

## Big Moves: Global Agendas, Local Aspirations, and Urban Mobility in Canada

Anthony Perl, Matt Hern and Jeffrey Kenworthy, *Montreal and Kingston*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020, pp. 344.

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This ambitious book aims to show how the development of urban expressways and rapid transit in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver has “depended on when, and to what degrees, these cities aspired to expand mobility in order to advance their position in global trade, cultural, and communication networks” (4). This quoted passage suggests a problem that pervades the entire book: the tendency to anthropomorphize cities. Cities don't aspire, but city councils, provincial cabinets, financial elites and activists can aspire. The authors often fail to specify who exactly is doing the aspiring and in what circumstances.

The authors do make an effort to define various territorial limits of cities: metropolitan regions and urban cores, for example. But the urban core of Vancouver is defined as the territories of the municipalities of Vancouver, Burnaby and New Westminster (106). Who speaks for this configuration? At one point (206), the authors write: “All three of Canada's largest city regions have consistently attempted to pursue different mobility trajectories, to equivocate on the values underlying them, and to balance aspirations in such a way that a range of preferences for travel, public space, and community structure appears to be accommodated.” Who knew city regions could be so thoughtful, especially perhaps in Toronto where there is no subprovincial governmental institution that can even pretend to advance a city-region position on anything?

With the exception of chapter 5, this book is not really about the messy business of urban politics. This is no doubt because for at least two of the authors (Perl and Kenworthy), the main concerns seem to relate more to analyzing how various aspects of globalization determine—or at least partially determine—the characteristics of urban transportation systems. The authors do not pretend to analyze in any detail the ways in which provincial and local political systems mediate this process.

Chapter 5, “Globalized Agendas Confront Local Priorities,” is about local activism. Presumably the main author here was Matt Hern, described on the back cover as “a community organizer, independent scholar, writer, and activist” who lives in Vancouver. This chapter contains excellent accounts of how activists in the three cities attempted to resist plans for urban expressways. There is little that is new here, but the chapter rightly points out that the general absence in Canada of inner-city expressways is a feature of Canadian cities that distinguishes them from American ones.

Readers are informed throughout the book that each of the three cities has had to respond to the imperatives of globalization. In chapter 4, we are provided with a great deal of data about money spent on expressways, subways, kilometres built per capita, and so on. Ironically, except for the original subway construction in Toronto and the building of that city's Gardiner and Don Valley expressways, the governments of the provinces have been more important than the governments of cities. The authors know this—and there are helpful discussions of general political developments in the three provinces—but there is little systematic discussion of provincial policies (or lack of) relating to urban transportation.

In one of their more explicit references to neoliberal globalization (100), the authors state: “Economic elites in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver have always attempted to access distant

investments in their urban-growth schemes, but spatial, informational, technological, and governmental constraints all used to inhibit their reach in ways that are no longer so constraining.” They acknowledge that many of the early global influences were little more than traditional urban “boosterism.” In this context, all of the infrastructure that was built in association with Expo 67, the 1976 Montreal Olympics and Vancouver’s Expo 86 was part of these cities’ “global agendas.” Fair enough, but it’s not exactly the form of globalization associated with the neoliberalism of the 1990s and 2000s.

What about Toronto? The authors point to the importance of the (provincial) decision in 1971 to stop the Spadina Expressway. They explain the outcome this way: “With Toronto lacking the global-city identity that was proudly displayed by Montreal, it proved much easier to make the case against monumental infrastructure and lavish public expenditure on reshaping the inner city” (174).

Toronto has now surpassed Montreal in population and financial importance. What has happened in Toronto concerning investment in transportation infrastructure? Unfortunately, the authors end their analysis in 2002, so they are able to avoid painful discussions about subway lines not built, endless debates about light rapid transit, and even proposals to dismantle parts of the Gardiner Expressway. Presumably because it is completely outside the boundaries of the “urban core,” there is no mention at all of Highway 407, the toll road whose construction began in the 1990s to relieve pressure on Highway 401, which is within the city’s boundaries and which does receive a full financial accounting (228–32).

In fact, the main value of the book is the detailed accounting of how so many rapid transit systems and portions of expressways within the three “urban cores” were financed in the period 1955–2002. The “Data Dictionary” in the appendix (210–48) and the many graphs presented in chapter 4 are treasure troves of financial information. Given how difficult it must have been to collect all these data from multiple primary and media sources, it may seem unreasonable to point out that meaningful comparisons among the three cities remain difficult.

On page 55 the authors ask (*italics in original*) *whether Canadian metropolitan areas form a unique and identifiable group within the global urban-mobility context, with an evident core of internal coherence, or whether they exhibit sufficient and significant variation to prevent effective generalization about their character and function.* In attempting to answer the question, the authors swamp the reader with data (for example, “motorcycles per 1000 persons” in six Canadian metropolitan areas, compared with data from similar areas in the US, Europe, Australia and Asia).

Even with all the data provided in the book, we cannot know if Canadian metropolitan areas are “unique.” The authors, however, do conclude that they are an “identifiable group” because they represent “urban equivocation”—that is, “the simultaneous pursuit of multiple and contending land-use paradigms” (207). In other words, Canadian cities muddle through by making compromises among different interests, hardly an unexpected finding.

Anyone who studies the development of urban infrastructure in Canada will likely find much of value in this book. For those of us who focus more on urban politics, the authors remind us that if we dig hard enough, we can find data—especially financial data—that we might have thought impossible to unearth.