

**A Tale of Two Southwestern Ontario Cities:
A Comparison of the Relationship Between Culture and Landscape
In Toronto and London**

Human beings shape and are shaped by the spaces they live in. The relationship between human beings and the spaces they inhabit is the proper subject matter of geography. One particular kind of geographical relationship is the dialectical way in which the landscape that human beings create influences and is influenced by the culture that human beings live in. Sometimes, the relation between landscape and culture is obvious. For example, the landscape of Northern Canada, with its unforgiving cold and its meager resources, explains a lot about how the native inhabitants of the North structure their culture and manage their lives. In many cases the relationship is more subtle, however, although with careful examination it can still be shown to exist. This paper will examine the relationship between culture and landscape by comparing the landscapes of two Southwestern Ontario cities: London and Toronto. I will argue that the relation between landscape and culture in both of these cities shares four broad features: 1) landscape determines and reinforces cultural identity; 2) landscape is a factor in social stratification, and therefore cultural ideas of class, wealth, and power; 3) landscape facilitates or inhibits cultural activity; 4) landscape is a means of communicating the values that a given city hold to be important or defining elements of the city's cultural identity as a whole. Before demonstrating each of these connections, it is important to understand what the terms 'landscape' and 'culture' mean in a geographical context.

Knox, Marston, & Nash (2004) discuss the many meanings that the term 'landscape' has come to possess in the terminology of professional geographers. They write that "landscape is a complex repository of society. Each landscape is a collection of evidence about our character and experience, our struggles and triumphs as humans... geographers have developed different categories of landscape types based on the

elements contained within them.” (Knox, Marston, & Nash, 2004: 240) Of the various categories of landscape that the authors define, two will be of particular interest in the argument that I will be presenting here: the symbolic landscape and the derelict landscape. Knox, Marston, & Nash define the symbolic landscape as “[a representation] of particular values or aspirations that the builders and financiers of [that landscape] want to impart to a larger public.” (Knox, Marston, & Nash, 2004: 241) They define a derelict landscape as one which “[has] experienced abandonment, misuse, disinvestment, or vandalism.” (Knox, Marston, & Nash, 2004: 241) Both of these sorts of landscape will figure prominently in their connection with the cultures of London and Toronto.

Regarding the term ‘culture,’ Knox, Marston, & Nash write that it is “a shared set of meanings that are lived through the material and symbolic practices of everyday life.” (190) Given this definition, it is already apparent that landscape to some degree anticipates or shapes culture in some way, because it too is shared by its inhabitants, and it has specific meanings that it either acquires through common use or else has assigned to it through some sort of formal procedure. For example, a town square could have the acquired meaning of ‘a good place to skate,’ whereas it may have the formally endowed meaning of ‘a place where laws are enacted and enforced.’ The degree to which citizens are free to introduce new meanings into a landscape, and the degree to which a local government facilitates this freedom influences to a greater or lesser degree the felt impact of landscapes on a citizenry.

One of the primary ways in which a landscape influences the culture of a city is that it determines and reinforces elements of cultural identity. The landscapes of both London and Toronto are similar in the trivial way that their most important buildings

feature Canadian flags. While not abundant, Canadian flags are certainly present in the downtown cores of each city. In London, Canadian flags adorn the court house and the city hall—likewise for the courthouse and the city hall in Toronto. However, there are also a number of landscape features that Toronto possesses but that London lacks, and these features reflect very basic demographic facts about the composition of their respective populations. For instance, there is a preponderance of individual ethnic enclave neighbourhoods in Toronto that have business signage in languages other than English. Corso Italia, China Town, Little India, and Little Korea all feature signage in Italian, Chinese, Indian, and Korean respectively. Comparatively little ‘foreign’ signage exists in London, however. This reflects the more basic population make-up of each of these cities. While London does have some ethnicities in its population, their proportion compared to the rest of the city is not nearly as large as it is in Toronto. (2001 Census)

Data from the 2001 census for the proportion of each of these four ethnic groups in Toronto and London is summarized in Table 1 below.

	London		Toronto	
	Population	% of Population	Population	% of Population
Total	427,215	--	4,647,960	--
Italian	17,290	4.4	429,380	9.2
Korean	1,725	0.4	43,110	0.9
Chinese	5,875	1.4	435,685	9.4
East Indian	4,295	1.0	345,855	7.4

Table 1.

Another way in which the landscape of a city influences its culture is by reinforcing social stratification, and along with stratification, class, wealth, and power

markers that cultures use to differentiate among their members. Anyone who has traveled within a city for any appreciable period of time is aware that different parts of a city have different kinds of 'neighbourhood.' Some neighbourhoods look well-kept and well-developed: these traits are what make us think that a neighbourhood is 'wealthy.' Conversely, neighbourhoods that are poorly kept or have properties that are in disrepair are usually indicators that the people who live within the neighbourhood itself is 'poor.' Furthermore, the distance between the 'richest' and the 'poorest' neighbourhoods is used as an index by people to define the difference between the richest and the poorest individuals in the city. Both Toronto and London embody the connection between social mobility of its citizens and the landscape in which they live. Zukin (1995) writes that "building a city depends on how people combine the traditional economic factors of land, labour, and capital. But it also depends on how they manipulate symbolic languages of exclusion and entitlement. The look and feel of cities reflect decisions about what... should be visible and what should not..." (7) In both Toronto and London, social stratification is obvious in different neighbourhoods, and is reflected in similar ways. For example, neighbourhoods that are 'east of Adelaide' in London are generally considered to be socio-economically poorer than other neighbourhoods in the city. Likewise, the neighbourhoods of Regent Park and Parkdale in Toronto are similar to their counterparts in London in that their environments look neglected and run-down. There is a significant difference between the character of these neighbourhoods in the two cities, however: in London, the neighbourhoods are isolated from the rest of the city in many ways. Public transit reaches them less frequently and doesn't service them as often as public transit services Regent Park and Parkdale in Toronto. Additionally, there are very few

commercial establishments in the poorer neighbourhoods of London, whereas despite the depressed economic circumstances of the poorer parts of Toronto, there are still stores, libraries, and parks that exist to service the community. Therefore, the landscape of London tends to polarize the various strata of its society greater than Toronto's landscape does, but both cities demonstrate the connection between landscape and cultural stratification.

A third connection between landscape and culture is the way in which it either facilitates or inhibits cultural activity. The landscape of a place offers or refuses certain basic options for community activity. For example, a community that has a lot of green space and bicycle paths will tend to encourage outdoor activities and cycling. A community that has a casino, on the other hand, will tend to encourage gambling behaviour. Therefore, the structure of a given landscape will make certain cultural activities more possible, while making others less possible, if not impossible altogether. Compare Figure 1 and 2 below: Figure 1 is a skyline view of Toronto's downtown and Figure 2 is a skyline view of London's.



Figure 1. Source: <http://www.atlanticfur.com/Gfx/TorontoSkyline.jpg>

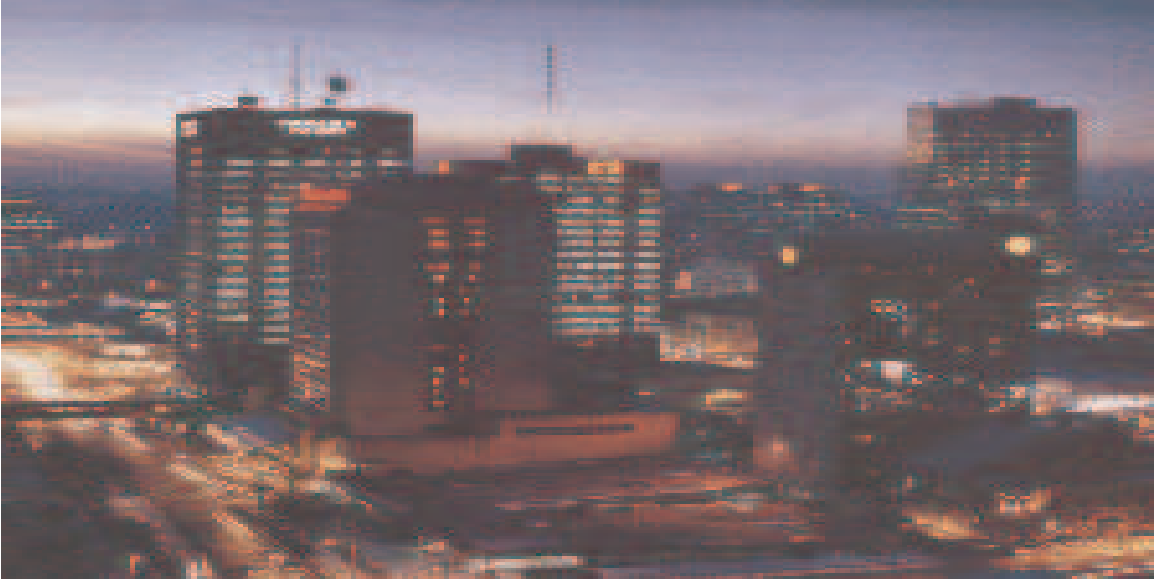


Figure 2. Source: <http://www.royalpagecommercialgroup.com/londonpic.gif>

Both images seem to depict a vibrant downtown community, but the number and size of large commercial buildings is less in London than it is in Toronto. Indeed, the lack of new development in the downtown core of London has tended to drive many of the established businesses out of the area altogether, because without further growth, the businesses established in downtown London cannot continue to be profitable. The erosion of the downtown London core, and the creation of a ‘derelict landscape’ has prompted many city officials to try a number of revitalization projects. The recognition that the landscape of downtown London is suffering the effects of abandonment and neglect are summarized by a 1994 report by the planning department:

Debate surrounding the state of London’s Downtown has been a recurring theme in public discussions in London since the mid-1980’s. To many Londoners, Downtown has lost its vibrancy, and no longer serves as a destination or place where people may wish to live, work, shop, or go for entertainment.... Much of [this] perception may be traced to the relatively late entry of large shopping malls into the London market. (London Planning Division, 1994: 1)

The report goes on to outline a number of reasons for this decline, which include “the movement of residents to the suburbs, and the movement of stores and services to

those areas, is not unlike any other North American city... In London, this trend has been exhibited in the decrease in the downtown share of the retail market, as regional malls and suburban shopping plazas provide retail opportunities for residents outside the Downtown.” (London Planning Division, 1994: 2)

Unlike the plight of London’s downtown, Toronto continues to enjoy growth and expansion both within its urban core and at its suburban periphery. The fact that Toronto offers its citizens more opportunities than London is one of the reasons why it becomes a more attractive destination, and its growth is dialectical: people come to the city because it is growing and filled with opportunity, and it is growing and filled with opportunity because people continue to come to the city. The same sort of dialectical pattern in growth and population demand can be seen in London, only in reverse: businesses abandon the downtown core because of a lack of patronage, and consumers stop going downtown because there are no businesses there anymore to cater to their needs. Despite the fact that the two cities seem to be growing in opposite directions, the pattern of their growth still illustrates the basic fact that a city’s landscape can either serve to facilitate or inhibit the activities of its citizens.

One final connection between landscape and culture is found in the way that a particular landscape communicates a certain message about the culture that inhabits it. Landscape features such as tall buildings and large recreational facilities like the Skydome in Toronto (Figure 1) or the John Lobbatt Centre in London (Figure 3 below) communicate to the visitor that the city is ‘open for business’ and that there is a large amount of capital that is able to support such structures.



Figure 3.

'John Labatt Centre:' an initiative taken by London Government to re-invigorate the downtown London landscape. Source: http://www.infrastructure.gc.ca/publications/cp/dpr/2003/John-Labatt_b.jpg

While the structures that exist within a city's landscape may serve a practical purpose, they also serve a symbolic purpose as well. Unfortunately, the meaning that certain symbolic structures or buildings take on within a cityscape can turn out to be the opposite of what the architects or designers intended, creating negative impressions in the minds of citizens, or even creating what Tuan has called 'a landscape of fear.' Tuan (1980) writes:

The city manifests humanity's greatest aspiration toward perfect order and harmony in both its architectural setting and its social ties. Wherever urbanism emerged independently, we find that its root lay in a prestigious ceremonial center rather than in a village. An early and essential function of the city was to be a vivid symbol of cosmic order: hence its simple geometric design with walls and streets often oriented to the cardinal points, and its imposing monuments. Corresponding to this desire for physical perfection was the longing for a stable and harmonious society. (Tuan, 1980: 145)

Tuan, however, also recognizes that "it is deeply ironic that the city can often seem a frightening place. Built to rectify the apparent confusion and chaos of nature, the

city itself becomes a disorienting physical environment in which tenement houses collapse on their inhabitants, fires break out, and heavy traffic threatens life and limb.” (Tuan, 1980: 146) While Toronto is certainly not very intimidating when compared with larger cities such as New York or Los Angeles, visitors from more rural parts of Ontario can become understandably disoriented and somewhat frightened by the level of activity. Visitors to London, on the other hand, are not intimidated by the activity as much as they are intimidated by the isolation and loneliness that the downtown core seems to embody. There is also an element of fear that the visitor feels because of the fact that there are so few people and the landscape seems so uncared for.

In summary, the relationship between culture and landscape is both complex and dialectical. The culture of a place will influence the character of its landscape, and the landscape in turn will influence the culture, but often in multi-faceted and unpredictable ways that city planners and architects cannot foresee. This paper has discussed four ways in which landscape influences culture, using the contrasting examples of London and Toronto as models for this relationship: landscape as a determiner of cultural identity, landscape as a factor in social stratification, landscape as a facilitator of cultural activity, and landscape as a method of communicating symbolic cultural values. Both Toronto and London exhibit each of these relationships, either in a positive or a negative way. A greater understanding of these relationships will help city planners manage urban growth.

References

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