The Suburbs as Transitional Space:
Mapping Edge City Heritage Through Contemporary Art

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BACKGROUND

As a topic of conversation, Canadian suburbs tend to inspire little beyond critiques of their corporate monopolies, car-centric infrastructure, and lack of diverse recreational activities.

Despite its present synonymy with homogeneity, the corporate suburb that dominates today's spatial imaginary has not always been the standard in Canada.

The making of place is a complex process that encompasses various technological and social structures. Visualized by journalist Alex Marshall as a "three-legged stool of politics, economics, and transportation," place must be considered as similarly fluid and fluctuating as the intersecting systems that produce it.[1]

According to Richard Harris, Professor in the School of Geography and Earth Sciences at McMaster University, the rise of a "corporate, packaged suburb that was designed, financed, and built in an increasingly standard way,"[2] can be traced to the years between 1945 and 1969. Though this category of suburban form does not encompass the entirety of its rise to prominence in Canada, it has become the definitive representation of the suburbs, which

in turn has solidified accompanying assumptions about the banality of suburban life.

Prior to this period of corporate monopoly in the "early twentieth century, there was no such thing as *the* suburban way of life." Evidence from available municipal services and the home appliances indicate instead, a "diversity of suburban living." During this time, the built form of the suburbs was comparably varied and classifiable into four categories: elite, unplanned, industrial and middle class.

However, due to economic developments such as the rise of corporate finance and the large costs of settling undeveloped land, by 1960, suburbs were primarily being constructed by corporate developers, becoming "more uniform and ubiquitous than ever and were leading symbols of a new consumer lifestyle.[3] Eventually, the varied categories of suburban development came to be dominated by vast and standardized corporate suburbs.

REPPRESENTATION AND EXPERIENCE

While the appearance of Canadian suburbs became homogenized, populations moving into these communities did not. In the Community Foundation of Mississauga's 2013 Vital Signs report, the Region of Peel was reported to have the highest proportion of immigrants in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), with 50.5% of residents being born outside of Canada. Of

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[1] Alex Marshall, *How Cities Work: Suburbs, Sprawl and the Roads Not Taken*, x (Texas, USA: University of Texas Press, 2010).

[2] Richard Harris, "The Rise of the Corporate Suburb 1945 – 1960" 132, *Creeping Conformity: How Canada Became Suburban, 1900 – 1960* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

[3] Ibid, "Creeping Conformity?" 164.

that 50.5%, 57.6% of immigrants reside in Mississauga.

The high percentage of immigrant populations in GTA 'edge cities' indicates that, though development of the landscape is prescribed, the social dynamics are richly layered, as evidenced in the linguistic profiles of the area, where top languages range from Tamil in Scarborough[4], Chinese and Farsi in North York[5], to Punjabji, Urdu and Polish in the Region of Peel.[6]

Contemporary theories of place continue to shift towards definitions that advocate for conceptualizations that are "eventmental," that see place as "something in process, [and] something unconfinable to a thing."[7] When thinking about suburban heritage, it is thus necessary to position edge cities similarly as places in constant states of becoming, where "public memory [is] part of a more complex epistemology of self, community, space, and place that inhabits the local," with the ability to normalize "a history of entitlement and exclusion through the arrangement, regulation,

and policing of space, including memorial space."[8]

CONTEMPORARY ART AND HERITAGE

To account for edge cities' persistent state of becoming, a method of sharing narratives of place is proposed to be found in contemporary artistic practice.

Contemporary art is a combination of research, critical analysis, experimentation and play. Its production communicates ideas, often with the purpose of questioning existing ideologies. Art objects are closely linked to the artists that produce them, and render visible an artist's subject position. The visibility of this subjectivity, is where contemporary art derives its value in discussions of heritage.

The proximity of the artist to their work, establishes what Professor Diana Taylor terms, "archival memory." In historical documents, some museum practices "separates the source of 'knowledge' from the knower – in time and space," where institutional "choreographies of meaning"[9] throughout the life of a document are unavailable. Conversely, contemporary art's close linkages to authorship and intention, creates space for otherwise marginalized narratives and alternative worldviews, making the presence of contemporary art in heritage institutions worthy of exploration.

In the context of the suburbs, contemporary artists are using their practice to challenge dismissals of their presumed static realities. The selected artists discussed and reconceptualized the 'edge city' by reframing its symbols, the suburban home, the plaza,

[4] City of Toronto Community Council Profiles, 2011 Census "Area D – Scarborough: Language Groups" 2011. http://www1.toronto.ca/City%20Of%20Toronto/City%20Planning/Wards/Files/pdf/C/CCA_ESC%20Census%20Profile%202011.pdf.

[5] City of Toronto Community Council Profiles, 2011 Census "Area B – North York: Langauge Groups" 2011. http://www1.toronto.ca/City%20Of%20Toronto/City%20Planning/Wards/Files/pdf/C/CCA_NNY%20Census%20Profile%202011.pdf.

[6] Peel Data Centre, 2011 Census and National Household Survey, Ward Profiles "Language: Top 5 Non-Official Languages Spoken Most Often at Home," 2011. http://www.peelregion.ca/planning-maps/wardprofiles/#language.

[7] James Opp and John C. Walsh, "Introduction: Local Acts of Placing and Remembering," 7, *Placing Memory and Remembering Place in Canada.* (Canada: UBC Press, 2010).

[8] Ibid, 13, 14.

[9] Diana Taylor, "The Archive", *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2003).

and the scale with which the suburbs have previously been understood.

PRIVATE SPACE AND THE SUBURBAN HOME

Documentary photographer, visual artist and practicing intern architect, Esmond Lee questions the symbolism of the suburban house, in his series, *Between Us*. Shot entirely in Lee's home in Scarborough, Toronto, the series examines Lee and his parents' values and desires through their manner of inhabiting this shared space.

The purchase of Lee's suburban house is motivated, not by his own ambition, but that of his first generation immigrant parents. As a symbol, the house and home ownership denotes middle class success, security, a sense of pride and freedom, something Lee describes as "cornerstones of the immigrant dream."

To facilitate his parents' realization of this dream, Lee sets his own aside. He secures a stable day job that allows him to finance the purchase of this suburban house, and transplants himself from Toronto's downtown core to settle with his parents in its eastern suburb, Scarborough.

Though Lee and his parents acquire the material manifestation of the American dream, its emotional promise of happiness remains unfulfilled. The cohabitation of the house becomes the site of "an ambivalent, unresolved dream that both embraces and denies place."[10]

Navigating this ambivalent space of the house, Lee and his parents restlessly settle this shared space, imprinting their unresolved desires and attempts to reclaim control, through the material objects and spatial organization of the home.

As a family portrait, *Between Us* is an intervention of the social practice of photography. Conventionally, photography, defined by Marian Hirsch, the William Peterfield Trent Professor of English and Comparative Literature, is a:

> "family's primary instruments of self-knowledge and representation [and] the means by which family memory would be continued and perpetuated, [and] by which the family story would henceforth be told."[11]

In deliberately obliterating the figure of his family, Lee disrupts the suburban home as a symbol of family cohesion, and successful integration, emphasizing his experience of it as an alienating space that pronounces diverging values between two generations of Canadian immigrants, a space that for him unsettles.

PUBLIC SPACE AND THE PLAZA

In the work of photographer, Morris Lum, edge cities shifts in scope to the larger context of suburban commercial space. In 2012, Lum became the inaugural artist to exhibit in the Art Gallery of Mississauga's (AGM) emerging artists' gallery, the XIT-RM. For this milestone exhibition, Lum presented his series, *The New Cultural Topographic: The Plaza*.

According to Lum, the plaza's significance lies in its changing tenants, which serve as a signal of "the changing cultural patterns of various

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[10] Kirsten Emiko McAllister, "Archive and Myth: The Changing Memoryscape of Japanese Canadian Internment Camps," *Placing Memory and Remembering Place in Canada,* Ed. James Opp and John C. Walsh (Canada: UBC Press, 2010).

[11] Marian Hirsch, "Introduction: Family Frames," 6 – 7, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, (USA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

ethnicities that have created their own communities in the outskirts of Toronto."

Aligning with Marshall's framing of place as being created by the union of politics, transit and economy, Lum's examination of the suburban plaza presents economic and cultural supports of community formation, using these commercial spaces to document the passage of human geographies in GTA edge cities.

When considering the growth and survival of the black community, Professor of Black Studies and Sociology, George Lipsitz suggests that, the "battles for resources, rights, and recognition not only have "taken place," but also have required blacks literally to 'take places,' "[12] citing examples of major civil rights moments occurring in stores, at lunch counters, on trains, buses and in schools.

These examples demonstrate the importance of place to the well-being of racialized populations and highlights how survival for these communities and struggles for civil rights, are intrinsically linked to "fights to secure freedom of movement in public and to enter, inhabit, use, control, and own physical places." As a result of the nature of these struggles, racialized spatial imaginary possess the "shared understanding of the importance of public space as well as its power to create new opportunities and life chances."[13]

In the context of Toronto's edge cities and the corporate suburbs, the plaza is thus the means by which racialized populations inhabit and create their place in an otherwise white spatial imaginary.

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[12] George Lipsitz, "The Black Spatial Imaginary," 52, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2011).

[13] Ibid.

In turn, the success of racialized populations' integration into the suburban context, begins to inform the shift of non-racialized businesses to adopt racialized customs and codes, as captured in Lum's image, *Scotiabank on the Corner of Steeles Ave E and Silver Star Blvd, Markham*, which depicts Chinese text on its signage.

The racialization of these corporate businesses, points to the influence of these racialized communities as consumers, and more importantly, their success in fostering belonging.

LOCAL SCALE AND CORPORATE CONTEXT

The work of Camille Turner is deeply informed by politics of home and belonging. A media/performance artist and educator, her work takes the form of interventions, installations, and public engagement. In 2013, Turner was invited to assume an artist residency at AGM by Director | Curator, Stuart Keeler. Turner became known as the Artist-in-Residence for the city and was tasked with structuring a piece with Mississauga itself as her subject.

To document her research process, Turner began a blog to house photographic and textual impressions of the city from her wanderings as a pedestrian. First exploring the surroundings of the AGM, Turner was struck by the disparity between her ideas of a vital downtown corridor, and the reality of Mississauga's corporately dominated City Centre.

In a text by cultural and linguistic ethnographer, Keith Hamilton Basso, he describes that, "what people make of their place is closely connected to what they make of themselves as members of society," noting that "while the two activities may be separable

in principle, they are deeply joined in practice."[14] Determined to find places in Mississauga created by people and not by corporate entities, Turner gravitated towards Cooksville, Mississauga.

Cooksville was the original downtown of the City of Mississauga. Besides being the heart of the early city where Mississauga installed its first town hall, it was also home to a brickyard, farms, and the Canadian Pacific Rail station. Now, despite sharing comparable historical significance with Port Credit, and Streetsville, as one of Mississauga's founding villages, Cooksville is infamous for the highest rates of poverty in Peel Region, with over 20% of its residents living in poverty and an alarmingly rate of child poverty at 30%.[15]

In spite of its unfavourable statistics, Cooksville is simultaneously one of Mississauga's few walkable neighbourhoods, home to a wealth of street level businesses, uncharacteristic of Mississauga's newer, corporate developments. To reconcile these histories and address the rate of its erasure through urban development, Turner designs a walking tour to explore what the public values as heritage monuments of Cooksville and asks what will be left of its characteristic small businesses in the face of redevelopment.

Named after the Highway Ten and Highway Five intersection. Turner's *5 & Dime Walking Tour* presented public archival photos of the neighbourhood, an outdoor monument, and encounters with local business owners to ask

how cultural vitality and heritage is defined and evaluated.

The tours were held during Mississauga's 2014 *Culture Days Doors Open* and served as an act of commemoration that questioned "the 'local,' [redefining] who is 'of' this particular place,"[16] and what merits remembrance.

The belonging of Cooksville's strip malls to the narrative and history of Mississauga is important to Turner. She sees its racialized grocery stores and restaurants as social hubs in the community that facilitate support networks and cultural knowledge.

As sites of culture, Turner proposes that strip malls possess "local knowledges, cultures, customs and economics [... that] resist the homogenizing forces of global capitalism,"[17] and merit acknowledgement.

CONCLUSION

As gentrification creep toward the busy corridor of Turner's *5 & Dime Walking Tour*, as Lum's suburban plazas shift to cater to ever-emerging demographic tastes, and as Lee continues to reconcile immigrant ideals of the suburban house with the reality of inhabiting it, these artists demonstrate the indeterminate dynamics of suburban lived experiences.

These artists depiction of edge cities reiterate how, the trend to understanding space through "meanings, sentiments and stories" and how, if "the production of place is always unfinished and uneven," then "places and memories are

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[14] Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Place: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*, (USA: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

[15] Social Planning Network of Ontario, "Mississauga East-Cooksville: Action on Poverty Profile" 2014. http://www.spno.ca/images/pdf/povertyprofiles/peel/Peel-Mississauga-East-Cooksville.pdf.

[16] James Opp and John C. Walsh, "Introduction: Local Acts of Placing and Remembering," 8, *Placing Memory and Remembering Place in Canada.* (Canada: UBC Press, 2010).
[17] Ibid.

always in a state of becoming, of being worked
on, [and being] struggled over."[18]

In this fluctuating suburban landscape,
institutional partnerships with contemporary
artists are increasingly necessary, to ensure
galleries continue to be discursive spaces
where pluralistic understandings of the 'edge
city's heritage is represented.

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[18] Ibid.