

BOOK REVIEW

Streetcars and the Shifting Geographies of Toronto: A Visual Analysis of Change.

Brian Doucet and Michael Doucet, Toronto, 2022: University of Toronto Press, ISBN 987-1-4875-0010-8 (paper).

This is a fascinating book analysing shifting urban changes in Toronto since the 1960s through the city's iconic streetcars. Those familiar with Toronto will likely identify why its streetcars are so unique, which the authors highlight as part of Toronto's heritage. Uniquely written by Michael and Brian Doucet, both academics with longstanding roots in Toronto and its streetcars, the book takes its starting point with the authors' personal photos with streetcars of the early 1980s and in current day. A book with a long history, it is a rich exploration of Toronto from a local and global perspective that will attract both those with a lens on the Toronto urban condition and readers less familiar with Toronto's context.

The book is distinctive in its highly visual approach to understand Toronto's shifting dynamics, framing urban change through photos and critical visual analysis. Instead of turning to the likely method of archival material, the authors focus on photographs taken by streetcar 'enthusiasts'. The choice of focusing on streetcar visuals foregrounds a broader recognition 'that the city's streetcars are themselves political' (p. 3). The authors therefore take original photos as a starting point, rephotographing the originals years later to better understand the contextualized nature of change through a critical approach. These visual manifestations are the outcomes of economic shifts, political choices, social transformations and planning decisions. Taking the form of a visual analysis of change, the authors term their approach repeat photography, serving to highlight the accidental nature by photographing urban space as taken by 'accidental archivists'.

As the authors explain, the book visually documents Toronto's ascendancy as it became more global, but also highly divided, reflecting Hulchanski's (2010) well-known classification of the three cities within Toronto. Thus, Toronto's central area is both better-served by transit and is also wealthier. Through this approach, the book follows a journey to explore planning transformations, changing urban form and spatial patterns, and major social, economic and political forces shaping Toronto's urban landscape. A first aim of the book is to focus on everyday spaces central to changes in Toronto and its uneven geographies, while a second is to close the gap between policy, planning and academic debates.

The book, however, is not merely about chronicling visual changes, but grounds Toronto's shifting dynamics in theory. Beginning with Toronto's changing nature since the 1960s, chapter 1 explores the challenges experienced by citizens through the authors' vignettes of their own experiences in the city, framed by their memories as experienced through its streetcars. What is unconventional is its personal take on these social, political and economic transformations. Chapter 2 puts these changes in perspective theoretically by exploring the global context and wider processes as a force driving urban change in Toronto. The authors draw on Friedmann's (1986) world city hypothesis in which urbanization is intertwined with global developments, viewing such growth as predetermined by higher order forms of governance. This shifted to more entrepreneurial ways of governing, increased competition and inter-city competition (Harvey 1989; Kipfer & Keil 2002), highlighting the increasing unevenness and socio-spatial segregation taking shape during these years.

Building these ideas as foundations, the authors focus on Toronto's emergence and basis as a 'Streetcar City', exploring urban form, morphology, land use and the emergence of

a highly unequal city. This approach to neighbourhood scale changes is driven by transportation, at least before 1945, as ‘it was the streetcar...that influenced how cities grew and expanded’ (p. 51). Rather than being shaped by the development of cars, it was the city’s streetcars influencing new urbanization patterns, including suburban development (Relph 2014), shown by photos of Toronto’s varied neighbourhoods of the time. The product of intense real estate speculation, the Streetcar City ‘is characterized by regular city blocks with neighbourhoods anchored by central streets, lined with retail and (originally) streetcar tracks running down them’ (p. 52). This morphology can be distinguished from later development, predominantly shaped by the development of automobiles. As chapter 3 documents, following this era, Jane Jacobs’ activism and writings had a profound effect on Toronto, most famously by halting the Spadina expressway in the early 1970s. The result of the abrupt end to the Allen Expressway at Eglinton Avenue is a testament to Jacobs’ longstanding importance in Toronto. Despite such progressive ideas during this heyday, the predominance of unaffordability in the city is the current story of the day, including growing gentrification and divides between core and suburban development, and increasingly, adjacent cities in Toronto’s surroundings. This reading of Toronto’s development paints a familiar picture of Toronto, from its history of rooming housings predominant in some of the city’s streetcar suburbs like the Annex, to its conversion of old factories into apartments as new markers of gentrification.

Although photography has been used as a method in urban studies, the authors’ use of repeat photography highlights the temporal nature of urban change, better understanding Toronto’s changing dynamics. Combining theory with visual representations of the city over time thus serves to reinforce the message of the city’s shifting geographies. Yet images of particular places need to be properly contextualized by using them as an analytical tool rather than as static images, which the authors

do using repeat photography. As the authors note, a challenge for urban research ‘is how to analyse the many ordinary and unremarkable spaces that largely went unphotographed’ (p. 88). Focusing on streetcars helps to capture parts of life often remaining absent from city narratives, viewed through power relations and understanding the socio-political contexts in which the photos were taken. The photos in the final sections of the book should be viewed while reading the text, moving back and forth in an iterative journey across Toronto’s changing geographies, its urban form and political and social history shaped over the past decades. As a final takeaway, it is important to remember that ‘streetcars do not serve the entire city’ (p. 231), a key recognition for critical urban scholars of the fault lines in such processes. Given such unevenness, this window on Toronto’s streetcars politicizes the geographies of the everyday city through new ways of looking at the city, helping to broaden future challenges of cities around the world.

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