamlessly with Al-Qaeda in the popular Western imagination? One reason may have been is that they represent the perfect 'Other.' The Western public knew little about their cultural or social belief systems and tended to believe the worst. The prevailing rhetoric in the West was that the Taliban's beliefs are inimical to all Western notions of decency or civilization. This may or may not be true, but it does not constitute adequate grounds for invasion.

A basic lack of legitimacy is what makes the Afghan war so difficult to pursue and what makes it such a hard sell to American allies: it just doesn't make much sense. A fight against Al-Qaeda has morphed into a fight against

an anti-modern but essentially nationalistic enemy in the Taliban. This is why parallels to the Vietnam war seem more and more appropriate. The Taliban has replaced the Vietcong. Apparently, not everyone within the American establishment learned the same lessons about the quagmire that was Vietnam.

In Afghanistan the smart money is staying clear of that war as best they can. If you hope to ingratiate yourself with the USA, which includes such countries as Canada, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia then you might find some motivation for enthusiastically supporting this war. All others seem to have much less commitment to the idea that the West will eventually succeed there. They don't call Afghanistan the'Graveyard of Empires' for nothing.]]></content:encoded>

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Pressure cookers and their role in greenhouse gas reduction

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People might think that trading in their gas-guzzler for a Prius would be a good way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. However, there is a simpler and less expensive way of achieving similar reductions: eating less meat and using a pressure cooker to cook legumes.

Everyone knows that driving cars is bad for the environment, as is making oil out of tar sands and generating electricity using coal. Eating beef and other livestock is bad for greenhouse gas emissions because domesticated livestock eat a lot, belch a lot and create huge clouds of methane from their manure. They also degrade the land on which they graze and pollute water systems. Rearing cattle produces more greenhouse gases than driving cars, a UN report warns. Clearly, livestock are furry versions of the obnoxious SUV. It is time that people replace their meat with something more ecologically and nutritionally responsible.

One alternative to eating large quantities of meat is to eat legumes, a food category that includes beans, peas and lentils. It is what most of the world eats and what we in the West ate before we got on the bandwagon of eating unsustainable quantities of meat protein. Legumes are classic ingredients in any Diet for a Small Planet. Legumes can be bought in any middle-eastern food store for next to nothing and they are so colourful and beautiful you will want to keep them around just for decoration.

The problem with legumes is that they take a long time to cook -- they usually require overnight soaking and then must be boiled on the stove, sometimes forever. This is inconvenient for many cooks, plus they can smell up your house. Solution: use a pressure cooker to cook them.

Modern pressure cookers are completely safe, relatively inexpensive and take only a short time to learn how to use. The advantages of a pressure cooker are many:

- They reduce cooking time
- They reduce energy used during cooking
- They increase the convenience of cooking dried, hard-to-cook foods such as legumes
- They ease dramatically the preparation of stocks and broths -- essential ingredients in any good kitchen

I had to look all around the region to find where to buy them. I discovered that Macy's in Buffalo -- of all places -- was the best and cheapest place for me to buy one. It may sound ridiculous but it was actually worthwhile for me to travel an hour each way and cross an international border to buy a pressure cooker set from Macy's. Since then, I have discovered a basic eco-truth of which Al Gore or David Suzuki would be proud: every cook (even those with no interest in vegetarianism or legume-eating) should have a modern pressure cooker.

At first people ridiculed my theory of pressure cooking, sensing that it was yet another attempt to solve through gadgetry the burdens of helping to cook food for our family. That is until they witnessed the unholy speed in which I could convert an

unimpressive pot of dried ingredients into a tasty pot of steaming stew or stock.

Note that pressure cookers are not slow-cookers. Pressure cookers use less energy while slow-cookers use more.

For those with the fear the their pressure cooker will blow up in their face you can be assured that modern pressure cookers appear to be foolproof (unless you are intent on creating an explosion). They have clever interlock mechanisms that prevent opening the pot when it is under pressure. The brand I bought was a [Fagor, which is a Spanish company that I can highly recommend. They don't make the most expensive cookers but also not the cheapest.](http://www.fagoramerica.com/ "Fagor")

I would recommend stainless steel cookers over aluminium. Buying a new, modern one is preferable to resurrecting an older one.

Pressure cookers are not something you will use every meal, but I find I use it several times a week. I have been startled just how useful and basic a kitchen utensil it is.]]></content:encoded>

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The Militarization of Play

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Most boys love weapons. Cross-bows, battle axes, harpoons, guns: they can't get enough of them. The latest implements of war to be installed in our house are a full complement of Nerf guns. These are built like colourful assault weapons, with laser scopes, auto-loading mechanisms and support tripods. They shoot day-glo coloured Nerf bullets -- not just one a time but in a steady stream of foam-rubber mayhem.

The boys love them and find them vastly entertaining. They delight in staging long-lasting wars with both their male and female friends. Adults tend to avoid such battles in case they show something truly alarming or distasteful about the development of their children.

We didn't buy these Nerf guns for them (they were Christmas gifts from relatives) but we don't lose much sleep over the implications of them being in our house. Nor are we too concerned about the possibility they will inflict severe psychic damage on our boys. Boys will be boys. We predict these boys are as likely to be attracted to a career in video production or on the stage of musical theatre as on the battlefield.

As when training dogs, the technique that seems to work best in the boys' education is to praise the behaviour we wish to encourage and ignore that which we hope to discourage. Therefore, we tend to ignore this latest Nerf gun invasion. If we don't talk too much about it, it might just go away -- like every other toy that has crossed their path.

What is amusing is to consider where this development in toy design -- giving boys exactly what they really want in their most-Rambo-esque fantasies -- might lead. Combining the infinite resources of the military-industrial complex with the innovative minds in toy design is ripe with possibility.

We predict: Pretend IEDs by Fisher Price -- 'trip the plate and you'll have an explosion of fun!' Guided attack drones by Lego Mindstorms -- 'your little sister will never even hear it coming!' or Fun-time Phosphorus Bombs by Play-Doh -- 'you'll bust a gut when you see the agony on your playmates' faces!']]></content:encoded>

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The subtle rewards of violin practice

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Two events over the holidays had significant positive effects on our twin boys. One was a holiday concert performance in which the boys played in the beginner violin section. The other was an impromptu violin recital the boys gave to our extended family on Christmas Eve.

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Both events were great successes and earned them an enormous number of brownie points--especially with my mother-in-law. The boys could appreciate their new, slightly-elevated status after these performances and liked what they saw. Since then, it has become much easier to get them to practice violin.

They both started beginner violin in the Fall when they joined the admirable West Hamilton Strings programme. This is a mass experiment in teaching hundreds of ordinary school kids in the public school system to play stringed instruments. Hats off to their talented and committed teacher Jennifer Spleit.

With these music lessons they had no idea what they had agreed to do before it too late. They didn't know that the turnstiles into violin lessons work only in one direction (for the first year at least). Their situation reminded me of ads for the Roach Motel: 'Kids can check in, but they can't check out!'

The first few orchestra practices were absolute misery for all concerned. Their revulsion at the demands of violin was total. Their conception that this little wooden instrument would take years and years of dedicated practice before they could begin to master it was completely lacking. For them, it was all too absurd to even consider.

They used the most forceful language to express their displeasure, including:

<blockquote>'We signed up for violin only because we thought it would please you and we thought you would get mad if we didn't.'</blockquote>

<blockquote>'We hate the violin, we hate practising it, and there is no way we will ever do this again unless you force us to.'</blockquote>

Fortunately, now the situation is much easier to take. I have managed to retire the usual suspects--those authoritarian reasons that parents trot out when they want to get their kids to do something their kids see no reason to do whatsoever, including:

<blockquote>'We paid the money for these lessons and we don't have money to waste on lessons you don't attend.'</blockquote>

<blockquote>'Once you make a commitment for something like music lessons, you have to at least complete the first year or else we may not sign you up for anything ever again.'

'We really don't like quitters around here.'

Or, their favourite--the full-frontal Drill Sergeant

'You will practice your violin and you will do it NOW!'

This authoritarian approach works remarkably poorly with our boys. Being twins growing up in a permissive family, they often gang up on their parents and freely express their derision of our parental authority. They are completely willing to live in a world where adult demands are a hazy concept that really need not concern them:

'We don't need you because we have each other!'

We frequently attempt to shift the balance of power over in our direction but this can be painfully ineffectual when done in the typical control-and-command manner.

The most effective approach is to plant the virus in their heads that their interests actually coincide with their parents' interests. This type of magical thinking goes something like this:

'If you practice the violin then everyone wins!' [which in the great scheme of things is actually true]

'How many kids can read music at your age? You guys are so lucky!'

'I heard some violins at a concert last night and I was amazed how well the musicians played! You guys would have really enjoyed it.'

You really can't force a child to have a genuine interest in a musical instrument. You have to lead them to that goal indirectly.

In the long run you have to think up reasons why they might like to pursue this activity on their own volition. For example: because it is fun; because you can perform to admiring crowds; because it sounds really cool to hear dozen of other kids play violin at the same time; because some really cool people play violin [e.g. Ashley MacIsaac, Stephane Grappelli, and Itzhak Perlman]; because the violin is the sweetest-sounding little instrument in the world and it's been around relatively unchanged for hundred of years.

Now, especially after their performance successes, it is mostly smooth sailing for all of us. The boys practice right after school without complaint. There are no more metaphysical discussions about the legitimacy of authority in parent-child relationships, or the meaning of discipline in a decentralized, post-modern world. Leading graduate seminars with ten year olds is not all it's cracked up to be.

Now it is more about playing notes with the correct pitch, playing the score as it's written, and trying to create the sweetest tone with the bow.]]>

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Dogs on Roof, Hamilton

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This is one of my favourite photos of Hamilton. I forget exactly where it was taken but I believe it was near Wentworth and Burlington Streets. It was taken on 19 July 2008.

It shows two dogs who are getting some fresh air and exercise on the roof of a front porch to a modest town-house, in a poor neighbourhood of Hamilton.

They apparently got onto the roof through a small sliding window directly above the porch roof.

This photo raises some interesting questions:

Did the dogs go out the window on their own or were they encouraged to so by someone?

One possible scenario: the dogs were sent out there because they needed 'to get out' and the window was the most convenient exit. Is this what happened?

Are the dogs in any danger of falling?

Do the dogs enjoy being on the roof?

Do the dogs urinate and defecate on the roof?

What do the dogs think of someone taking their picture?

Is having dogs on the roof a common occurrence or did I just happen by the only time it occurred?

Are there people in the room behind and what are they doing?

Is this a display of some kind of civic or personal dysfunction or is there something else going on?]]></content:encoded>

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Urban destruction in the heart of Brantford, Ontario

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[caption id="attachment_797" align="alignnone" width="320" caption="Buildings from many periods in the Colborne St Demolition Zone, Brantford, ON"][/caption]

Two days ago, on a whim, I took my first visit to downtown Brantford, Ontario. I wanted to walk around, take some photographs and get a feel for the place. South-western Ontario tends to reward such impromptu exploration.

I drove to the densest part of old downtown Brantford, the place where the buildings are closest together and the streets the narrowest. This I usually find to be the most interesting and historic part of any town. There in Brantford, I found to my horror that a large chunk of the historic core was under threat of imminent demolition! Workers were preparing to dismantle one of the most interesting and historic street scapes in town. The hammer-swinging may have already begun.

After doing a few Google searches once I got home, the full reality of the situation dawned on me: I happened to stumble upon what might be one the most flagrant instances of urban vandalism in the province. I confidently categorize it as vandalism because it doesn't appear, from what I have read, to make any sense whatsoever. They are taking down something of great value and replacing it with nothing at all.

This is not the demolition of a single building that has fallen into disrepair, or an urban redevelopment proposal that lacks architectural style. No, this is far worse. This is the wanton destruction of an entire downtown street scape, parts of which date from Victorian times. The site appears to be dripping in urban and historical significance. It literally anchors one corner of the historical district of Brantford. Its buildings, street scape and composition speak deeply of a social history that stretches back to the founding of the city of Brantford.

It is a puzzling situation to see something of such great apparent value about to be eliminated.

<h2>What is there</h2>

The block to be demolished is located in the central historical core of Brantford, along the south side of Colborne St. It is a long block that includes, apparently, 41 separate buildings, some of which date from the mid to late 19th century. Colborne St lies on top of a small bluff rising above the meandering Grand River.

Buildings on the south side of Colborne St are built with sub-structures that go down several stories. Elaborate steel and masonry structures prevent the buildings from tumbling down the bluff. These buildings are a bit run-down at this point but are definitely picturesque. The age of the buildings vary and the overall design of the block was incremental and unplanned. This is what gives it its charm.

[caption id="attachment_799" align="alignnone" width="320" caption="Building on stilts, to be demolished, Colborne St, Brantford, ON"][/caption]

It reminds me of several hill or ridge towns I have seen in Europe or North America where a neat row of attached buildings presents a unified elevation up above on the street, but tumbles down a slope on the other side. This usually creates interesting town scapes that old-style landscape painters might find attractive.

[caption id="attachment_798" align="alignnone" width="320" caption="Old Victorian industrial buildings, to be demolished, Water St, Brantford, ON"][/caption]

Below Colborne St are streets called Water and Wharfe. Streets with such names tend to be at the central historical core of cities -- typically located along original shorelines. This suggests that not so long ago, along these streets in Brantford, there were warehouses and small port operations connected to the nearby Grand River.

Brantford itself is a small city, currently not especially prosperous, known for its associations with Alexander Graham Bell's invention of the telephone and as the hometown of hockey's 'The Great One' - Wayne Gretzky. It is also close to major settlements of First Nations peoples at the nearby Six Nations reserve and has an attractive location on the bio-diverse Grand River.

Brantford has a small downtown. There are some beautiful buildings in the downtown core. From an architectural and urban design perspective there is much of interest in Brantford, including, fine churches, law courts, civic buildings and a modernist City Hall. Brantford has a central square in the form of an Union Jack around which some of its most prominent buildings are grouped. Outside of Brantford's historic core is a variety of low density suburban housing and big-box retailing typical for this part of Ontario.

Brantford, despite recent pain due to de-industrialization in the manufacturing sector, is clearly a city with some agreeable cultural, historical and natural assets. These could be spun into something quite attractive. Clearly, demolishing a prominent street scape in the heart of downtown works against such a goal.

<h2>My take on this situation</h2>

I think demolition of this street scape is a terrible idea. It should have been preserved for the following reasons:

<h3>As a mixed-use place to live and work</h3>

One of the best ways of creating vitality in downtown cores is to create mixed-use developments that enable people of various incomes to work and live in close proximity. The block being destroyed is an historic and extremely charming example of this type of development. On Colborne St it enabled people to live over pet shops, diners and clothing stores. This is exactly why people sometimes travel to the 'Old World' -- to see charming scenes of ordinary people living over places like pet shops! Clearly, Brantford is working according to a different model of perceived value.

[caption id="attachment_800" align="alignnone" width="320" caption="Art Deco commerical building, to be demolished, Brantford, ON"][/caption]

The condemned block once housed people, was a place to work and was likely an interesting place to shop. All these people associated with the area will now have to live, work and shop elsewhere. The city of Brantford is in effect telling these people to get lost. This 'communication strategy' seems harsh, anti-democratic and completely counter-productive to the economic and cultural development of a distressed community. It makes no sense.

<h3>Overall attractiveness and urban integrity</h3>

The block provides Brantford with urban integrity and texture. The block blends in perfectly with surrounding buildings and anchors the downtown both visually and architecturally on the edge of a bluff. The individual buildings are attractive. The street scape in which they are housed is also attractive. The buildings are currently run-down but this only indicates a lack of investment in their upkeep rather than any inherent lack of value in the buildings themselves.

This condemned block -- due both to the quality of its individual buildings as well that of its overall assembly -- is probably near the top in terms of overall civic quality and interest for threatened urban street scapes in Ontario. Brantford definitely cannot afford to lose an architectural and historical assembly of such quality.

<h3>As a conduit for history</h3>

[caption id="attachment_801" align="alignnone" width="320" caption="Mixed-use Victorian housing and commercial block, to be demolished, Brantford, ON"][/caption]

It takes a certain insensitivity to tear down buildings that have withstood the trials and tribulations of the last century and a half. Each age produces its own sets of buildings. These buildings will not come back. Once they are gone they are gone.

This is not to say that all old buildings should be saved. But it does mean that ones of noteworthy quality at the centre of the historical core of cities should be given special consideration and protection.

This is also not to say that cities can't build modern buildings. Preservation of historic buildings does not put modern architects out of work. The combination of the qualities of old buildings with modern design is often a winning combination.

However, demolishing old buildings in some absurd, nihilistic notion of 'modernity' makes no sense.

<h2>What were they thinking? Some theories</h2>

The question is for me was not whether it is a good idea to get rid of this street scape -- it is one of those situations where the inappropriateness of the demolition is not in question even for a nanosecond. I can conceive of no world in which the demolition of these buildings would make any sense.

The question then becomes 'What were they thinking?'

The decision to demolish the south side of Colborne St was not made in a vacuum. It was made by upstanding citizens of Brantford, likely with support from parts of their community. Here are some theories of what might have factored in their decision-making process:

<h3>Elimination of decay and devaluation of the old</h3>

Old, historic buildings -- especially ones that that are attached to one another in an urban block that falls down a little bluff, are expensive and troublesome to maintain. As well, some people simply don't seem to like old buildings. They associate them with bad conditions, bad lifestyles, bad choices and all around moral decrepitude.

Clearly, in Brantford, old attached buildings as on Colborne St are associated with the underclass -- those who are seen not to have the sense or the resources to live in a more mainstream suburban setting.

<h3>Elimination of venues for marginalized businesses and residents</h3>

When you demolish an old, sketchy part of town, you usually displace marginalized businesses (e.g. tattoo parlours, head shops, crack dens) and marginalized residents (e.g. prostitutes, drug addicts and those on welfare). Getting rid of a venue for such things lets people imagine that they don't exist.

Whenever an urban block is threatened with demolition there is also a natural process of marginalization. Who wants to put money into a part of the city that people in power want to eliminate? The threat of elimination is the opposite of a vote of confidence. City Hall thinks so little of residents' homes and lives that they are willing to go to the expense of sweeping them away for a simple, but seriously deranged idea -- an idea based on the concept of 'eliminationism.' This eliminationism applies equally to the architectural and social context of Colborne St. Eliminate 'bad' buildings and the 'bad' people will also

magically disappear. It is a fearsomely destructive idea.

Collapse of multiple owners into simpler entities

When you have a street scape with 41 individual buildings, you may have 41 separate owners. If all the properties are bought or expropriated then 41 owners can magically collapse into one easier-to-administer entity.

Making it single ownership makes it more similar to the suburban areas ofBrantford where the lots are large and the ownership patterns uncomplicated.

The Colborne St block is the opposite of the suburbs: it consists of a messy warren of interlocking spaces and relationships. Getting rid of this simplifies things for some people but at the cost of overall vitality for the city.

Getting rid of this block of old buildings is like clear-cutting an old-growth forest. In both cases you replace diversity with a less stable and less valuable mono-culture. This destruction makes no sense and goes against all we now know about how to develop and revitalize cities.

Provision for higher-returning developments

Sometimes old buildings are demolished to be replaced by higher net-revenue developments. This explains why parts of Toronto have high-rises vs. lower-density row buildings, which were once common throughout its core. But the goal in Brantford does not appear to be a search forhigher-returning, higher-density development.

Theredoesn't appear to be any preferred future use for the site, except as the site of a bizarre culture war.

Previously,the site had assured income. No firm plans have been presented to replace this income.

Something was traded for nothing.

Conclusion

Usually when I travel around small town Ontario I am impressed by the quality of architecture and the overall charm of settlement. This was even the case in Brantford for me before I saw the ominous blue demolition fences surrounding an area of prime architectural significance.

The decision by the City of Brantford to demolish a good chunk of their historical core is indeed unusual.

The buildings to be demolished are quite interesting and their site appears to be absolutely central to the history of the city.Like many such crimes against heritage and common sense it was not committed by outside forces intent on the destruction of

Brantford, but appears to be a curiously home-grown affair.

This decision to demolish buildings along Colborne St takes a marginalized city and further marginalizes it. It is such a complete reversal of things I value that I remain stunned and saddened.

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go back every year to visit family. Some of the older downtown buildings have been replaced and a big part of that decision
was because of the university satellite campus that took up residence downtown. a lot of the old buildings are still there and
still doing the same things they always have been. There are some sad stories about cool places downtown that aren't there
anymore, Ludwigs (men's clothing store that lived downtown for more than 40 years moved to the north end) Heinbucks
(basically a junk shop, four floors of just...stuff, extreme fire trap but very interesting never the less) there is still a tattoo
parlor downtown, I got my first tat there. it's called Kreative Khaos and has been an unstanding Brantford landmark for as
long as I can remember. Brantford's steady urban decline began long before now though, it actually started when Massey
Ferguson closed it's door effectively making hundreds of people unemployed. The changed to downtown are vital even
though it does mean losing really cool buildings...and I am speaking as someone who did live downtown in a turn of the
century house split into apartments. I also have many friends who lived in apartments over condemned stores.
Anyway, that's all I wanted to say about something that's close to my heart. Brantford is a neat town and unfortunately it's
history and beauty are only going to continue being destroyed in the name of progress. As a fellow UE it makes me sad so
see buildings that I explored back in highschool when I was first getting into this cease to be.]]></wp:comment_content>
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In Brantford, there appears to be this bizarre notion that no decent person could possibly consider living downtown. This

social devaluation appears to make architectural elimination of the downtown much easier. If people feel that all the good people 'like us' live out in the burbs, why not get rid of downtown?]]></wp:comment_content>

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It is easy to criticize when you do not live here.

I too am sad to see these buildings going as there was much potential for revitalization over the years which was squandered and mismanaged by city leaders. But instead of pining away and living with such a stained street, at least the city leaders have finally decided to get off the pot.]]></wp:comment_content>

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when they are just rapidly decaying and rat infested? I understand the historical significance, but if we wanted to preserve the buildings that badly, why were they not 'kept up' (for lack of a better term) throughout the years. It is unfortunate that we are losing SOME historical presence throughout the downtown, however, nothing lasts forever and it's time for a change. Additionally, not all historical builds are lost. Both Wilfrid Laurier University and Mohawk College have embraced the historical buildings by fixing them and using them for lectures, community use and the like. So, to say that we are completely destroying the downtown's historical 'feel' is unrealistic.

Additionally, Brantford has the opportunity to become prosperous, just as it once was. Since the arrival of the University and College downtown, the population is growing thus allowing current businesses to prosper and new businesses to emerge.

Given the changes throughout downtown, I believe that over the next decade Downtown Brantford will become a hotspot for community events, shows (at the Sanderson Center), better nightlife, etc. that will allow for the population retention as well as prospering businesses. Thus, it is my hope that this will result in a healthy economy for the city of Brantford as a whole.]]></wp:comment_content>

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neglected for any number of reasons. In this case it seems like City Hall was leading the charge.

You write "nothing lasts forever and it's time for a change." Old buildings definitely do not last forever when they are purposely marginalized and long-term residents are forced out for no good reason. Are historical cores of old Ontario towns something you can change, 'freshen-up' easily - like you're putting on a new pair of slacks?

When a city doesn't protect what appears to this outsider to be its 'crown jewels' (despite how rat-infested they appear to be) it suggests a city pursuing a self-destructive, ill-informed path. This makes the place far less attractive for many kinds of investors. It greatly diminishes Brantford's overall 'brand.']]></wp:comment_content>

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it is the oldest development trick in the book; turn a building into a noxious use and then use that as an excuse for
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in the early 1990's, I was witness to the decay then. The "stilt" homes are similar to the one's in downtown St. Catharines
which is also experiencing the demise of its' downtown core - once a great source of shopping and eateries it now boasts
empty storefronts. I too am appalled by the decisions of the cities and towns to simply eradicate historical gems for the sake
of progress - or let's just call a spade a spade - monies placed into the hands of developers who operate on the basis of greed
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in albeit a much larger city, Montreal. A downtown theatre built in the 20's (The Seville) was allowed to rot until the city
finally told the owner/developer he could demolish it. And demolish it he did, despite earlier agreements to at least
preserve its facade. The art-deco structure was reduced to rubble with city hall approval. Decades of mis-management
allowed this to happen, much the same way it's happening elsewhere. Since the Seville was levelled, several other old
structures have met the same fate. A couple of Victorian mansions may soon see the wreckers ball, and even Old Montreal
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through the downtown area hundreds of times, I find that the demolition of these buildings was both a relief and a shame.
The downtown in our city was once very beautiful and still is one of my favourite parts to visit - the shops and old houses
still in the nearby streets are absolutely gorgeous and show workmanship and individualism practically nonexistent in the
newer subdivisions. During the early 1900's, the area served as the heart of the city, with a bustling industrial sector, many
factories and a railroad. The houses were such prime real estate that they were squished together to look more like a city in
Europe than Canada's usually more widely spaced houses.
Now, the railroad go into another portion of the town. The houses are dirty and falling into disrepair; some of the most
beautiful houses, homes to the wealthy, with beautiful Victorian and French Chateau architecture have become dirty and
have fallen into disrepair. They, especially the houses in the area to be demolished, looked so grimy that when the Post-
Apocalyptic neighbourhood scenes were shot there, the director actually cleaned up the streets a bit before shooting. The
downtown and those buildings in particular were almost a sign of how far we have fallen - Brantford now has one of the
highest unemployment rates in the area - and were not pleasant to look at anymore besides.
Additionally, the city has been trying to revitalise the downtown area by putting in the new Harmony Square and other
attractions for a younger crowd in the hopes of attracting a campus of Wilfrid Laurier University. We currently have an
outpost of sorts of the school downtown, but they hope to attract a permanent Campus.

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One of the main buildings housing students surrounds Harmony Square on 2 sides. On the other side and across the street are older townhouses that were much better maintained. On this side were the dingier, less attractive townhouses, many with "For Lease" signs in the window. The view looked like a comedic contrast - the new Harmony Square and the old, sad buildings behind. Most of the buildings were not even making money - the core has a bad rep, and in a sprawling city like Brantford, living in the core has little to no advantages. Many of the businesses are also driven away by this bad rep. The new view, post-deconstruction, is much more attractive. The hill provides a sweeping view of the open sky from Harmony Square and on the hill itself the Grand is visible. City workers have been planting trees along the sidewalk and placing gorgeous wrought-iron benches. This is much improved over the graffiti'd storefronts, many having not changed in the slightest from the seventies or fifties, having been blocked off in those years.

I think that overall it was the only option available to us. Brantford does not have the public support necessary to revitalise the downtown area as proposed; it's ugly now and that's all people can see it as. However, if the city shows what a little work could do to make it better, than perhaps interest will revive in the core - I can honestly say that this was the first time the public took interest in these buildings since "Silent Hill" was shot here.]]></wp:comment_content>

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maintained and unattractive. But I don't think is reason enough to destroy them. After all, once they're gone they'll never be replaced with anything similar.

I would also have to disagree with the idea that the new view is more attractive than the old.

Heritage buildings and the tourists they bring can be a great source of income for places all over Canada and the world. What is required is that civic leaders have some imagination.]]></wp:comment_content>

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buildings that were torn down were slowly purchased by one man. He bought them planning to let them run down, then
when they were an eye sore, the city would swoop in and buy them at a profit, and he'd make a killing.

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What happened was the city couldn't afford to do anything for the longest time as we went through much financial hardship in the form of lost jobs in the city. Brantford went from a prosperous middle class/upper middle class city to a city of service based low income jobs.

The city couldn't afford to buy them from the owner the way he wanted. Eventually I believe the city took over the buildings, but after 20+ years of neglect, the repair costs would have been way too high.

The city is in the process of turning the downtown core into an area of higher education. We've seen massive rebuilding, renovation, and a lot of overall improvement.

I miss the old buildings, but they were holding the area back.

What we should learn from this, is that the laws concerning upkeep of buildings need to be reinforced and updated, so in the future, no properties get mismanaged like this again.]]></wp:comment_content>

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My Life as a 'Doors Open' Tourist

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One of my favourite times of years is the Doors Open season. This season starts in the early spring and ends in late fall. One of the great rewards of spring is for Doors Open events to begin.

When this event occurs in Hamilton, I am giddy with excitement as I plot my route--to see how many sites I can cram into each day. I have created online maps in order to better organize my assault of cultural consumption--and to help others do the same.

I have learned that almost every single site is worth visiting. The architectural, cultural and community resources of this city, and surrounding communities, are remarkable. For example, lining Barton Street, Hamilton are an impressive number of large churches, built at a time when Barton was a major commercial thoroughfare. Eventually, I hope to visit every one.

You don't have to be an architect to appreciate such sites; they are often captivating for all who walk in the door. Usually, there are well-informed guides to help you see and appreciate the social and architectural history that infuses these places. It's like an 'embarrassment of riches' scenario; incredible riches but few crowds. You sometimes feel very privileged to participate.

Doors Open events tend to be social. They connect you with people who care deeply about buildings and are active in these buildings' attached communities. A building without a community is often not that interesting. What makes them really come alive are the dozens of people who are passionate about preserving, inhabiting or simply telling about them to strangers. It's like you stumble into a compelling interactive museum, guided by experts in the field, all for free. I must confess I really like the 'for free' part.

The above is all well and good, however, one problem with such cultural consumption is that in my case it is a high-carbon pastime. I drive to these places in a car because the sites tend to be far-flung and because I want to visit as many as I possibly can. So, for me there is a bit of cognitive dissonance. Knowing what lurks inside of heritage buildings (usually splendid places and dedicated, kindly people) clashes with my desire to moderate my consumption and keep our embarrassingly-large car parked in the driveway. The building preservationist side of me wants to work better with the tree-hugger side, because both should be working on the same team.

Getting around to Door Open sites appears to be the only environmentally-suspect aspect of these events.

I could concentrate on one geographical area but then I would miss out on some out-of-the-way gems. I really do want to see it all.

It's this fear of 'missing out' I suppose is one problem. I want to see all the sites, but perhaps I don't need to see them all at once. Slow-eating is clearly a good idea (as we often tell our ravenous twins). Perhaps slow-Doors-Open-touring is as well. Buildings that may have taken hundreds of years to acquire their 'patina' may require more than a rushed afternoon to fully appreciate.

Other ways of being more environmentally responsible would be to use public transit, which is often possible, or to use an

alternate means of personal transportation such as a bicycle.

I think, though what might prove most sustainable is to do the touring with other people so that a larger group could pool their carbon consumption. This is similar to the [Art Bus](http://thepearlcompany.ca/?page_id=4) concept--a highly successful Hamilton enterprise that encourages communal gallery touring during Hamilton's monthly Art Crawl. I'm sure a similar idea could be applied to Doors Open touring, where the attractions are similarly dispersed and the rewards of participation are equally as great.

Doors Open events are all about community. This community focus should also apply to how people get to far-flung sites. A communal approach to transportation would make Doors Open touring more environmentally-friendly and more fun as well.]]></content:encoded>

<excerpt:encoded><![CDATA[Doors Open events are all about community. This community focus should also apply to how people get to far-flung sites. A communal approach to transportation would make Doors Open touring more environmentally-friendly and more fun as well.]]></excerpt:encoded>

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Your comment, Michael, about visiting all the churches in a certain location is interesting. I can remember living in England and doing just that with the local churches. Each one had its own particular aspect that was unusual: one church had a grove of lime trees leading to the main door, another had a huge thousand-year-old yew growing beside it. Another church seemed to have a large floor space when I wandered around inside. Yet when I circled the building from the outside, the church seemed somehow much smaller.

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Looking forward to more posts about Hamilton!]]></wp:comment_content>
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Machine Shop Paradise in Guelph

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<h2>Introduction</h2>

As part of Doors Open 2010, Guelph channelled its inner Stuttgart with tours at the Linamar Corporation.

The Linamar Corp makes precision machine parts for various manufacturing sectors, including the automotive industry. Judging by the tour it appears to be a successful, high-growth multinational corporation, with operations in Canada, US, Mexico, Europe and Asia.

It all started in Guelph, when a young Hungarian immigrant named Frank Hasenfratz set up a one-man machine shop in the basement of his home in 1964. Lucky for Guelph, he found the city to be a supportive environment for what later became an industrial empire. This appears to be a classic tale of a highly-skilled immigrant with ambition and marketable skills doing very well indeed in the New World.

At the entrance to Linamar there is a decorative screen with air-foil shaped blades. These expensive building components create the impression that something highly technical, perhaps aesthetically-inspired is going on inside. Linamar clearly wanted to build an architectural show-piece that impresses the local community. I would say they have succeeded in that goal.

But the architectural aspect of this place is not what is most interesting. Behind the impressive lobby is a large factory floor in spotless condition. It is a high-end machine shop in the European tradition. There are banks of Toyoda CNC machines. There are boxes full of metal filings and gleaming parts machined from blocks of high grade steel. There are signs showing how things should be done. Obviously, process and quality control is of prime concern.

In one room they were testing parts for the McLaren Group, the famous UK race car builders. Not knowing too much about the parts manufacturing business, I would say that working with McLaren is something to brag about.

The whole place has that unmistakable whiff of success. I remarked to my sons, who were reluctantly along on the tour, 'You know guys training as machinists or CNC designer/programmers might not be such a bad career path.'

<h2>Blue-collar knowledge work</h2>

At Linamar, relatively small number of people perform highly skilled work. The workers seem to enjoy their work, tending to the CNC milling machines, making and testing metal prototypes. It is clear the instant you walk in the door that this would be desirable employment for many people. There is a sense that people working here have an enviable degree of autonomy.

This is what could be called blue-collar knowledge work.

Canada is not known for blue-collar knowledge work, despite Southern Ontario (and the metropolitan area of Montreal) being the industrial heartlands of the country. We seem much more content with the basic extractive and resource-based industries like mining, forestry, fishing and farming. This has made the country rich, but it means Canada often lacks the skills to produce innovative new products and also makes it vulnerable to the vagaries of basic commodity pricing. The has

been true since the foundation of the country.

Southern Ontario has a substantial auto sector, but most of the main action in this industry such as design and development is done elsewhere in California, Germany or Korea. For those interested in industrial design, this puts Canada on the periphery.

Countries such as Germany, Japan, the Netherlands and Switzerland have much stronger craft traditions than do Canada. These lend support to blue-collar knowledge economies through extensive apprenticeship programs and government support for precision manufacturing.

In Canada, there is not the sense that machine-dependent trades, ones that people typically go to vocational school to learn, are the preferred ways of making a living. Knowledge-based industries such as software or telecommunications get much more attention. High-end machine shops like you find at Linamar get much less attention.

In Canada, the dominant and sometimes naive idea is that the only really desirable jobs are white-collar ones.

Mittelstand in Canada

Linamar appears to have its roots in a type of company that in Germany would be part of the *Mittelstand*, that is, small to medium-sized, family-owned businesses.

In Germany in the 1960's the explosive post-war period of economic growth called the *Wirtschaftswunder* was largely a triumph of the *Mittelstand*.

In German-speaking countries, *Mittelstand*-type firms have become experts at producing well-designed, highly technical products. Such small, but sometimes extraordinary capable companies have created much of the industrial wealth that provides such high living standards in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

Linamar has obviously grown way past the boundaries of the *Mittelstand* and has become a North American style multinational, but its *Mittelstand* roots seem clear.

In Canada, an anonymous corporate model is more common, where the allegiances to a skilled workforce or to craft ideals are much less focused. With large corporations the quality of the end product depends more on trans-national economic factors and tends to have little relation to family pride.

Conclusion

At Linamar, it is obvious that Frank Hasenfratz and his family are the original motivating force behind this corporation -- or at least, this is how it is presented.

It appears that Frank Hasenfratz brought his machine shop ethos with him when he immigrated to Canada. Without him and his family, there would likely be nothing similar to Linamar on the outskirts of Guelph.

You find this pattern often in Canada. Here we tend to import our expertise rather than develop it in-house. It is unclear whether this is a sustainable industrial development strategy.

For an industrial culture to produce machined objects of high quality, as at Linamar, you have to hold the work of machinists in high regard. In this sense Linamar is both a product-focused workplace, where beautiful gleaming parts are stacked neatly in boxes, as well as a worker-focused one where each worker is encouraged to take great pride in their work.

For these reasons a visit to Linamar is refreshing. Unfortunately, it seems like a bit of an anomaly in the current Canadian industrial context.]]></content:encoded>

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Demise of The Pearl Company

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A surprising event happened recently in Hamilton, The Pearl Company announced it was shutting down. The Pearl Company is a cultural enterprise owned and operated by Barbara Milne and Gary Santucci in the Landsdale neighbourhood of Hamilton. The reasons given for their decision to pull out was that they were no longer willing to fight City Hall in a long-running zoning dispute, which apparently has cost them a lot of money over the years.

The Pearl Company has been instrumental in bringing cultural events to one of the most distressed neighbourhoods of Hamilton. It is well known locally for putting on an almost absurdly large number of musical, theatrical and artistic performances in their converted industrial space. They also operate the successful Art Bus, which conducts tours of Hamilton's art galleries twice a month. By all accounts, and from personal experience, their cultural contribution to the city is of the first order. They are the energizer bunnies of cultural entrepreneurship within the city. In any sensible regime they would be made heroes of urban renewal or be given the keys to the city. But not here.

There has been some discussion about the procedures involved in zoning applications and whether these procedures were followed, but the bottom line is that the good The Pearl Company is doing is readily apparent while the bad they might be doing is not apparent at all.

Development resulting from cultural initiatives such as the James St North Art Crawl gets a lot of press in Hamilton. But running The Pearl Company out of town seems not only to be a bad idea, it seems like a crazy idea. What would be 'no-brainers' in other places [e.g. supporting venues like The Pearl Company] are controversial here. Could this be another example of Hamilton shooting itself in the foot? Has Hamilton completed its transition from the 'Ambitious City' to one in which no good deed goes unpunished? Many people seem to think so.

<h3>Polarization</h3>

What newcomers to Hamilton quickly learn is that how they view the city may be diametrically opposed to how many long term residents view the city. We see the same place but may come away with sharply differing conclusions. This disparity of perspective is typical of polarized social, economic and political environments, which I suppose is what we have here in Hamilton. In some respects it is like a northern industrial version of the Deep South. Some benefit from the status quo while others do not.

The epicentre of polarized viewpoints is in the Lower Town of Hamilton and most particularly in its East End near King and Steven -- exactly where The Pearl Company bravely set up shop. This is Hamilton's Downtown Eastside. Poor people tend to live in this part of town, rich people elsewhere, and never the twain shall meet.

<h3>Micro-managing investment</h3>

You would think that a poverty-stricken city like Hamilton would try to encourage as much private investment as possible in this age of declining public coffers. Yet, City Hall appears to chase away people with real money to invest - with a stick. This city is not always open for business.

City Hall in its planning policies seems to have a preference about where private money ought to be spent. It has a desire

to funnel investment into officially-sanctioned areas such as James St North, Locke and Ottawa Streets. These are attractive areas, with great potential to be sure, but what about the rest of the city? Neighbourhoods such as Landsdale are ignored and marginalized even though physically and architecturally there is not much difference between it and its more fashionable cousins.

Surely the city should focus on the fact that money is being invested rather than on where it is being invested. Trying to micro-manage private investment decisions through the planning and building departments seems absurd.

The power structures of some cities work against artists while some work against business people. In Hamilton they manage to work against both these camps. Those on both the left and the right wings of the political spectrum can experience the neglect of City Hall!

Marginalization of neighbourhoods

Hamilton, partly due to its archaic planning and zoning systems, intentionally concentrates poverty in areas such as Landsdale. Despite this concentration of poverty one can easily see the attraction of opening an arts and performance space in the middle of it. This is what normally happens in cities lucky enough to have entrepreneurs like the Pearl Company's owners: investment takes place in distressed neighbourhoods since costs there are low. Fighting City Hall year on end obviously adds to investors' costs.

In the US, neighbourhood marginalization and red-lining often has a racial component. But not so much in Hamilton -- ethnic minorities can be found in most parts of the city. Here, marginalization is more poverty and environmentally based, with poor people coming in all colours.

Another important factor in the marginalization of neighbourhoods is environmental degradation. As in many cities, especially those with heavy industry, the East End is poorer than the west due to prevailing winds and the particulates they carry. Anything near or downwind of a steel plant is bound to suffer some marginalization. But this does not explain The Pearl Company's case since areas further east of it that are much closer to the belching furnaces (e.g. Ottawa St) are on the upswing.

Architectural resources

One of Hamilton's greatest resources is the huge number of old brick warehouse buildings that dot Lower Town and elsewhere. The Pearl Company is an excellent example of adaptive reuse for this type of building. It is surprising how few of these industrial buildings are converted into productive uses as you might see in larger centres. This huge resource exists here but is not being exploited. Indeed, City Hall appears to actively discourage its exploitation. This is puzzling.

Conclusion

There is a battle of ideas going on here but it's difficult to sort out exactly what kind of ideas are in play. The politics are certainly parochial, the processes of neighbourhood marginalization are severe and the planning policies appear to be self-defeating. However, I can't quite understand this situation.

What The Pearl Company episode does suggest is that private investment in unfashionable areas of Hamilton is extremely risky even though some of these areas appear to be full of economic potential.

This can't be good.]]></content:encoded>

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The value of automated design requirements testing

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<content:encoded><![CDATA[The other day I was reading a software book called The RSpec Book [Behaviour Driven Development with Rspec, Cucumber, and Friends, by David Chelimsky]. It deals with the specification and automated testing of software. This might sound as dry as dust to those lacking a geeky inner-core, but actually it raises interesting issues about design processes and requirements engineering.

In design, defining what is required is a complex task. What design requirements are and whether they have been fulfilled is one of the more central issues in design.

In large projects, a large book of requirements is often compiled at the beginning of the design process. This documentation is often brimming with interesting ideas and insights, much like a Victorian novel. However, the problem is that this impressive pile of documentation is usually not referred to as often as it should be later in the design process. The greater the length of this documentation, the harder it is to use. It is extremely easy to forget what you know.

Wouldn't it be nice if all the content in the entire requirements documentation is executable so you can never miss that important nugget of wisdom buried deep inside?

By executable what I mean is that you can send a command to RSpec: 'Check all of the specifications now, and report back whether they all still pass.' If they pass, then they are coloured green, if not, red.

RSpec derives from an innovative approach to software engineering called Extreme Programming or Agile design methodologies, in which tests or specifications are written before the software itself. In order to make sure you are on track, you simply run the specifications that you have accumulated over time to see that they pass. If they do pass, then you can rest easy, otherwise you know where your work lies.

This, I think, is a revolutionary idea. RSpec currently works only on software written in the programming language Ruby but the idea could be applied to other design domains.

<h2>A non-software example</h2>

Recently in Hamilton Ontario the citizens were witnesses to a particularly farcical site selection process for a new stadium. It migrated from one site to another, like a travelling minstrel show, to land at the eleventh hour at a place which most consider not just a compromise but a true head-scratcher.

Some of the requirements for this stadium were:

Spend the least amount of money to accommodate an audience of a certain size

Accommodate both a professional football team as well as an amateur summer games

Improve the urban quality of the city core

Make it possible for people to get to the stadium using both public transit as well as private cars

Make the venue visible so that people travelling past the city are made aware of the stadium

Most of these requirements are typical of such sports stadium and are non-controversial. Surely it wouldn't be that difficult to manage these requirements? However, no: the final site decided upon actually didn't satisfy some of these basic requirements. It appears that requirements tests were not run as each new site was introduced. If RSpec could have been run, it would still be glowing bright red.

Adequate requirements documentation was almost certainly produced at the beginning of this project, but wasn't referred to later, or was ignored. This politicization of design requirements is not that uncommon, but it is a setup for the depressing waste of civic resources. This, in a community that can ill afford such waste.

Of course, there is no RSpec yet for the site selection process of new municipal stadiums, nor are the design requirements in form that a tool like RSpec might understand. But this day is coming and I look forward to its arrival.]]></content:encoded>

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Executable design requirements in Cucumber

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It is also important that design requirements are testable throughout the design process, such that the following questions are managed: ‘Are we designing the things that we started out designing?’ and ‘Is what we are designing fulfilling the requirements that we assembled over the course of the project?’ In complex design projects it is extremely easy to ‘lose the plot.’

Recently, I discovered a software development tool called Cucumber, which is scenario-based software for the computer language Ruby. Cucumber enables you to write software specifications in a format that is quite close to natural English and then guides you step-by-step as you implement your software. Once parts of a scenario are satisfied, then it tells you what feature you need to work on next. Therefore, Cucumber is a design and specification environment, but also a work-flow generator as well a testing framework. This combination of aspects appears to make it very powerful.

Cucumber encourages interactions between stakeholders, since the design specifications can actually be read (and possibly written) by those without technical backgrounds. This, I think, is enormously helpful. Not only that, but these testable specifications (the holy grail for many types of design process) stick around the entire design life-style. Cucumber helps right at the earliest stages of a design process, where ideas are free-flowing and ill-defined, but it also helps at the end of implementation stage where the integration of disparate parts may be more the issue. It encourages an agile process in which design and implementation are better integrated. You become less afraid to add new features or design ideas late in the game because the cost of integrating new ideas with things that work becomes manageable.

Design is not only a technical exercise, but is also a creative one in which stories or scenarios, which express our hopes and desires for a brighter future, must be created, refined and managed--in a collaborative setting. Cucumber is an exciting step towards that goal.]]></content:encoded>

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If Charlie Kaufman were to write Cucumber design scenarios

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interest of mine is how best to encourage real creativity in design. One way is to write design scenarios, which express that
which we hope to see designed. If this process were to be open so that a diverse group of stakeholders could participate,
then the quality of the design process and the resulting design product should improve.</p>
An excellent design and specification tool for software projects is called Cucumber, described briefly in an <a
href="http://michaelcumming.com/2011/03/executable-design-requirements-in-cucumber/">earlier post</a>. Cucumber is one tool in an innovative
approach to software engineering called agile or extreme programming, in which tests are written before the software
itself. Using tests this way kills two birds with one stone: it describes what you want in the software, as well as enables
automated testing about whether these requirements are satisfied. As you build the requirements you construct the software
that satisfies them, all at the same time.
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Software design then becomes a cumulative exercise. Therefore, you don't have to think of all of the good ideas at once. This is expected to reduce the cognitive load on software designers and increase their quality of life, which are two of the basic goals of the agile programming movement. Developer happiness tends to increase the quality of software. With the increasing role that software plays in our lives, this is not a trivial concern.

If inventing software involves creating interesting scenarios, this implies that how these scenarios are written becomes more relevant. Are software scenarios capable of showing the stylistic and genre variations as seen in other types of scenarios?

One industry in which scenario writing takes a central position is the film industry. Is storytelling in film making similar to storytelling in software design? Are software designers a type of screenwriter?

What a normal Cucumber scenario looks like

Courtesy of the [Cucumber website](http://cukes.info/):

```
<pre><strong>Feature</strong>: Addition
<strong>In order</strong> to avoid silly mistakes
<strong>As</strong> a math idiot
<strong>I want</strong> to be told the sum of two numbers</pre>
<pre style="padding-left: 30px;"><strong>Scenario</strong>: Add two numbers
<strong>Given</strong> I have entered 50 into the calculator
<strong>And</strong> I have entered 70 in to the calculator
<strong>When</strong> I press add
<strong>Then</strong> the result should be 120 on the screen</pre>
```

This scenario tests whether addition in a software application is performed correctly. This might be the first step in a Cucumber-driven process. It could lead directly into software development in Ruby, in which the software development part -- the part that involves writing actual Ruby code -- is not really any more difficult writing the scenarios and features. Therefore, scenario writing not only *informs* the process but it actually *drives* the process.

As you can see above, the way in which features and scenarios are written in Cucumber is readily understandable by anyone who can read English. All of the words in bold are key words in that they have special meaning in Cucumber. Overall, it is simple and straightforward way of expressing actions, motivations, characterizations and possibly, narrative arcs: things that are important to the dramatic arts in general.

Cucumber scenarios form a good interface between those who can read or possibly write them (most of the population) and those who write computer code (a small minority).

It is important to remember that Cucumber specifications are executable. Cucumber takes them and checks your code to see that you've actually implemented what the specifications demand. This is what makes them magical.

However, the scenario above is quite dull and software-specific. It lacks a compelling narrative arc. No one would read this scenario for pleasure, as one might a film script or a Jane Austen novel.

What a more interesting Cucumber scenario looks like

Feature: Heritage preservation

In order to keep communities healthy

As a citizen

I want old heritage buildings to be preserved

Scenario: Preserve unoccupied heritage buildings

Given old building is heritage quality

When no one is using the building productively

Then the owner should preserve the building

Here, the example is less trivial and begins to talk about things that some might find interesting. It expresses a policy specification for urban preservation in a compact form. This could affect cities in a real way.

Such a scenario might be a good first step in creating an architectural heritage inventory for cities in which heritage buildings are under some threat (such as the city in which I live). One could craft a heritage building application in the web application framework Ruby on Rails, starting with simple scenarios just like that.

What a Kaufman Cucumber scenario looks like

Charlie Kaufman is a screenwriter and director, known for such wildly creative films as *Being John Malkovich*, *Adaptation*, and *Synecdoche, New York*. He is one of the most creative people working in Hollywood today. Not all people like his work or find his humour to be hilarious, but I do.

Kaufman started as a screenwriter before becoming a director. His brilliant cinematic ideas begin as words on the page -- much as a software developer working in an agile programming or behavior-driven development, begins as words on the page.

In *Synecdoche, New York*, Kaufman tells the story of a troubled theatre director who puts on an absurdly ambitious theatrical event, which last several decades. This theatre piece recreates New York in its entirety. It takes place on a sound stage built in a warehouse in New York.

Since the warehouse in which the piece occurs is also part of New York, this means within the recreation of New York you also find the warehouse in which the recreation takes place. This creates the opportunity to represent an infinite recursion of warehouses inside of warehouses ad infinitum. The fact that Kaufman attempts to represent this recursion dramatically is brilliant and very funny.

What would the Charlie Kaufman Cucumber scenario look like for this?

Feature: Infinite recursion in dramatic representations

In order to show the absurdity of excessive representational ambition in theatre

As a film director

I want to show that infinite recursion may lead to absurdity

Scenario: Warehouse in a warehouse

Given all of NYC is portrayed dramatically in a warehouse

When this warehouse is also part of NYC

Then this leads to recursive representations of the warehouse, ad infinitum

As a film *Synecdoche, New York* combines a touchingly melancholy tale of a man's mortality with the most absurdist type of humour. This means you laugh and cry simultaneously when watching the film. This is no mean feat in cinema. If only software were to inspire such emotions in their users!

To encourage more interesting software it must be a good idea to encourage more creativity in the writing of software scenarios. As the Charlie Kaufman example demonstrates this creativity can be quite open-ended, humorous and lead in

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Mush Hole, Brantford

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Last weekend, I went with my sons to a powerful art show at the Brantford Arts Block called Mush Hole Remembered: R. G. Miller by the accomplished Mohawk artist R. Gary Miller-Lahiaaks (This show runs until April 9, 2011).

The best commentary on this show is that which is included in the show itself. The artist and curator's statements are powerful and moving. These statements are found at the end of this post.

The show consists of paintings and drawings inspired by Miller's experiences as a child inmate at the Mohawk Institution, a.k.a. the Mush Hole. The Mohawk Institute was Brantford's local Indian residential school, closed down in 1969. This former school lies about 3 km from downtown Brantford, near the banks of the meandering Grand River.

The fact that the artist refers to himself as an inmate, as opposed to a student, is indicative of the nature of the place. It was more a prison than a school. The brutalizing tendencies of this institution was more prominent than any educational intent or result.

Attending the Mohawk Institute was an extremely painful experience for the artist, which has reverberated throughout his adult life. Miller's experiences at the school included beatings, rapes and hunger.

The fact that places like the The Mohawk Institute exist is an inconvenient truth in Canadian history.

Not surprisingly, this early trauma created demons for Miller, which he has had to overcome. One way he battles these demons is by producing art and exhibiting his work. His process of healing is an ongoing one.

<h2>Commentary</h2>

<h3>The art</h3>

The works in the show are in a variety of media. The most prominent are paintings of native boys and girls standing in front of the Mohawk Institute.

The children seem happy enough and appear to derive support and camaraderie from each other. One message you might derive from these paintings is that although the Mohawk Institute may have been brutal and racist, at least the children had each other. I'm sure the reality was more nuanced than that.

There are drawings in the exhibition that suggest the Mohawk Institute was a site of inhumanity on par with other physical and cultural genocides, such as the Jewish Holocaust and the Cambodian killing fields. There are images of skulls and of death cults. There is a drawing of an emaciated figure reminiscent of the liberation of death camps in WWII. One large drawing of a crying child reminds me of the famous photograph of the Vietnamese girl running from a napalm attack. A painting of a very young child suggests that the abuse and horror of the Mohawk Institute were inflicted on even the youngest inmates.

The Mohawk Institute is clearly represented by Miller as Brantford's 'Heart of Darkness.'

Buildings have a prominent role in Miller's paintings. They are painted in a lurid, expressionistic style that suggests that despite a facade of Victorian respectability, unspeakable cruelties occurred inside.

Also prominent in the artwork is the so-called Mohawk Chapel, which still stands across the road from the Mohawk Institute. The Mohawk Chapel, whose official name is Her Majesty's Royal Chapel of the Mohawks (St Paul's), was the first Protestant church in Upper Canada and is now the oldest surviving church in Ontario.

In Miller's paintings these two institutions are joined together. In the daily routines of the children, they were probably either at the Mohawk Institute or they were across the road at the chapel.

However, the proximity and relationship of the Mohawk Chapel to the Mohawk Institute is a disquieting one. It was a close relationship between the two power centres of the time: the church and the state. However, it was a relationship that did not bode well for the humane treatment of native children.

The overall message of the exhibition is clear: native children suffered greatly at the Mohawk Institute, that the artist was one such child who suffered there and that this oppression was systemic, institutionalized and supported by church and state working together.

<h3>The final solution</h3>

As the curator Neal Keating writes: The Indian residential school system was an attempt at a "final solution" to Canada's Indian problem.

The reference to a 'final solution' is clearly eliminationist in spirit. This is what ties the practices of the Mohawk Institute into instances of genocide in other parts of the world.

There is this two-fold aspect to such genocidal tendencies: one, that the mere existence of a people presents some kind of threat or problem to a dominant population, and two, that simply getting rid of the minority population is a sensible way to address the manufactured problem.

The Mohawk Institute closed in 1969, after 140 years of "killing the Indian in the child." That is a long time for a system, which is today widely considered as fundamentally racist and abusive. This system was not a flash in the pan. It lasted far, far longer than the Nazi regime in Germany, the killing fields era in Cambodia, the genocide in Rwanda and even the apartheid regime in South Africa.

<h3>Having your kids taken away</h3>

A particularly appalling aspect of the residential school system is the fact that it involved forcibly separating children from their parents and other communal care givers.

Children were often removed from their families at an early age. The level of care at residential schools was typically brutal and oppressive. The mortality rates were shockingly high. Some children spent most of their childhood in places like the Mohawk Institute. The only reason that many native parents sent their children to residential schools was because the government forced them to.

Children were not allowed access to their language or culture. Indeed, this was the whole point of the residential school system: to break the bonds of traditional culture within aboriginal families.

If the government does not trust you to raise your own children adequately, this in effect devalues all of native culture.

Indeed, the history of Canada like most other New World countries is noted for its pervasive devaluation of native cultures. This process of devaluation continues to this day.

A childhood spent in such appalling conditions is not conducive to forming habits of self that serve you well in adulthood. A process of self-alienation is expected to result in dissociative psychological disorders and self-destructive behaviors. This is what Miller reports happened to him. His experience at the Mohawk Institute is still a raw wound.

The system

As students of Canadian history are aware, the Indian residential school system is one of the darker episodes of Canadian history.

For those who study the system, it appears less like a curious anomaly in Canadian history and more of an inherent aspect of native and non-native relations in this country. The residential school system was systematic and bureaucratic in nature, fully supported by the Government of Canada.

In 2008, The Government of Canada apologized for the residential school system.

At the time, it seemed like the apology was of some significance to First Nations people but that it meant much less to those outside that community. It is this asymmetrical nature of the apology that strikes me as odd.

True apologies involve some moral cost to those making the apology. It should bring some sense of shame to some people. I am not sure that this apology was of that type.

When this apology occurred in was just another news item. It was like it happened long ago and did not necessarily affect people today. Yet we know from Miller's work that the effects of the system reverberate loud and clear in the minds of its victims.

Therefore, I saw little psychological or emotional connection between the non-native population--most of whom see it as an issue which doesn't affect them directly--and the very real psychological pain felt by First Nations people. The Schindler's List of the residential school system has yet to be made.

Canadians haven't arrived at the point where they see the racism and brutality of the residential school system not as an incidental aspect of sending native children away to learn from a supposedly superior culture, but as its fundamental aspect.

Conclusion

Standing in front of Brantford's Mohawk Institute is a weird and disquieting experience. You really do get the feeling that if these bricks could talk they would tell a sad and painful tale.

There is something about this city of Brantford, its meandering Grand River, the former residential school with its spooky facade and grounds, the nearby Mohawk Chapel, all of which are down the road from the largest Indian reserve in Canada. There is a strange confluence of forces there, which do not appear to be benign or entirely in the past.

The children in residential schools were inmates. Their only crime was that they were aboriginal. Despite being completely innocent these children were treated as if they were guilty of some unspeakable crime. The fact that trauma was inflicted as a matter of government policy is a continuing source of pain for First Nations.

The artist R. Gary Miller suffered greatly under this system. His way forward--his means of survival--was not to remain silent. He expresses clearly through his art what the residential school system has done to him. I applaud his courage.

As the curator Neal Keating writes "The curriculum of the Mohawk Institute taught the artist that aboriginal culture was wrong, that aboriginal language was forbidden and that aboriginal spirituality was particularly abhorrent."

This suggests that the opposite is likely true: that aboriginal culture is as correct as any other and is worthy of respect, that aboriginal languages are the bedrock of native culture and cannot be denied without harming the culture in fundamental ways, and that native spirituality is not only not abhorrent but likely presents the best approach in healing from wounds afflicted by an aggressive and brutal alien culture.

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<h1>Statements from the exhibition</h1>

<h2>Exhibition title</h2>

MUSH HOLE REMEMBERED: R. G. MILLER

"Mush Hole" is the nickname for the Indian residential school that was officially known as the Mohawk Institute. R. Gary Miller-Lahiaaks (Mohawk, b. 1950, Six Nations) was put into the Mush Hole in 1952, when he was 2 years old. He was kept there for the next 11 years, until 1963. As a child-inmate in the Mush Hole, Miller was subjected to severe beatings, repeated rapes, and chronic hunger. All this delivered by the non-Native adult supervisors who exercised total power over the Indian children's lives; this in the name of Christianity and Civilization.

<h2>Artist's statement</h2>

This exhibition represents a combination of vague, mundane memories of years at the school, and flashes of horror experienced there. They are the strongest memories I could approach without descending into a place I would not be able to emerge from.

This project evolved from decades of need to express my personal outrage at the world, combined with a moment of political timeliness. I thought it would be groundbreaking and exciting to tackle - it turned into four years of nightmares and breakdowns, until I realized I had a more fragile grip on my center than I knew. This was as close as I could come with sharing my story.

Perhaps other Residential School Survivors will take up the gauntlet and excise their demons in their own way. Mine have only been exposed - not destroyed. I know now that I cannot carry on living on the surface of my self. My artwork previous to the conception of this project has always been an attempt to find a raison d'être and self-respect. I am incomplete and I need help to heal and achieve peace with my past. You cannot cauterize an infected wound.

R. Gary Miller-Lahiaaks, 2008

<h2>Curator's Statement</h2>

Sometimes art is created for the purposes of revealing truths that hurt, and performing a rite of exorcism. This is one of those occasions. Like tens of thousands of other First Nations people alive in Canada today, R. Gary Miller-Lahiaaks (Mohawk, b. 1950, Six Nations) is surviving the Indian residential school experience. This exhibit is about that experience, and the memory of trauma induced by a genocidal system aimed at achieving a "final solution" to Canada's Indian problem. The residential school that Miller was in was the Mohawk Institute, a.k.a. "the Mush Hole," which finally closed down in 1969, after some 140 years of "killing the Indian in the child." It is significant that the first opening of this exhibit is taking place on the site of the former Mush Hole, which is today the Woodland Cultural Centre.

R. Gary Miller was put into the Mush Hole in the early 1950s, when he was very young, two or three years old. He remained there for the next 11 years, until 1964. In the four decades since then he has been hospitalized numerous times for a variety of psychiatric disorders. He has repeatedly attempted suicide, been arrested for assault, wrecked his marriages, and developed severe substance abuse and other health problems. A common pattern is evident in the thick file of medical and police records for Miller: when the doctors and nurses asked him why he did it, he invariably answered that it was because of what happened to him in the Mush Hole.

What happened to him? Like many others, Miller's childhood was burned up in the aboriginal holocaust of Canada. His young body was regularly beaten for some nine years (starting at the age of four or five), serially raped and molested for more than six years, and undernourished for all eleven years. In addition to this, the curriculum of the Mohawk Institute taught him that aboriginal culture was wrong, that aboriginal language was forbidden, and that aboriginal spirituality was particularly abhorrent.

Neal Keating, 2008]]></content:encoded>

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Update on Colborne St South in Brantford

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[caption id="attachment_1079" align="alignnone" width="300" caption="Before demolition 1 (looking south-east)][/caption]

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[caption id="attachment_1078" align="alignnone" width="300" caption="After demolition 3; view of the demolished site, showing the exposed north side of Colborne St (looking north)][/caption]

Last week I attended a lecture by Dr. Karen Dearlove who described the site in greater detail and reflected on its relationship to the [now filled-in] canal at its base. This part of the core of Brantford was the western end of a canal that ended directly

below where Colborne St hits the Grand River. This short canal (called the 'Brantford Cut') improved navigation along the Grand River by avoiding a great meander in the river downstream of Brantford. The Grand River Canal, of which the Cut was a part, became obsolete with the building of the railways in the 1860's.

The canal system fed an impressive industrial complex that manufactured farm machinery, in a part of town now known as the [Greenwich-Mohawk Brownfield Site](http://www.brantford.ca/govt/projects/brownfields/sites/Pages/GreenwichMohawkSite.aspx). There are development proposals to maintain some of its remaining industrial buildings and infill with new buildings in the style of the old. This site is about a kilometer from the Colborne St site.

The question remains why Brantford councilors felt in 2010 that it was a good idea to demolish such a large quantity of urban heritage architecture on the south side of Colborne St.

One theory that hadn't occurred to me is the *de-industrialization trauma theory*, which goes something like this: Brantford experienced rapid de-industrialization with the closing of several large factories in the early 1980's. The citizens of Brantford saw their city turn quickly from an industrial giant into a relatively unimportant city. Many thousands of people became unemployed and were therefore traumatized. They expressed this trauma by devaluing the remnants of the old, such as heritage streetscapes in the core. The future of the new Brantford was not to include things that reminded the citizens of the old order; if they removed evidence of this past then it became easier to cope with their sudden loss of status.

I'm not sure I buy this theory, since Brantford has managed to retain many fine heritage buildings. Indeed, Brantford is currently experiencing a mini-boom as a regional educational hub, which appears on the whole to be beneficial to the preservation of its core.

But the Colborne St destruction still resonates strongly in the minds of those who fought to prevent it. Brantford lives on, but in a diminished state.

Rehabilitation of the the Greenwich-Mohawk site and of the adjacent canal system, which seems like such a promising development, will have to do without the prominent landmark provided by the south side of Colborne St at its western terminus.]]></content:encoded>

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The pictures look lovely but the reading shows it is more like an adult living centre. There are absolutely no community centres for any age, nothing for children, including parks, no walkways for exercise, just one lonely museum.

Pretty is nice but we need more drawings from more creative outlets to form a community where everyone belongs. Where the area is an actual community, not just homes.

We need to look at sustainability, from the environment to the financial and the groups of people allowed in.]]></wp:comment_content>

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Because there is a major flaw or two.

The people who lost jobs and were ``traumatized`` did not have the power to tear down Colborne St as the majority of these industrial workers were working class, not city councilors. Those most traumatized were hardly concerned with devaluing

downtown buildings when they were now faced with no jobs and no money and were more concerned with homelessness, how to feed their family's, fear of what was coming next. They did not have the energy, never mind the political savvy to play the tricks these city councilors played in order to have buildings torn down when prohibited to do so and without regard to the safety and welfare of Brantford's citizens (I was driving thru the area when the mushroom cloud of asbestos blew up without protecting the environment (even tho it was only a little bit) and shoved under the proverbial carpets so fast I was in awe.

The only people who did not want to look at those historical buildings, to avoid looking at the old order, were councilors who are still hiding something. Some are in the know, most of us, ``the citizens`` are not.

Leading to the a more profound reason the theory is askew. I do not know how many councilors, potential majors and city hall staff say that the average ``citizen`` is too dumb to care, don't know how to vote, don't understand why we need to conserve energy, and so on...often worded slightly less plain, however, meaning the same thing. If we don't ``get it``, why on earth would we bother taking out our trauma on Colborne St 20 years later?]]></wp:comment_content>

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The owner of many of the buildings, Steve Kahn IIRC, stands to make, more, much more, millions more, if his lawsuit against the city for appropriating his properties at far below market value is successful.

Look at the facts. The leader of the council group adamant to flatten everything never bothered to run for election in 2010. Why?

Kahn wasn't getting enough in rent to cover the costs of taxes, utilities and upkeep of the buildings.

If I was Kahn I'd buy a cheap empty suit on council to front for the appropriation and demolition.

Then I'd sue the city for \$8mn or so, settle for half that and retire somewhere warm and rich and unencumbered with buildings growing ever older and in need of money for upkeep. Winning!

Course, this is all off the cuff but that Occam guy was pretty smart.]]></wp:comment_content>

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This pesky coalition business

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One of the most prominent issues of the current Canadian election campaign is the idea of coalitions. Stephen Harper, the right wing Conservative leader, presents them as an affront to Canadian values and all that is right about our democracy. The absurd position, which has no historical foundation, is not countered in any substantial way by the other parties.

In Canada, the left is splintered while the right is unified under Stephen Harper. The only way that the left will assume power is to become as unified as the right. This is made a little more difficult in the Canadian context because one of the parties on the left is the Bloc Québécois, a Quebec-only party that promotes sovereignty for Quebec.

Therefore, for the left to unify in a formal way, as a single party, would be a difficult or impossible. The only way to unify it is to do so in a virtual way--as some kind of coalition. This is not unusual in other countries but is presented as something to be avoided at all costs by Harper.

Harper presents a coalition of the right as a natural phenomenon, while a coalition of the left as an unholy alliance. All evidence seems to point to Harper getting away with this misrepresentation.

<h2>Let's just cut out the left entirely</h2>

In the USA there exists a two party system. Hard right is now represented by the Republican Party, while the center right, by the Democrats. Both these parties are tireless in their efforts to support corporate interests, with little or no regard to political concerns to their left.

In the USA, the left is not unified under the umbrella of the Democratic Party. It is simply absent from the political party system entirely.

This 'democratic deficit' and limited range of political options in the USA makes it an anomaly compared to many other western democracies, where leftist parties do exist and sometimes have real influence in the political sphere.

Harper wants Canadians to believe they live under a similar political construct, in which the right assumes a natural right to govern while the left is effectively disenfranchised.

What favors Harper in the popular imagination is a basic misunderstanding of the parliamentary system.

<h2>This is not the USA</h2>

In a republican system as found in the USA voters elect a president directly. The candidate who gets the most votes gets to be president.

In a parliamentary system, you elect your local member of parliament. You do not elect the prime minister directly. The prime minister is the person who manages to acquire the 'confidence of the house.' This is usually, but not always, the leader of the dominant political party in parliament.

In the USA, there are profound checks and balances on the power of a president. In Canada such checks do not exist because the role of a president does not exist.

Harper wants to be a president, but one with few checks and balances. The Canadian system is not set up to accommodate

such a position. In fact, the US system is not set up for such a position either.

A parliamentary system is not necessarily superior or more democratic than a republican one, it is simply structured in a profoundly different way. It is the misunderstandings of these differences by the voting public that Harper hopes to exploit.

Working with others

In a parliamentary system, a leader in a minority situation must work with the members of other parties to get things done. If a ruling party lacks the confidence of others, the government will fall and another election will be called. This has happened to Harper several times.

Harper has difficulty in gaining the confidence of those with opposing political views. He does not work well with others--especially with parties to his left, which includes all other parties in Canada's parliament.

Harper is greatly offended by the idea that when he is in a minority position, he must work with members of other parties. He would prefer not to have to do this, but when he's in a minority he has no other choice.

He proposes that the only sensible option is for Canadians to elect him to a majority, which would allow him to escape the 'bickering' and rule in a way unconstrained by consensus-building protocols. He wants a majority in order to centralize all political power in himself and to ignore all others.

Judging by his recent record, he clearly wants to set himself up as a petty dictator, but one who supposedly derives his legitimacy within the parliamentary system.

Harper wants to be a father figure, whose authority is unquestioned either by the voting public or by other members of parliament--even those within his own party. Such an overtly authoritarian and patriarchal politician is rare in Canadian history.

Conclusion

When Stephen Harper rails against coalitions, he misrepresents the basic structure of the parliamentary system under which he works. He is, in fact, making it up as he goes along.

Many Canadians find this political tactic disingenuous in the extreme. They are rightfully worried about the fragile state of our democracy.

Clearly, Canadians need to learn a little bit about the basic structure of our parliamentary system. Without this knowledge they will be victims to well-spoken demagogues like Harper who are willing and able to subvert the system under which they work in strikingly undemocratic ways.]]</content:encoded>

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RIM and its new PlayBook

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This week the RIM PlayBook tablet computer was launched. It is probably a decent machine with some compelling design features but it has received some scathing reviews.

Tablet makers are currently in a frenzied catch-up mode to Apple. They are trying to duplicate the stunning success of the iPad. If a tablet manufacturer is to be successful in this fight they have to come up with some truly innovative ideas that create real buzz, as opposed to say, ridicule.

One thing that stuck out with the RIM PlayBook is its lack of an email program. Not including an email program in a tablet computer is comparable to launching a new car without windows that roll down or a radio that turns on.

When I read about that deficiency I scratched my head and chuckled. What were they thinking? Were they actually trying to make the front page of The Onion, or perhaps there is some structural deficiency in their design thinking.

I think it might be a good time to explore some aspects of the RIM model and provide some cultural context.

RIM is located in the small southern Ontario city of Waterloo. Waterloo is about one and a half hours drive west of Toronto.

Southern Ontario is a part of Canada that some of us view as the natural economic, educational and cultural heartland of English Canada. This smug feeling of superiority the rest of Canada naturally detests.

Waterloo is usually portrayed as the science and technological hub of Canada. RIM has its headquarters there, as do other successful tech companies such as OpenText.

RIM grew out of work done at the University of Waterloo, which is one of Canada's prime research universities. This university is renowned for the excellence of its research in many fields including math, computer science and engineering. It has the reputation of being young, smart and ambitious.

Similar to how Stanford is the reason why Silicon Valley is where it is, the Waterloo technology hub exists because of its proximity to the University of Waterloo.

If some of the smartest people are in Waterloo and RIM is the wunderkind of Canadian technology, then why would they launch a tablet with such obvious and laughable deficiencies?

No one would claim that they aren't smart up in Waterloo. But maybe being smart is not enough, or perhaps they are smart but in a particularly unhelpful way.

I have some history with Waterloo but I admit they I have little direct knowledge of Waterloo's current culture except having driving through it several times and stopping on occasion at its impressive Perimeter Institute. I am sure that many nice people live and work in Waterloo.

Waterloo is an attractive place, but in a white-bread, buttoned-down, suburban kind of way. If you are looking for gritty urban living of a kind found in Brooklyn, East-end London or Istanbul, you would be well-advised to look elsewhere.

The nearby city of Kitchener seems to have more historical buildings than Waterloo and has a grungier, more working class appeal. Kitchener is renovating some of its old factories to attract the hipster crowd. This appeal to sustainability and historical preservation seems to be working out well and is creating substantial interest in the business community.

Yet, Waterloo is stuck in a corporate-campus type setting in which truly urban attractions and experiences are less prevalent.

There is something just a bit nerdy about Waterloo. It has traditionally attracted the pocket-protector set: those with more skills in mathematics than in art or socially disruptive thinking.

Maybe RIM and its PlayBook suffers from this approach to technology.

RIM has the reputation being a darling of corporate types. Its main competitive advantage is the interoperability of its devices within secure corporate data networks. To many, this is a key advantage.

But to those outside the corporate or business realm this is much less of a compelling feature. In fact, it works against being seen as 'cool.'

Data security is a good thing but it is not the only thing. Security should not trump all other concerns. Usability, openness and overall innovation must also be important design considerations.

Many view the recent global recession as somehow engineered or caused by the excesses of western capitalism. For a company that hopes to design devices with some broad consumer appeal, being allied with multinationals and their preference for secure data is not necessarily an advantageous position.

There are only so many corporate types in the world, whereas there are huge numbers of non-corporate types. It is this broader-based consumer market that the likes of Apple and Google are in a much better position to exploit.

RIM is left on the sidelines serving a privileged corporate culture. RIM is further marginalized by its obscure Canadian origins, in a world where Canadian multinationals are not seen as being particularly progressive or innovative.

Compare the engineering-driven culture of Waterloo with that of Silicon Valley in California.

One of the reasons that the Bay Area is such a great success is that the engineer-driven culture of Silicon Valley is balanced by the artistic anarchism and free-spirit of nearby San Francisco and Berkeley. It is the land both of Stanford and its straight A students, but also of the Black Panthers and of environmental activism.

There is something electric in the air of the Bay Area, which seems missing in a place like Waterloo. Waterloo appears to have all the nerdiness of Silicon Valley but without the inspiring counterpoint of free-love and of new ways of organizing society.

This makes Waterloo an attractive place of employment for some but not a sympathetic place to live as a free-spirited artist or even as an open-source programmer.

If one has some interest in those kinds of alternative lifestyles then one should explore the downtown districts of Toronto, or even Hamilton, rather than Waterloo.

Exploration of social alternatives is necessary to come to a point where real innovation is possible. Innovation and social conformity do not always make great bedfellows.

RIM and Waterloo have the reputation of being steady and reliable places in which to produce conventional work. However, what is now required is unconventional work.

If RIM is to become a success in fields such as the design of consumer-friendly devices, it must ditch its joined-at-the-hip connection to the corporate world and explore its inner anarchist.

RIM, in short, must either innovate or die.]]></content:encoded>

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Canadian Election Results 2011: Neo-Cons vs. the Social Democrats

<link><http://michaelcumming.com/2011/05/canadian-election-results-2011-neo-cons-vs-the-social-democrats/></link>

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What was also quite unexpected--until the last couple weeks of the campaign--is how in Quebec the nationalist Bloc Québécois (BQ) was largely replaced by the federalist NDP. This is a seismic event in Canadian politics, even more significant perhaps than the success of the NDP overall.

What this means is that in Quebec voters are willing to support a federalist party--that is, one not devoted to making Quebec a separate country. The Québécois are now willing to participate in Canadian politics at the national level. They had a choice between social democracy and nationalism and they chose social democracy. This is very surprising.

Previously, when the BQ held a substantial number of seats in Canada's Parliament, the center-left vote in Canada was split between three parties: the BQ (which the rest of the country was not able to support since they ran no candidates outside of Quebec), the Liberals and the NDP.

This split enabled the consolidated right under Harper to assume power.

This election now has had the effect of consolidating the left in Canada under the NDP. This has never happened before in Canadian politics.

During this election, the electorate was polarized. Voters could either follow Harper and his brand of western-based conservatism, or they could support a party whose left-wing, worker-friendly values have never been in question: the NDP.

The Conservatives and the NDP involve two distinct visions of Canada's future: either a US-influenced neo-conservative vision, or a European-influenced social democratic vision.

In Canada, if you are conservative you will never vote for the NDP, and if you are a lefty you will never vote for the Conservatives under Harper. With these election results the political polarization is now almost comically complete. It is unclear whether this is a good thing or a bad thing.

But what it does enable is an opportunity for both the left and the right to fully define their positions and to articulate the implications they have for the future of Canada.

On reason the Liberals were routed because it was unclear which side of this fence they were situated. Did they believe in the immigrant-friendly welfare state--which their party largely created--or did they not?

Ignatieff muddled this issue and made it difficult for many voters to support him. It was not only his political acumen and personality that was at issue, it was the clarity of his basic political position.

The Liberal Party experience in Canada could be compared to that of the Obama Democrats in the USA.

Obama is not liberal enough to appeal to the traditional urban Democratic base, nor is he credible as a centre-right politician who can appeal convincingly to US nationalism and the projection of American power around the globe.

In other words, Obama is not left enough for the lefties, yet not right enough to appeal to a suburban electorate. If he is not careful Obama may face a similar fate to that of Ignatieff.

In Canada, though, if any party is to assume the mantle of the curious Canadian concept of the 'Natural Governing Party' they must be both immigrant-friendly in a convincing, non-patronizing way and they must manage the country in an economically sound manner. Canadians wisely see their immigrants as their future, and prefer to be rich rather than poor.

It is too early to tell whether the right or the left will be able to convince the electorate of their skills in these two areas.]]></content:encoded>

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A friend of mine who is a recent immigrant to Canada was trying to explain the elections to me...but it was going over my head at the time. Maybe now I can revisit the conversation.]]></wp:comment_content>

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The Killing of Osama bin Laden

<link><http://michaelcumming.com/2011/05/the-killing-of-osama-bin-laden/></link>

<pubDate>Tue, 03 May 2011 23:48:17 +0000</pubDate>

<dc:creator>michael</dc:creator>

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First, is this article from the Nation: With Osama bin Laden Dead, It's Time to End the 'War on Terror.'<

Clearly, the war on terror has very little to do with the continued existence or not of Osama bin Laden, or his ilk. It appears to have much more to do with domestic politics in the USA. The war on terror was a war conceived for US domestic consumption, despite the undeniable hideousness and suffering of 9/11, and despite bin Laden's almost certain complicity in that tragedy.

In order for this war to end, there must be a change in US domestic politics, which I can't see happening anytime soon.

Operations such as the bin Laden killing are known as Black Ops. Obama is expected to do well politically as a result of this one. People dancing in Times Square is to be expected. Americans shouldn't be surprised though if the dancing is more restrained outside of the US.

Another thing to consider is a comment I heard yesterday from an English phone-in caller to the CBC. He said something like this: even at the height of the IRA crisis in Britain, police there refrained from openly assassinating their enemies (not to say that they never did such a thing). But now it appears that in the US, Black Ops are the order of the day. He thought it odd that no one was talking about this. When did it become acceptable to brazenly assassinate your enemies--especially those in foreign countries? Is this really a good idea?

Of course of all the enemies the US has ever had, Osama is the one you would most likely want to kill. I bet even the Quakers would line up to get that guy.

One problem with Black Ops is that they're *black*. This means they are illicit and that they derive a lot of their power because they aren't talked about openly, in polite company. When they become a basic foreign policy technique--which a president proudly and openly announces at a press conference--then they get a little tawdry. It is like UFC cage matches suddenly becoming popular and then held in the Rose Garden of the White House. They might please the crowds but they also might diminish the respectability of the Presidency.

Black Ops are greatly effective in eliminating your enemies (when they work out as planned). They certainly serve to demonstrate the effectiveness and skill of the US military for targeted, Shin Bet style killings. What might be in question is the idea that physically eliminating your enemies is always wise.

Such operations must not only *feel* good, they must do something positive for the fortunes of the USA for them to be considered successful.

Bin Laden was demonized not only because he was a murderous terrorist, but also because he had the temerity to mount a private Black Op of his own against the sole remaining superpower.

Countries other than the USA are of course strongly discouraged from mounting their own Black Ops against *their* enemies. This is a form of American exceptionalism that the rest of the world may resent.

The Bin Laden killing reminds me of a widely circulated news item around the time of the start of the war in Afghanistan. A young man with a bellicose bent proudly announced that the the USA was the new 'Roman Empire' and that the world

would just have to get used to that fact.

At the time I thought it was an odd thing to compare ones country--Land of the Free, Home of the Brave--to the Roman Empire.

Wasn't this the same Roman Empire notable for its cruelty and decadence? And weren't the Romans--who in addition to their military might and grand architecture--known as a civilization that eventually went into a long period of decline and eventually fell?

Yet, it appears this irony was lost on the man. He liked the sound of the empire idea--with a military that could kick butt with impunity--but without considering any of its potential downsides.

As the Romans clearly demonstrated, military power is only one aspect of power. Economic and moral power still count for something, and empires can sometimes become burdensome to their owners.

One of the downsides of being the sole superpower is that there is a tendency to pursue international relations as if their domestic political outcomes is the only thing that needs to be considered. It is like a Roman Empire frame of mind, but conceived by someone who has never left Peoria.

This attitude (also common in Canada under Harper) is short-sighted, parochial and often counter-productive to national interests. It works directly against seeing the 'big picture,' which you would think would be needed to maintain superpower status for long.

It comes as no surprise that Osama was hiding away in a secure compound in a garrison town in Pakistan. If he were hiding behind the Burger King in McLean, Virginia, now *that* would have been a surprise.

Finally, what struck me as really odd is the fact that Osama's body was buried at sea. Now, how do we know if anything *really* happened in Abbottabad? Conspiracy theorists: start your engines!]]></content:encoded>

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Election second thoughts

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Clearly, what happened in Quebec was not a rejection of nationalism in favour of social democracy. It was just that Quebec voters got tired of the old guy Duceppe and wanted a change. They didn't like what either the Conservatives or the Liberals had to offer--since both of these are tired brands at times--so chose the NDP. Their choice of the NDP is not the beginning of a committed relationship, it is more like a one night stand (that will last for four years). This romance could end at any time.

The Liberals are not dead. They will just lay dormant for awhile until they acquire a charismatic leader (Justin Trudeau anyone?).

The idea that the country as a whole is making a permanent shift to the right or the left is premature. Those from Alberta would like to think so but their political culture, which involves both a one party state and the unsavory anti-environmentalism of the resource extraction industries, cannot be easily applied to the other regions of Canada.

One of the great weaknesses of Harper is that his environmental record is absolutely pathetic. Conservative parties elsewhere in Western countries may even be bothered by what Harper appears to believe in: let's do nothing and hope no one notices. Anti-environmentalism is not necessarily a left-wing issue. Conservatives, too, occasionally wish to conserve things.

Harper's anti-environmentalism really makes us look bad overseas: you can dress him up but you can't take him to Copenhagen. You may not want to become Copenhagen but you don't want the people there to hate you.

International reputations for countries like Canada are worth big money. Squandering reputations waste money. This is an odd approach for a supposedly fiscally-responsible conservative government.

Anti-environmentalism is not a sustainable political strategy. Soon, voters will expect all parties to pay lip service to it. Canadians may or may not value social democracy but they do value environmental issues, if well presented.

Therefore, the party that could really do well in the next four years is the Greens. Their leader Elizabeth May sounds creative, intelligent and articulate.

Here are some things that all parties must become known for if they want to avoid ritualized Kim Campbell/Michael Ignatieff-style humiliations:

Connect with immigrants and the youth. These people are the future of Canada.

Be fiscally responsible and do not waste money on non-value producing programs (e.g. prisons).

Address environmental issues such that money, resources and reputations are not wasted.

Repair our international reputation such that Canada has real friendships not only with people with money (e.g. the Chinese) but also with people with moral integrity and courage (e.g. the people who began the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt).

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Waterboarding may or may not have worked!

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New York Republican congressman Mike King challenged those who say that “waterboarding doesn’t work.”

Congressman King, I don’t think the main issue is whether waterboarding worked or not, the main issue--which is as clear as day in almost all places, in all minds that have a molecule of rationality, sensibility or compassion--is whether waterboarding is morally reprehensible or not.

It is similar to arguing whether slavery ‘worked’ because it happened to raise the GDP of the confederate states.

Clearly, when it involves torture, in normal political discourse outside of Stalinist Russia or Khmer Rouge Cambodia, ends don’t justify the means.

It deserves a nanosecond of reflection to utterly reject such reasoning as that by King. No, make that less than a nanosecond.

I thought we were past all such nonsense--and it is complete nonsense--laughably so [read about it next in The Onion].

We live in an age in which headlines can be taken directly from mainstream newspapers, processed ever so slightly, then directly presented as satire. This is making satirists jobs so much easier! Isn’t there an app for that?]]></content:encoded>

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Battle of Stoney Creek 2011

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Every year in Stoney Creek, Ontario for the last 30 years people have reenacted the Battle of Stoney Creek. This was a small but pivotal battle between the Americans and the British during the War of 1812.

The British at the time were a great European power while the US were destined to become a great North American power. The Americans were just establishing their nationhood, their standing army and their military capability. The British on the other hand had one of the most professional and disciplined armies in the world.

The War of 1812 is usually portrayed as a battle between two settler nations: the British (helped by Canadian militias and its native allies) and the Americans. Later in the 19th century, both the Americans and the British did rather well for themselves.

The natives were of essential help in helping the British defend itself against the American invasion. They knew the land much more intimately than the British. Their keen sense of how to survive in the northern woods was honed by thousands of years of settlement. Their dwellings and clothing appear the most suitable for warfare in northern forests. They were also known as fierce and skillful warriors who could terrorize their enemies.

Yet, as the actor portraying Chief Tecumseh at the reenactment explained, the native side did less well as result of the war than the British or the Americans. Despite their help in helping the British not lose the war, the natives were the only side that can be said to have 'lost' this war: their traditional way of life, their political autonomy and the hold on their territory was soon to be greatly diminished by the influx of mostly white settlers.

Southern Ontario and in particular the Niagara region, then as now, was an attractive target of invasion: a fruit-belt with a mild climate, with important centres of population, adjacent to impressive lakes and other natural waterways and with some of the most productive farmland in the region.

As luck would have it the War of 1812 was a draw and residents of Upper Canada remained British, later Canadian. As a result of the War of 1812 most of the current eastern boundaries between Canada and the US were defined.

Therefore, one of the war's outcomes was the establishment of a stable frontier between two large countries. This has given the lands on either side of the border many years in which the inhabitants didn't have to worry too much about the possibility of external invasion or other political or military calamities. Most other regions of the world cannot claim such stability of their frontiers so early in their political history.

This was a type of 'peace dividend' for the region, which unfortunately did not extend to its aboriginal population. Their history after this war was one of increasing marginalization - rather than stability and growth. The reverberations of this process of marginalization are still felt strongly in the region and have yet to be addressed adequately on either side of the border.

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Canada to immigrants

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In yesterday's Globe and Mail was an article by Sarah Hampson called '[The child of a revolution remembers](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/relationships/news-and-views/sarah-hampson/former-revolutionary-carmen-aguirre-looks-back---in-heels/article2052417/singlepage/#articlecontent).' It is an article about an ex-revolutionary named Carmen Aguirre who is now a successful artist in Vancouver. Aguirre sounds very interesting and has had an unusually unconventional upbringing.

Contained within the article is a quote from Aguirre that is refreshingly open and unfiltered, which raises issues seldom seen in Canadian newspapers:

<blockquote>Despite the calm her life in Canada has, she doesn't enjoy being an immigrant. "The main stereotype that I deal with is this notion that somehow this country is better than ours." A burst of derision follows. "It's 'Oh, you must feel so lucky to be here.'" Another laugh. "That's so incredibly insulting." She shoots a withering look my way. "Within the immigrant community, we talk this way, but not outside. It's the politically correct thing to say, 'Oh, isn't it beautiful here?'"</blockquote>

Clearly, Hampson is less than enthralled about such opinions and seems more interested in Aguirre's clothing than her ideas, but Aguirre raises some interesting points.

Canadians expect to hear a conventional discourse from their immigrants. Canadians, like citizens of any other country, have constructed national beliefs about immigration, which inside its borders tend to be accepted uncritically. If Canadians hear something different, such as what Aguirre eludes to, then they might be taken aback.

This is not peculiar to Canada. All countries that are open to immigration tell similar stories about themselves. It is not that the content of Canadian stories is especially obnoxious or fanciful, but the fact that they are seldom critically examined and lack input from immigrants themselves that can be corrosive to the morale of some immigrants.

Canada appears to do well in most cases with its immigration policy and its immigrant experience. Many immigrants here appear to do quite well. However, it is the 'edge' conditions, for instance people like Aguirre, where the immigration discourse can falter.

<h2>Conventional Canadian thinking about immigration</h2>

Here are some of the stories that Canadians like to tell themselves:

<h3>Superiority of the new and inferiority of the old</h3>

When people move countries, the country the immigrant is moving into (e.g. Canada) is superior to the one they left behind (otherwise, why would they want to immigrate?).

Immigrants who manage to make it to Canada are lucky and the ones who don't are unlucky.

Once you immigrate to Canada the chance that you might find some other country more attractive than Canada (with the possible exception of the USA or New Zealand) is remote. Therefore, when you move to Canada your journey has ended. Congratulations!

It should be immediately apparent to the newcomer that no matter where they might have come from, life is surely better in Canada. Therefore, immigrants should experience joy when they arrive in Canada.

After an expected period of adjustment, the overall quality of life will be better in Canada than the place the immigrant has left behind.

Immigration to Canada is generally seen as a journey that works in one direction only. Immigrants are not expected to move on from Canada. Canada is not seen as a way-point but as the final destination.

The fact that immigrants took all the trouble of moving from one country to another is thought of as proof that what they find in Canada is superior to that which they left behind.

<h3>Expectations of gratitude</h3>

Countries that allow immigration such as Canada expect that immigrants express some gratitude and humility towards their new country:

Since the new country is clearly superior, immigrants should be grateful to their new country.

It is considered bad form to complain too vocally about the new country, at least within earshot of citizens.

Adaptable immigrants will find a way to succeed and be happy in Canada. Their first step is to let go of their past and be thankful for their new situation.

Excessive complaints about their new home says more about the immigrant than about Canada and its treatment of immigrants.

If the newcomer finds things less than functional or advantageous to their situation, the immigrant should remain silent until that time they are able to figure out how their new country works.

Whenever an immigrant express discontent and disappointment in their new situation then the immigrant is heartily invited to return to where they came from. This appears to be the knee-jerk response from many who contribute comments to such stories in national newspapers: the proper role of immigrants is to not broach any hint of complaint. If they do, then they are breaking some unspoken rule.

<h3>Of course you will be happy!</h3>

Canada, being a North American country in which the pursuit of personal happiness is a prominent goal, expects its immigrants to be happy:

Immigrants may not expect to be happy the moment they arrive in Canada. However, they tend to expect that eventually they, or their children, will be happy.

There are no structural impediments that prevent immigrants from being happy.

If you're an immigrant then hard work contributes directly to your future happiness.

If an immigrant is not willing to do work that is demanding or occasionally demeaning, then the immigrants lacks the personal resources needed to succeed in their new country.

Canada ranks highly in the places where residents profess to being happy. Therefore, Canadians tend to expect its immigrants to be as happy as they are, but without thinking too deeply about things that might make immigrants unhappy.

<h3>Canada the beautiful</h3>

Canada has the self-image of being a particularly beautiful place. This idea is reinforced by some foreigners who appear to believe the same thing. The idea that what attracts immigrants to move here involves the obvious beauty of Canada is a strong one in Canada:

Newcomers to Canada will find Canada to be a beautiful place. At minimum they are expected to find the natural aspects of the country beautiful.

The more resourceful of immigrants should also find the man-made aspects of Canada to be beautiful.

Canada is likely more beautiful than the countries that immigrants come from.

Beauty is something that attracts immigrants to Canada.

The beauty of Canada is something that will be a part of the lives of an immigrant. It is not just a PR device to attract outsiders, but is actually a national reality that can be experienced wherever the immigrant may travel.

Canada can in fact be a beautiful place but beauty is in the eye of the beholder. The idea that Canada is objectively-speaking a beautiful place tends to discount the notion that immigrants are frequently attached to the beauty of their own homelands.

Canadian forms of beauty may also be an acquired taste: not everyone finds endless wheat fields, softwood forests with no hint of human settlement, or even mountains beautiful at first. That which is considered beautiful by a society tends to be

socially constructed. Immigrants initially may have quite different notions of beauty.

The things which Canadians usually present as being beautiful tend to be non-urban experiences often far removed from the daily immigrant experience, of say, waiting for the bus to get home.

<h3>Canadians are nice</h3>

One thing that you find in Canada is their pride in being 'nice' people--definitely nicer than usual. Canadians have this idea that they are nicer than most and that being proud about being nice is non-controversial--since it is so obviously true!

It is not only Canadians who feel this way. You sometimes hear Americans say this as well (a line of discourse that I like to quash as soon as it surfaces).

'Niceness' is similar to beauty. Just as Canada can in fact be beautiful, Canadians frequently are nice--even to immigrants.

However, the idea that Canadians can self-assess themselves as being nice is as suspect as the notion that Canadians can self-assess their own national beauty: it is a generalization that can quickly become oppressive, self-serving and contrary to everyday experience.

Whether Canadians are nicer than usual is beside the point--if in fact such a thing could ever be empirically established. What is more important is their attitude towards this belief. Is it really possible to be proud that you are nice and still be nice?

It is similar to the paradox of being proud that you are humble, which also entails an inherent contradiction: your humility surely ends when your pride begins. Does not your 'niceness' also end when your pride about it begins?

I think Canadians sometimes tell themselves that they are nice without considering what outsiders, such as immigrants, might think of this self-constructed belief.

This relates to Aguirre's perception of being insulted about having to feel that she is lucky by being here. Lucky she well might be, but it is insulting to be expected to feel this way from people who may know nothing about your prior experiences.

<h2>My take on Canada</h2>

Canada is a good place for many immigrants. Many immigrants to Canada do in fact build lives, which are more agreeable and productive than lives they could expect to lead in their country of origin.

Canada can be a beautiful country in both its natural and man-made aspects. Canada's history is surprisingly interesting. Canada can be a charming place with an agreeable culture.

However, the most prominent blight on the Canadian national experience and self-image is the shameful state of most of its aboriginal communities. Within these communities life can be very bleak indeed with sky-high rates of infant mortality, substance abuse, suicide and family disintegration.

This situation is dire yet seldom talked about. Canadians appear to consider the experience of its immigrants to be more important than the experiences of its aboriginal communities. Unfortunately, this is a black hole in the national consciousness that appears likely to remain.]]></content:encoded>

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Longhouses and mitochondria

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Not to get too new-agey, but a village palisade looks just like a cell wall and the lozenge-shaped longhouses look like mitochondria, which as anyone who was awake in high school biology might remember, are the ' the power plants of cells.'

<h1>Longhouse images</h1>

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Swimming and singing

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Two things that currently give me great pleasure are swimming and singing. I am a beginner singer but an experienced swimmer. Both of these activities are life-affirming and fun. Both require practice and take years to master. I have learned that both depend critically on learning how to breathe properly.

Breath control is a necessary yet not a sufficient condition for competent swimming and singing.

Though, if you can't get past the initial hurdles of learning to breathe then it is unlikely you will find much enjoyment from these two activities. But if you do, the rewards can be substantial.

<h2 dir="ltr">Swimming</h2>

When I get into the water I feel like I'm at home in a friendly environment. I have spent many hours swimming towards the bottom of pools and lakes, with not a care in the world. Underwater for me is a peaceful, relaxing place. But lately, I spend less time swimming to the bottom and more time lap-swimming in a chlorinated pool.

With swimming, what you want to avoid at all costs is the sensation of drowning. You get this feeling when water gets into your mouth or nose, and down your throat. Only a tiny bit of water is required. It is very unpleasant.

Another annoyance is the tingling sensation when water gets too far up your nose. These sensations are what turn off many beginning swimmers. The trick to enjoying swimming, of course, is to avoid having these sensations at all.

To do this you need to blow out a steady stream of little bubbles out of your nose -- and sometimes your mouth -- so no water can get in; you use outflowing air to prevent the inflow of water. By blowing air out of your lungs underwater you also prepare for your next breath at the surface.

When you know how to swim, you don't think about breathing when you jump into a pool because those skills have been automated through practice. If you've achieved this automation, then you can concentrate on other things that might need improvement such as your strokes or body position.

Or, you can simply enjoy swimming and let your mind wander. I sometimes get a lot of thinking done when my mind can wander productively.

One of the reasons I love swimming is that the breathing part causes me no concern or reason to panic. I don't think about it at all; my body seems to know how to do it all on its own.

<h2 dir="ltr">Singing</h2>

Similarly, one goal of learning to sing is to be able to control your voice so you can produce musical tones without the feeling of panic and impending doom.

With singing there are lots of things to consider: the notes of the melody, their duration and what the lyrics are and what they mean. This can be a cognitively demanding activity -- especially when you don't know how to sing very well.

However, in a performance situation you don't want to be thinking too much. You want your 'muscle memory' to take over and your brain to go into autopilot. You need to automate as much of this skill as possible. This obviously requires lots of

practice.

Singing without proper breath control can be like drowning. It is not as serious as drowning in water of course but I imagine it would be very debilitating and embarrassing during a performance.

The remedy is to remember to breathe (best done between words and phrases) and to use your breath efficiently while you sing. If you can't do this, then just fake it and catch a breath as soon you can, without panicking.

Your vocal chords need air passing over them to create sound. Without this no sound comes out. If you run out of air at the wrong point, then you won't be able to produce a sufficient volume of sound.

However, if you have lots of air in your lungs then you can fill a large, resonant hall with your dulcet tones, which can be very gratifying.

PS. if anyone needs vocal tuition in the Hamilton, Ontario area, I would highly recommend my singing teacher Lucy Bledig. She really knows her stuff.]]></content:encoded>

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Political effort and our happiness

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Happiness requires effort. People who do little tend not to be happy. People who go through terrible things are not necessarily miserable. Often they can be the happiest people around.

The great Italian humanist Primo Levi is a good example (though I believe he did suffer from depression later in life). Despite the fact he witnessed the Holocaust he was able to write a very moving literary account of his experiences in Auschwitz. I imagine that writing this must have required great effort. But we are so much richer as a result of his efforts.

I think about politicians who promote reactionary ‘solutions’ such as starting wars, policies that further stigmatize the poor and the disenfranchised, or even such relative trivialities as taking out existing bike lanes in car-clogged cities.

Are they following their own political ideology? Certainly. But another explanation is that maybe they’re just being lazy. They don’t expend the energy required to recognize the destructiveness of their words and actions. They don’t attempt to come to better-integrated solutions because such solutions are hard to come by and require effort--sometimes Herculean effort. If they did expend this energy they might realize that the most productive path may require subtleties of thought.

Creative paths or policies tend not to destroy value. They enhance it. Not just for you and your pals, but for everyone. Politics need not be a zero-sum game.

Reaction takes less effort than creative thought because it depends so crucially on received opinion. Received opinion by its very nature is passive. Excessive passivity suggests laziness.

Sometimes the best idea is not the intuitive solution--it is often the counter-intuitive one. Quantum physics is the craziest thing you could ever think of, but it appears to run our universe.

To see the value in counter-intuitive solutions requires lots of thought and a consensus between other sentient beings that good ideas might sound crazy, but they also might just work.]]></content:encoded>

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LRT and Hamilton's industrial future

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The LRT (light rail transit, a scheme to use streetcars for public transit) seems like a smart idea -- one that will encourage productivity and the generation of cultural and material wealth in this city. I believe it will encourage urban revitalization and help to create a critical mass of other good things happening.

First, a personal disclosure. If the LRT is built it will help us personally: the proposed LRT B-line is down at the end of our street. It will surely raise our property values. But since the B-line is many kilometers long, many in this city might be in a similar position.

There have been several articles in the last few weeks suggesting that the LRT concept doesn't have much support from the current mayor and his city manager.

I believe that if this opportunity is not seized right now the momentum will be lost.

There is an argument that all-day GO train service is more important than LRT. Most LRT supporters would not pit these two issues at odds with one another. They are surely complementary: all-day GO train suggests that much money for Hamilton can be made in Toronto, while the LRT plan suggests that money might be made right here in town. Both ideas should be able to co-exist in perfect harmony.

<h3 dir="ltr">Transparency of decision-making</h3>

One of the benefits of democracy is that decisions are made in an open manner. If a bad idea is about to be axed then it is clear from the public record why this occurred. If an idea is good and it gathers support from many sectors of the population then you expect it to do well.

The enemy of democracy is the idea that the real decision-making takes place behind closed doors.

The reason that doors are usually closed in what is purportedly a democratic process is that the people making the decision to be not want to be held accountable for their own decisions. They want the power to make the decisions but not suffer the consequences if these decisions turn south.

This latest LRT decision seems to fail the transparency test. It is not clear why this LRT idea -- given the broad base of support which it has gained -- was so abruptly de-prioritized. Is there something here that the ordinary citizen is missing?

<h3 dir="ltr">Post-industrial malaise and beyond</h3>

One thing that really defines current-day Hamilton is the concern about what it wants to become when, and if, all its factories close. In the past, people made money and found employment from industrial production. In the future much less money will likely be made this way.

Hamilton puts itself on the 'psycho-analytical couch' perhaps more frequently than other places I lived because it really is puzzling what Hamilton should do for itself in future. I think the LRT debate involves such considerations.

What is clear is that new industries will need to spring up to fill the employment gaps created by the closure of hundreds of Hamilton's former factories. The nature of these new industries is the source of much debate and anxiety.

This might be like the Pittsburgh experience, but one that is taking much, much longer.

In Pittsburgh it seems like the possibility of a reinvented industrialism was erased almost immediately by the unseemly and quick evacuation of almost all industrial production. If that city was to do well, then people saw that it must go ‘post-industrial.’

The sudden loss of employment in Pittsburgh was both a blessing and a curse. A blessing because air quality improved overnight, but a curse because many hundreds of thousands of residents found they had to move from Pittsburgh in order to survive.

At least what this dramatic de-industrialization did was to focus the minds of its civic leaders.

However, in In Hamilton there still might be possibilities of investment and employment in heavy industry.

Therefore, there is significant ambiguity here about whether a post-industrial future might be able to co-exist within a continuing industrial city. There is much to recommend such an idea. Hamilton needs all the money it can get. It is in no position to discourage future industrialization, despite how unattractive this might seem to those who prefer their Hamilton to be grit free.

Therefore, Hamilton may or may not be in the middle of a post-industrial malaise. Yet it may be generations before Hamilton is truly post-industrial. It is quite likely that to become truly ‘post-industrial’ is not even an appropriate goal for Hamilton.

A knowledge economy is certainly attractive in many ways, but what seems most appropriate for Hamilton is a mixed knowledge/industrial economy.

If Hamilton’s economy remains mixed this makes the job of planning for future development trickier. Hamilton must acknowledge the important role that ‘dirty jobs’ play in this city while at the same time encourage -- in a forceful way -- the influx of people who have no interest in dirty jobs.

<h3 dir="ltr">LRT and post-industrialization</h3>

How then does this involve the LRT debate?

I believe that the issue of whether Hamilton is to have a knowledge-based future or an industrial one is related to the acceptance of the LRT.

LRT seems more aligned to a post-industrial future, while ‘no LRT’ seems best suited to an industrial status quo political position. [I would be interested to know if there is any sociological support for this idea].

In the LRT debate not only the appeal of various technical solutions are at issue but it is also a visioning exercise that involves the psyche of the whole city. What does Hamilton want to become?

In Hamilton there is often the hint of what kinds of pleasures are appropriate for an industrial city of its station. A familiar trope found in the civic discourse is ‘failures that originate in hubris.’ Perhaps the desire for an LRT system -- like what you find in the well-heeled cities of Europe -- is excessive and unseemly.

LRT opponents suggest that LRT is an inappropriate goal for Hamilton; that it is too fancy, costs too much money and that the public transit status quo is acceptable. LRT supporters counter that the LRT is not only an appropriate and sensible goal but actually the most financially rational solution.

In the event that Hamilton fails to find its inner Pittsburgh and does not become completely post-industrial in short order, then is LRT still an appropriate solution to public transit and city-building? Many, including myself, believe yes.]]></content:encoded>

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Portion size: American vs Dutch

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A recent trip to Pittsburgh illustrated something striking about the eating habits of two countries we've lived in: USA and the Netherlands.

In the USA the pattern for food portion size is 'more is more.' In the Netherlands it is 'less is more.' As someone who watches his weight, I have come to appreciate the Dutch approach.

In America, portion size is a market-driven phenomenon. There the market dictates that people should be presented with more food than they will ever need. Food in low-end restaurants -- which we tend to frequent -- is glossy, high in saturated fats and involves comically high calorie counts. We all know where this leads, and it isn't pretty.

But as a tourist, this can be an attractive and entertaining proposal. "Let's take another trip to the buffet, we're on vacation!"

This is fun in the short-term but it does encourage obesity. It is a lead anchor wrapped around the ankle of the American public. It is death by a thousand cookies.

Clearly, open buffets are more a threat to the survival of the USA than are jihadists. "We have found the enemy and it is us."

The Netherlands, in contrast, is a deeply Calvinist country where food is looked on a necessity for sustaining life rather than a cheap entertainment, or something that will bring pleasure. You eat to live, you don't live to eat. New visitors are sometimes taken aback by this, trained as they are to view the Dutch purely through the prism of soft drugs and prostitution.

I have been through many a Dutch office luncheon, which typically involves rolls with a single slice of cheese. They carefully count out the quantities required so if there are ten attendees there are exactly ten rolls.

When you first encounter this behavior you are taken aback, trained as we are to see an affluent society as one in which there is always more than enough to eat.

When the Dutch see food consumption become a pleasure they call this 'Burgundian.' This suggests a more Catholic, free and easy approach to food, as found in countries to the south such as Belgium and France. These countries are known for the quality of their food as well as a complete lack of Protestant guilt in consuming it.

However, as a way to run a country there is much to be said about limiting caloric intake and fostering guilt in consuming more than you need. It lengthens lives and increases the quality of life. This is why the Dutch are so tall and slender. They save money, look great, all the time honouring their forebears who survived hard times with a few potatoes and a stinky herring, eaten from a wooden bowl.

One thing about fatness is that the rich tend to be less fat than the poor. This is especially true in the USA. As Duchess of Windsor said: "You can never be too rich or too thin." In Pittsburgh, obesity appears to be a problem. In Manhattan, much less so.

By this logic, the Dutch take the path of the trophy wife or the socialite, while many Americans take the path of those less interested in the social value of their appearance -- they depress their 'market value' by their discretionary, dietary behaviors. This is somewhat puzzling in a highly competitive, market-driven economy. In Europe it seems there is a socially

acceptable ‘floor’ beneath which most prefer not to tread.

Of course you can have both a highly developed ‘Burgundian’ approach to food, as well as a tendency not to become huge. This is what you find in many countries, such as France, Belgium or Japan. These places seem like the best of both worlds. Obesity there is less of an issue, while excellent restaurants attract both fat and thin.

This is probably why so many Dutch vacation in the south of France.]]></content:encoded>

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Ben and Biking

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Yesterday at school, Ben had a demonstration of a road bike simulator that allowed him to compete and pedal against other kids. He won his race. He now has great enthusiasm for the idea that there is fun to be had behind dropped handlebars.

He had this brainwave in Dundas, Ontario which just so happens to be an excellent place for road biking. There is a charming road-bike themed cafe in the centre of Dundas as well as an excellent bike shop. Dundas lies directly under the Niagara Escarpment. Road bikers really like going up and down the Escarpment.

A teacher of Ben's remarked that kids who pursue the sports of swimming, running and biking have the highest grade point averages in high school (which is something I didn't know). It might be because these sports demand that the student focus intensely on repetitive, yet enjoyable, tasks.]]</content:encoded>

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The Coroner Takes an Interest in Cycling

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The provincial [coroner](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/story/2011/10/24/ontario-coroner-cycling-death-review.html) will now examine the public health issues of cycling fatalities in the province.

This is a good move because it takes the cycling debate away from excessive politicization (e.g. 'war against the car') into a less heated, more evidence-based, epidemiological direction.

Most cyclists would agree that cycling in places like Toronto is much more dangerous than it needs to be. Lots of cyclists get killed. One reason is the limited scope of cycling infrastructure in the city.

Toronto has an increasingly crowded and chronically underfunded public transit system. Cycling should be a sensible way of getting around town. But too often it isn't. Many more people would cycle in Toronto if only it were made safer.]]></content:encoded>

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Music Theory Guy

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Hi Stephen,

Thanks for your reply. It got me into thinking about what I like about your work and site.

I think that people learning music really don't get the basics about music theory. I think music is one of those things that you can do quite happily for years - perhaps your whole lifetime - and not understand the basics of music theory. In my case, I can play many instruments but have never had the sense that I really 'get' the fundamentals (I am a middle-aged architect and writer).

This is fine for many who may lack an understanding of these basics but eventually they will hit a wall beyond which they will not be able to go further. Then they must go back and try to understand how the system works on a deeper level. For many this is too daunting a task.

For instance, if you want to start composing music then some knowledge of music theory is essential. I think a lot more people would compose if they just understood enough about how music theory works. Probably, lots of people don't compose because of this reason.

A lot of music theory involves acquiring an understanding how Standard Musical Notation works. This appears to be a very powerful system that abstracts out a lot of complexity. The more I learn about this system I more I can appreciate its power and elegance.

Standard Musical Notation is similar to modern computer programming languages. The best ones abstract away a lot of complexity and allow the brain to begin to think creatively about the real problem at hand, which I believe is about self-expression and making deeper connection between ideas.

What I like about the Music Theory Guy approach:

- It assumes that anyone can learn this stuff, that is, music theory expressed in Standard Musical Notation
- It is appropriate for all ages
- It goes step by step and it is modular in approach
- It proposes that music theory is not some add-on at the end but that it is essential right from the start
- It doesn't try to shame people if you don't know it (why feel bad about something if it has never been adequately taught to you?)
- It explains it in a way that is just about impossible to not understand, if you go through your material enough times.

I find I go through your videos many times because I find them soothing to listen to. I will never tire of hearing about the Circle of Fifths, which I consider to have information packed into it than anything else I know. [Perhaps I should finally commit this thing to memory!]

I have no criticisms of your approach whatsoever. I would just like you to keep on going. This I see as an open-ended process that could go on forever.

If you were to keep on going on this project then eventually you would be explaining ideas about modern music which most assume are completely beyond their understanding. You would have provided for the public an unbroken chain of tuition which could help many to get to an advanced level of musical understanding. This I see as a significant accomplishment.

The questions I have about music theory are (these are just ideas for future work, not as requests for information):

The standard musical notation system obviously has a long cultural history behind it. Will this system evolve or is it fine the way it is?

Will future styles of serious or popular music eventually hit a wall in which the notation system will become inadequate? Will 'reform' of Standard Musical Notation ever become necessary?

In my experience in software design, great progress is enabled sometimes with the design of new languages and systems of notation. Is music in a similar position?

On a more pedestrian note:

How do melodies and chord progressions work? Do they just use the notes of the key the song is in?

The Nashville Numbering System seems like an accessible way of describing chord progressions and the structure of popular music. (e.g. 1, 5, 4 instead of I, V, IV). Does such an idea have any value in serious music education?

Should children be taught how to compose at the same time they are taught how to play an instrument? (We have twin sons aged 11 who are fortunate to have an excellent music education program in their local state school). Do you think these boys should be taught how to compose, say in Sibelius Junior Version?

Thanks and look forward to seeing more Music Theory Guy videos in my inbox!

Michael]]></content:encoded>

<excerpt:encoded><![CDATA[A reply to an email I received from the Music Theory Guy, an English music teacher in a London secondary school who believes that music students should have a firm grounding in music theory.]]></excerpt:encoded>

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composition. However my first marching band teacher, Mr. Campus, wrote about 75% of our music. It wasn't uncommon
for him to pass out a piece (written in his crazy music notation scribbles), and then later tell us to play something a little bit
different than what was written on paper (my first steps into improvisation perhaps).

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I must admit, I did try to mimic him a bit...trying to come up with unique tunes and put them to paper. But I find no shortage of awesome music that has already been penned to play. And my creations pale in comparison. You always hear those stories of those people who never learned music theory and in fact, don't even know how to read music -- who become musical geniuses. That brings the question: Can music composition be learned, or is it something that you must have a talent for?

It's interesting that my experience with computer programming is pretty similar. I enjoyed learning and using Java, C++ and various scripting languages. But I distinctly remember that when I wrote a program, my code would work, but it would always be considerably longer than my peers. My brain just doesn't have the knack for coming up with shortcuts and smart logical loop instructions that makes for short, efficient code. But that's ok....I have talents in other areas (so I would like to believe anyway).

I wholeheartedly support long-term and thorough music instruction in schools. It makes the children into well-rounded learners. However I'm on the fence about music composition. I feel like that's an area that is similar to the relationship between physical education and sports. Everyone should take gym, but not everyone needs to be on the football team.]]></wp:comment_content>

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education is basic to good education and well-connected neural development. I don't know if composition is like playing on
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like writing. It explains a lot that doesn't seem to get explained in normal music education. It seems to connect with a 'maker
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ABRSM Theory Music Exams. I personally found a lot of abstract theory laid out in the official textbooks of the ABRSM
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My visit to Halifax, NS

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<p>Recently, I visited Halifax, Nova Scotia to celebrate my brother's 60th birthday. I have a long history in Halifax. My parents, when they were alive, lived about 30km down the coast. I went to architecture school there. I know the city fairly well, yet I found this recent visit to be a bit different than previous ones.</p>
<p>I have always liked visiting Halifax because it is a charming place with various seaside attractions, great wooden architecture, charming old buildings, military fortifications that you climb around on and an interesting waterfront. These things are still around.</p>
<p>For English-speaking Canada it is older than most cities. It is not nearly as old as Montreal or Quebec City, but it doesn't give the sense that it is a big-box mall pretending to be a real city. It is the real deal.</p>
<p>In the past, despite the relative poverty of NS compared to Ontario there was always this sense that the government looked after most people, and that regardless, even if things were not that prosperous in the interior of the province, at least Halifax which is major regional service centre, would do alright.</p>
<p>What surprised me is the contrast with where I live, Hamilton, Ontario. Previously, Ontario always was the 'have-province,' while Nova Scotia was the 'have-not.' This is why in previous generations, the traffic would usually go from Nova Scotia to Ontario, Quebec or out West. If you had ambition you would leave town for greener pastures. I found it hard to conceive of any other pattern until now.</p>
<p>Now it looks like if you want to enjoy a charmed life, you might want to consider living in Halifax.</p>
<p>Halifax has beautiful women jogging by in Lululemon gear, eager cyclists who look like they are rushing to a software design seminar. There is no shortage of trendy coffee shops, Japanese lunchtime spots and bike stores selling touring bikes that you could use to explore the Cabot Trail. It looks like a bit like pre-recession College St in Toronto.</p>
<p>Halifax also has a fantastic full-length waterfront boardwalk and a state-of-the-art Farmer's Market that would not look out of place in Zurich or Oslo. You can imagine well-heeled American tourists tripping over themselves to buy souvenirs in the shops or drinking micro-brewns in dozens of stone-walled pubs.</p>
<p>Ontario these days, on the other hand, is taking on some of the rust-belt characteristics of say an Ohio, Michigan or Pennsylvania: the implosion of a once-prosperous manufacturing sector, cities in which new investment or civic amenities go wanting, or even civic governments that care about what citizens want. There is gloom in the air here and many residents are at a loss in how they feel about that.</p>
<p>Of course, the rest of the country, raised on the idea that Ontario always thought much too highly of itself and its alleged cultural advantages, is delighted in this reversal of fortunes.</p>
<p>Things that a cities like Hamilton or Toronto might learn from Halifax:</p>

Civic amenities such as integrated bike path systems, farmer's markets and waterfront boardwalks are very effective in attracting educated young people, as well as visitors. These people are always on the look out for new progressive places to set up shop (especially right after they get their professional degrees at Dalhousie).
A place has to feel 'cool' in order to attract these kind of people. Perceptions of being cool come from many interactions that people might have while visiting and can't easily be manufactured on demand.
Reactionary or 'Tea Party' style politics is the opposite of cool. It is a symptom of a place in decline; it is when people with money feel that in order to protect what they have, they have to start oppressing those without. This tactic never works out very well for economic and cultural development in a city. A civic race to the bottom will never win any place new friends. Downward spirals are never pretty. Life cannot be not just about lowering taxes for people who already enjoy the fruits of the status quo.
Political systems must give the appearance of being responsive to not only the practical aspects of life but also the deeper issues such as quality of life, art and design.
A city is should at least appear to be interested in high design standards for new civic infrastructure and the idea that

cities should have amenities that give pleasure. In places where the weather is not all that attractive, design can fill a very useful niche.

Cities must work flat-out--continuously--to attract newcomers with new ideas and preferably a bit of money, otherwise they soon wither and die.

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Review of 'The Reader'

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I just saw this 2008 film, which won an Best Actress Oscar for Kate Winslet. It is an unusual film in that it combines two things that are not commonly connected: the issues of illiteracy and of German guilt over the Holocaust.

The film is about an intense affair in the summer of 1958 between a gifted high school student named Michael Berg and an older but still attractive working-class woman named Hanna Schmitz, played by Kate Winslet. Hanna is a lonely, somewhat bitter person—a type not unusual in post-war Germany. Later it turns out this woman was an SS guard at Auschwitz who participated in atrocities during WWII.

In *The Reader* the boy introduces Hanna to literature by reading to her. The boy is a conduit for this women to the world of literature—a world to which she has had little previous exposure.

This boy is a good position to be this conduit because he is lucky enough to be getting a good education within a classical system, which traditionally has had the goal of furthering the possibly counter-intuitive idea that books are the foundation of culture and that to understand what their contents mean is a necessary and perhaps sufficient aspect of becoming cultured.

The thing that Hanna most values in her affair with the boy is having books which she has not yet read, read to her.

When the boy reads to Hanna at the beginning of their affair, he lacks two important bits of information: first, that Hanna is illiterate, and second, that she is a former guard at Auschwitz—a job which one can assume is soul-destroying for both its victims and perpetrators.

Later, at her trial for war crimes, it becomes clear that an important, undisclosed factor in her choice of career path is influenced greatly by her illiteracy: she probably joined the SS in order to avoid having to read on the job. The film skillfully uses fact this not to excuse her behavior but to add an element of ambiguity to the moral choices she made. In the end, she is made a scapegoat for the institutionalized criminality involved in running extermination camps, which of course were designed to humiliate and eventually kill most of the people they processed.

In the movie, the Michael Berg character at Hanna's trial is in a position to bring a crucial fact to the attention of the authorities: that Hanna was and is illiterate and couldn't have been the one to write and organize the atrocity for which Hanna is being tried. She is guilty of a war crime certainly, but that she was probably not its ring-leader.

Berg decides to do nothing and his failure to act causes him pain. It is presented as him having the chance to step up to the plate but that he declined this opportunity. He let the moment pass and paid for his passivity for the greater part of his life. It is only much later, when he tries to connect to his estranged daughter that he begins to open up and start telling what he knows. The film implies that this opening up creates a new beginning for Berg.

In the context of the time, to defend a former SS guard, in a country which was eager to exploit scapegoats, would take significant courage. He lacked this courage at the time.

One message of the movie is that even if you are, in effect, helping a former Auschwitz guard, you should still behave morally. This lesson is one that Berg's law professor tries unsuccessfully to teach his student.

The second takeaway is the profound life-altering choices and behaviors that illiteracy can make on people. People, if they are illiterate, usually view their illiteracy with shame. They blame themselves for being illiterate. Having two dyslexic children ourselves we have seen this dynamic first hand.

A failure to read is taken to be a general failure in personality, intelligence or motivation. It is presented as reason for feeling personal shame. Unfortunately, the idea that non-readers are either lazy, bad, or stupid is as prevalent today as it's always been. It remains as one of society's most enduring and destructive stereotypes and prejudices.

It seems that the reason most people are illiterate is either because they have not had the opportunity to learn, or that their brains are not structured in a way that their learning to read is natural. Luckily, reading is a skill that most children take to like ducks to water.

In the movie, it is not clarified why Hanna doesn't read: is she from an impoverished background, or is she dyslexic? Probably, a little bit of both.

One of the most moving points of the movie is when Hanna and Michael go on a cycling holiday into the countryside and happen upon a church or abbey in which a children's choir is practicing.

Hanna, who remember, is hiding two fundamental secrets—that she is former death camp guard who also happens to be illiterate—sits down on a pew and listens to the choral music wafting from above. The expression of astonishment on her face when she finds this performance moving is priceless.

Her look is one of disbelief that she wasn't aware that such a thing existed—that children's voices singing choral music can be an overwhelming sensory and aesthetic experience. She seems to silently ask her boy lover "Were you aware that such a thing existed?" He seems to reply: "Yes, I was aware it existed and I'm moved that you find it moving."

This brings us to the underlying mystery of the 20th century—how a country, Germany, which has made so many fundamental contributions to world culture in literature, philosophy and even choral music—could descend into the utter darkness of a place like Auschwitz.

What The Reader encourages is the idea that this question is more nuanced and ambiguous than it first appears and that truth is ultimately stranger than fiction.]]></content:encoded>

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Suez Crisis, Part II

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I noticed a [in today's local paper about Britain wanting to increase its naval presence in the Persian Gulf. I immediately thought that the Persian Gulf was quite a long way from the mist-shrouded shores of Great Britain.](http://www.thespec.com/news/canada/article/660440--britain-opens-door-to-more-military-power-in-persian-gulf)

This story also reminded me instantly of the [of 1956. This is when Britain, France and Israel fought back against the nationalization of the Suez Canal by a newly nationalistic Egyptian government under Nasser. The USA at that time told them to back off and reminded them that responses common during a colonial era were no longer appropriate, and that new geo-political patterns had emerged. The former colonial powers were also told that they would have far fewer opportunities to throw their weight around and that the new super-power in town \(then, the USA\) would be calling the shots.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suez_Crisis)

I predict that the same thing will happen in the Persian Gulf with the West's confrontation with Iran. However, in this case it seems like the most of the West will fall into the role that Britain and France played at the time of the Suez Crisis.

If the current Iran confrontation becomes a live war—and it increasingly looks like it will—then countries of the West will be told in no uncertain terms that the rules of the game have changed, in a similar way to 1956, and that they should back off.

I predict that China and other BRIC nations will be the ones doing the telling this time.]]</content:encoded>

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Playing the bells at St. Paul's, Hamilton

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This weekend, the boys and I visited [St Paul's Presbyterian Church](http://stpaulshamilton.ca/) in downtown Hamilton in a [Doors Open 2012](http://www.doorsopenhamilton.ca/) event. This church has a splendid Casavant Frères organ, which the organist was playing when we arrived. St. Paul's is a beautiful Victorian church, built in 1857, that has wonderful stained glass windows and wood carvings. Like most other churches of its type, it appears to suffer from a declining congregation despite its outstanding architectural attractions.

What we thought was especially entertaining in this visit was that they allowed Doors Open visitors to sound the bells of St. Paul's bell tower using their mechanical controller levers, which are located in a console up in the bell tower. These levers were marked with musical note names and numbers. A carillonneur could consult a musical score that showed these notes and numbers. It wasn't that difficult to get the hang of the system after a few minutes.

This we thought was a unusually good opportunity for people to play with the bells of an historic church. In fact, I can't think of another time that I have ever encountered such a thing.

This opportunity the boys took up with gusto and were soon hammering the levers as enthusiastically as they could and attempted to play 'Mary had a Little Lamb' with eventual success. A church warden looked on sympathetically and tolerantly as two 12 year old boys tried their hardest to create acoustic mayhem using the church bells. The boys were impressed that the outside city could hear the sounds they produced.

We all thought that this [Doors Open visit](http://2009/10/door-open-smithville/) was reminiscent of another visit to another Presbyterian church in the little town of Smithville, where the church tour guides were kind enough to allow the boys to operate their historic hand-pumped organ. This also greatly excited the boys in a similar way.]]></content:encoded>

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Workshop@CSI: Urban Design Using Sketchup

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Friday, November 16, 2012. 1:00—2:30pm
CSI-Annex. 720 Bathurst Street, Toronto, ON
Meeting Room #4 (3rd floor)

View the event listing and poster here. Sign up for this workshop here, or contact michael@ambitiouscity.com, or just show up.

Sketchup is an innovative 3D program, with some compelling features:

Create 3D volumes by extrusion (very cool)

Navigate easily through 3D spaces

Make components that save lots of work

Create 3D forms from photographs

Map images onto 3D forms

Compelling issues may be raised during this workshop, such as:

What is design, in general?

Do people design cities or do cities design themselves?

Who should get to design a city?

Should urban design be democratic?

Is design a top-down or a bottom-up process?

Should we live in cities, or should we live in the country?

What can we do to make Toronto a better place?

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Design Seminars@CSI

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design innovation, design thinking and creative approaches to design practice. Bring your lunch. #The first design seminar
took place in the fabulous new Design Commons Cluster at CSI Annex!

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Virtual Choir@CSI

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for Social Innovation, Toronto (CSI)? The idea is for many singers to sing some vocal piece on their own at their own computers and then combine their contributions together later using music editing software, such as Ableton Live or Pro Tools.

The most famous example of this is the work of

I think the CSI idea (whatever that might be) could be promoted using music, specifically modern, secular, choral music that communicates ‘CSI’ in an emotionally moving way.

What I was thinking for CSI is the rock-bottom budget version of Whitacre's idea. Sing something really simple, which even non-vocalists might be able to sing. The piece could be scored using

Maybe people could hear their parts using headphones and then record their voices without re-recording the reference track. Another alternative is to record all tracks on my computer using my Apogee One microphone, one at a time. We could set up a little DIY sound booth somewhere. People could hear the music on headphones and sing it at the same time. They could see the music scroll by in the Sibelius score.

Even if you can't read music it should be possible to contribute. In my experience, some really good vocalists don't know how to read music. My own sight-reading skills are quite mediocre, and my pitch is far from perfect, but that doesn't mean I can't stumble through a score and not completely embarrass myself.

Some might ask, why not just have everyone sing at the same time like a regular choir? I think that would be much more difficult because it requires someone to be able to direct a whole gaggle of people singing. Being a vocal conductor is a difficult task that requires quite a bit of musical knowledge to do well. Plus, everyone has to be at the same place at the same time.

If the Virtual Choir CSI idea sounds like something that interests you, then fill out this

thanks,

Michael Cumming

michael@ambitiouscity.com]]></content:encoded>

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Berlin Babylon (2001) at the Goethe Institut

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I expected a punkish or boundary-exploring film—especially considering it has a soundtrack by the German industrial band Einstürzende Neubauten (Collapsing New Buildings); something along the lines of the excellent Legendary Sin Cities: Berlin (2005).

I thought the film would reflect aspects of one of the more counter-cultural cities in the world. Unfortunately, I was disappointed.

My negative reaction to the film surprised me greatly. After the screening I talked to a Canadian woman who also didn't like the film. We both seemed to love Berlin, but didn't like this portrayal of it. It didn't seem to reflect the Berlin that we knew.

Implicit in the title Berlin Babylon, for me, is the idea of a place where new forms of awareness or expression are created: one in which perhaps social or sexual taboos are relaxed compared to most other places. I expected some allusion to the Weimar days when things were wild, free and disturbingly unsustainable. But there was none of that.

Instead I found a long and occasionally boring film featuring well-known German and international architects making banal observations about the fair city of Berlin.

The film didn't appear to have an organizing principle or idea. It seemed to focus on the challenges of building taller than normal buildings in the vicinity of Potsdamer Platz or Alexanderplatz, for architects, municipal officials and building owners.

There was little mention of the history of Berlin. Berlin, of course, has a very interesting history. It was an Imperial City, a metropolitan latecomer to the Industrial Revolution and the centre of Nazi oppression. It was bombed during the war, divided, and then re-joined. Now it is one of the great magnet cities of Europe and the world; one in which diverse cultures mingle and create new forms of expression.

Berlin has such a rich and interesting history, in so many ways including architectural. Making a boring film about Berlin would be a challenge I thought.

Berlin Babylon is the opposite of a counter-cultural statement. It is an exercise in listening to well-established and privileged elites. The ideas emanating from such people are not insignificant or necessarily ill-informed of course, it is just that one might expect opposing viewpoints from other sources.

What also struck me about the film is how dated it seemed. It was like a time capsule from a faraway time: the nineties. One before 9/11, before global financial collapse, before doubts in the practicalities of Euro integration, or perhaps doubts about the stability or sensibilities that elites—European elites in this case—bring to the table.]]></content:encoded>

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