The Face of Canadian City
at the Dawn of New Millennium

Alike the majority of the planet’s population, also Canadians follow the general trend and move to the cities. Cities that are no longer just places where people live, but also places where they seek culture, fun, social life and other life “necessities”. Cities are also places where they can achieve higher education and find more opportunities to fulfill their ideas of a quality job and make their dreams come true. Cities are simply no longer what they used to be. They became the living hearts of the country, places of opportunities and challenges. No wonder that 80 per cent of Canadians prefer to live in a city (Statistics). The number of the Native population living in cities is even more interesting – more than 50 per cent (Statistics). Why is it so? What are the Canadian cities actually like?

Every city is shaped by the people who live in it, and people are shaped by the city. But not only. People, and through them the cities, are also shaped by the philosophical era they live in. This simple fact influences the cities in two main aspects. First, it is the architecture, which gives the city its unique image and places the city in the specific era, and second, it is the structure of the city or urban design as it is called nowadays. Architecture is, no doubt, the most visible of the city influencing features. It gives it its unique impression. The Skyline of the city is no more just a beautiful view. It became much more. It is the identifying symbol of the city that distinguishes it from the others. It became a logo of the city. A logo that is formed by the city’s architecture. Architecture thus plays not just the esthetic function, but also the identifying and even the financial function, since the skyline is important for promoting the city and its tourism. Yet, architecture’s primary target is the visual or esthetic side of the city. The way every city works is influenced above all by its structure. However, even the structure is heavily influenced by philosophy.

Most buildings in Canadian cities date back to the 20th century. The century that was influenced by two main philosophical eras: modernism and post-modernism. Modernism was a reaction to the new century, to the chaos of
WWI. Modernism itself has no generally accepted definition. It brought order and pattern to the city. Postmodernism on the other hand, became a reaction to modernism and this is also its definition, because you can hardly define something that is a reaction to something with no definition. It made it possible for minority voices to be heard, juxtaposition becoming the key word of the era. Such opinion shift had of course tremendous impact on the city. Canadian cities were mostly influenced by one branch of post-modernism – post-structuralism. Unique skyscrapers were built to create the new image of an up-to-date dynamic city. Means of transport changed and localization of industry as well. I am not saying that the post-modern city is an opposite of the modernist one, yet there are certainly many features that are. What are these features then?

The modernists see space as something to be shaped for social purposes and therefore always subservient to the construction of a social project (Harvey, 66). Modernists’ ideas about rebuilding cities were built on large scale plans, even mega plans to reshape cities into a relatively simple, easy to build structure of repeating monofunctional zones. Krier views this basic feature of modernism as its central problem, calling it anti-ecological, wasting time and energy. This modernist approach was a breakup with the imperial urban design that was based mainly on community principles, an urban design in which all the urban functions were available in walking distances. The arise of new technologies mainly in transport, namely automobilism and mass transport, changed all this, the ‘myth of the machine’ being one of the key features of the inter-war modernism. People were then able to travel across the city in relatively short time. Parts of the cities became specialized in their function, being interconnected by broad avenues serving as arteries of the city. Canadian cities, like the American ones, had one important feature – the road pattern. Unlike in the European cities the road pattern in North America is almost strictly rectangular based on the colonial principle of land purchasing. This rectangular structure was ideal for modernist ideas about a city, the strict assembly line uniformity and mass production. The building of new quarters was driven by cost and efficiency, simply reproducing the already built structure and spreading it farther and farther from the city center. City centers became the cores of the city, the seat of centralized governments controlling the whole city. The centers became also the "windows" of the city, their architecture being under the influence of the City Beautiful Movement that originated as early as in 1892 at Chicago World's Fair. They began to harbor symbols of corporate power, unique skyscrapers that became symbols of the city and corporate wealth – a base for
future CBDs (Central Business Districts). Canadian city of Modernist Era is more or less characterized by the Burgess concentric model that was adopted by the Chicago School of Urbanism in 1920s and as the time passed it shifted into the Hoyt’s sector model, diversifying the city functions into sectors and then with the outburst of postmodernism turned into the multiple nuclei model. We must not forget another key feature of the city that emerged already in the time of modernism and has continued through the postmodernism till today – the suburbs. Suburbs, as the typical monofunctional sector of the city, represent an important step in evolution of North American cities, not necessarily viewed as a positive one.

Postmodernists on the contrary see space as “something independent and autonomous, to be shaped according to aesthetic aims and principles, which have nothing necessarily to do with any overarching social objective” (Harvey, 66). The search for everlasting beauty of the modernist city is over. Postmodernist city becomes a mixture of various influences and components that have been suppressed till then. Although Canadian and U.S. cities share many common features, I feel it necessary to mention at this point the key distinguishable feature of different approaches to multiculturality. Postmodernism revealed the taboos of minorities of all kinds and allowed them to exist side by side. Yet the American approach resulted in transculturality rather than multiculturality. The omnipresence of the American pride, i.e. being American in the first place, virtually loosing your previous identity and then in the second place someone else, led into a melting pot and ghettoisation. Canadian way, the “real” multiculturality, is based on just the opposite principle – be whoever you want to be, do not loose your identity and help us create our common Canadian one. In case of the cities this leads to significant differences between the U.S. and Canadian ones. Yes, even Canadian cities do have its Chinatowns, Little Italies, etc., yet they are no closed ghettos, staying apart from the rest of the city. On the contrary, they create communities bound with the rest of the city and the overall atmosphere and mood of it. Postmodernism in Canadian cities till the 1990s is characterized by the expansion of CBDs and strengthening of centralized municipal governments on one side and increasing multiculturalism and expansion of the cities on the other side. Although centralized government is nowadays being understood as rather obsolete and non-flexible, in the era of postmodernism it had positive influence on the transformation of the Canadian cities (which went hand in hand with the changes of Canadian economy from staple economy to the mature economy) and made it possible to avoid many negative features known from the U.S.
As the Canadian cities became more “mature” in the late 20th century, the structure of Canadian cities shifted to the multiple nuclei model, i.e. creating several centers of the cities that became specialized in different types of business, in other words, the cities became more decentralized.

As far as the postmodernist architecture is concerned, Jenks sees its roots in two main technological shifts. First, contemporary communications have disintegrated the ‘usual space and time boundaries’ and produced both a new internationalism and strong internal differentiation within cities and societies based on place, function, and social interest. Second, new technologies (particularly computer modeling) have dissolved the need to conjoin mass production with mass repetition, and permitted the flexible mass production of “almost personalized products” expressive of a great variety of styles. The results are closer to the nineteenth century handicraft than to the regimented super-blocks of 1984.

The main changes became visible in the downtowns (CBDs). New skyscrapers became higher, more sophisticated and unique in style, each of them being original. This led to the skyline, so typical and distinguishable for every city that it became its fingerprint, its logo, we can even say its trademark widely used in promotion and tourism. Yet skyline is also important to the residents. Lynch’s research in several North American cities shows that people tend to remember the distinguishable buildings and use them for navigation in the city while they ignore the ‘dull’ modernist blocks. The unique buildings thus do not possess just aesthetic functions, but are also positively perceived by the residents. In the 1990s with the boom of internet based businesses (also called “.com” businesses) a new phenomenon emerged in Canadian cities – gentrification. New buildings were built in the CBDs or their fringes providing new residential opportunities for young millionaires called the yuppies. This phenomenon is usually connected with the recovery of the CBDs that were considered in decline in the late 1980. Yet according to D. E. Paul this is rather a myth. The decline of CBDs was applicable only to several American cities and totally excluded the Canadian ones. Paul’s research results even show that Canadian CBDs actually continued in raise even during the late 1980s. Moreover, the phenomenon already mentioned, the creation of several CBDs within the metropolitan area, can be traced in large Canadian cities.

The architecture of Canadian suburbs has also slightly changed since the modernism era, but more important is the increase in the sprawl of the
suburbs. Although it is not as striking problem in Canada as in the U.S.A., urban sprawl is a phenomenon closely connected with Canadian suburbs. Urban sprawl has no generally accepted definition. Simply put, it is an (uncontrollable) spread of the city into its neighboring countryside. Although some scholars argue that urban sprawl can be seen in positive light, the general approach to it is rather negative. There are three ways of urban sprawl, each of them having different impact on landscape. First and the most harmful one is the ‘low density’ development. Bluntly put, it is a typical modernist development of the city, simply reproducing certain (usually rectangular) pattern of single dwellings over and over again spreading through landscape and consuming vast areas of natural landscape. The second way is the ‘ribbon’ development (also called strip development). If planned and regulated, this can become a very useful and relatively efficient means of sprawl. The basic idea is that commerce is situated along principal roads that are connecting residential areas. The third way of urban sprawl is the ‘leap frog’ development. The idea is that new residential areas are built in a certain distance from the city where the lot prices are low. This new area is then connected to the city by new infrastructure. It has several disadvantages. It makes the city spread well into space and the cost of infrastructure is usually high because of the distance. Canadian suburbs develop by all three ways of urban sprawl depending on the area and city. Yet Canadian urban geographers view sprawl as a problem and try to regulate it using experience from the U.K. and other European countries.

Conclusion

Canadian cities share some common features with the American ones, but they are also different in many respects. During the twentieth century they were influenced by two main eras: Modernism and Post-modernism. Both eras changed them and by values specific to them tried to develop them into modern cities comparable with cities all over the world. Central Business Districts were the areas where most changes have occurred, mainly decentralization, shift to multiple nuclei cities and gentrification. In this sense, I can say without hesitation, the centers became post-modernist. The case of suburbs is not so unambiguous. It is true that the architecture has changed there, new technologies are being used, but as far as the urban design of the suburbs is concerned there are still many modernist approaches driving the process of development of these areas. Yet, everything is changing and now at the dawn of the new millennium new tendencies in city development in Canada can be traced. The municipal government of the City of Vancouver is leading the third largest Canadian city into
transformation process that will result in a strong, decentralized, ecological
city based on community principles eliminating long commuting and thus
reducing air pollution. It will be a pleasant, ‘easy to live in’ city that will
provide its residents with all functions in walking or cycling distances. A
city of the 21st century. Vancouver is the first Canadian city in this effort.
Not the only one though. Toronto is likely to follow the suit and other
Canadian cities will probably join these efforts.

Works Cited

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