



Great Expectations

The rise and stall of York University

York University Archives

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It was designated to grow faster and become larger than any university in Canada. The first of its kind, it would point the way for campus development in North America. In fact, some thought that, given time, it would not be second to any in the world.

Such was some of the optimistic reaction to plans unveiled for the new campus of York University in 1963. While it has grown tremendously in a short period, it has not risen to the ambitious projections of the early sixties. On the eve of 1980, when the university was scheduled to be physically complete, just over half of the proposed buildings have materialized.

It goes without saying, however, the formative years of York were confident ones and strategically important in shaping the future of the university. When the new school officially opened in September, 1960, at the University of Toronto's Falconer Hall, only 73 students were enrolled. But even those meagre beginnings had not gone without intensive planning.

Actually, the seeds of York University were planted in the mid-1950's by a small committee of North Toronto's YMCA. Initially, their objective was the advancement of adult education. But as the project developed, it became obvious a more extensive plan was necessary. Population projections predicted Toronto's 1.5 million in the late fifties would swell to 2.8 million by 1980. Considering that the U of T was the only school granting undergraduate degrees in the city, there would soon be a serious need for another full-time multifaculty university. As a result, the planning committee enlarged and by 1958 had become independent of the YMCA.

But the primary goal of the committee was not only to meet the demands of the projected increase in students. They also proposed to pioneer a new educational philosophy. In contrast to the strong movement for specialization in Canadian universities, York would form education programmes on the basis of liberal and general studies. Students would therefore be exposed to fields of study which had a "perspective on the wholeness of man's development," before they specialized.

By March, 1959, York became a reality when the Ontario Legislature passed an act to incorporate the university. Subsequently a permanent Board of Governors was established. The new chairman, formerly a federal cabinet minister, was the Hon. Robert H. Winters, (Winters College). William W. Small was appointed comptroller and secretary of the Board while Dr. Murray G. Ross (Ross Humanities and Social Science Building) the former Vice-President of the U. of T., became the first president and vice-chancellor. Later, Air Marshall Curtis (Curtis Lecture Halls), the only remaining member of the original organizing committee, was appointed chancellor.

As an affiliate of the U. of T., York took its first major step in 1961 when it moved to its first campus: an 82-acre estate at Bayview and St. Lawrence. Known as Glendon, it was only a stepping stone to a vast campus being planned that would hold up to 7,000 students by 1970.

York planning officials considered over 70 possible sites for this proposed campus - including the Langstaff jail farm in York county and the Boyd Conservation Area near Woodbridge - before choosing a 465-acre tract of land in the vicinity of Steeles and Keele Street in Toronto's north end. The area was deemed eminently suitable by virtue of Toronto's northwest growth towards the region and its accessibility by future traffic arteries.

The Steeles-Keele site had been farmland for over a century and a half, beginning in the early 1800's when United Empire Loyalists, mainly from Pennsylvania, settled the land. Family names such as Stong (Stong College), Hoover and Kaiser were long associated with farms on which the university stands today. The property had been held by the federal and provincial governments since 1954 for a housing programme before it was presented to the university as a gift from the provincial government in 1962. By then it was just a matter of time before the gently rolling fields would begin to be transformed into a large suburban university.

While planning seemed to be progressing smoothly, the early years were often tumultuous for the young university in search of identity. In each of York's first three years it experienced faculty uprising centering around discontent with President Ross' Administration policies. In the third,

Also in the third year, the liberal education curriculum was first imposed; prior to this, courses were given in conjunction with the U. of T. A radical departure from anything taught in Canadian universities, this new system was an experiment of sorts and led one first year student to proclaim, "York is a fine university as long as you don't mind being a guinea pig."

But by far the most exciting news for York in 1963, or at anytime in those growing years, was the announcement of the school's master plan for development of the Keele-Steeles campus. Three architectural firms had been working jointly to come up with a plan that would satisfy the advice given to them by the Board of Governors: "Be imaginative, let your fancy fly. Design a campus that will show the way for future university development in North America."

When the plan was made public, it was indeed regarded as a grande design and a bold framework for development that projected the university to reach maturity in just seventeen years, complete with 67 buildings containing floor space equivalent to 85 residential blocks.

The plan was met with a great deal of approval. In particular, there was enthusiastic comment from the press who labelled it, among other things: "Campus of the future," "York's Utopia," "Instant University," "An academic city" and "A prototype for future Canadian campuses."



Murray G. Ross

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which eventually led to the resignation of six professors, complaints ranged from un-honored salary and position commitments, to the President's slowness in setting up the normal university bodies such as faculty councils. Playing down the troubles, Ross said they emanated from "the pressure of rapid expansion and disagreement over the curriculum." Nevertheless, sociology professor John Seeley pressed for a formal inquiry into the allegations which would threaten to jeopardize the institution's academic reputation. However, the Board of Governors rejected an investigation, leaving the faculty frustrated one more time. No doubt disagreements would continue with the multitude of divisions that were in store for the school's rapid growth.

Basic to the design were closely spaced buildings constructed about paved or planted quadrangles after the example of old European universities and towns. While a roadway would encircle the campus, the quadrangles would be accessible only to pedestrians.

By 1980 the university campus was to have among its pleasant walks and landscaped grounds, two lakes (one with an island bandshell), concealed parking areas, a stadium with a seating capacity of 5,000 and a long ceremonial drive leading to the campus focal point, the Humanities and Social Science Building.

Among the modernistic buildings included in the plan were libraries, lecture halls, student apartments and up to 12 colleges. At the time, the venture was expected to cost \$150 million and meet the

needs of about 20,000 students by 1980.

It is interesting to note that on this university, that advocated a strong liberal arts education, buildings were allotted for such specialized fields of study as medicine, dentistry, architecture, engineering and law.

The planning motto adopted by York was, "the student will be the yardstick for everything." The college, with up to 1,000 students each, would avoid depersonalization in the rapidly growing university and promote a sense of community living. In some ways colleges were York's answer to fraternities; the latter being overtly discouraged for the new campus.

By April, 1964, four spadefulls of earth, dug out of a windswept field at the sod-turning ceremonies, were all York had to show for its new campus. But by September of the following year, classes were being held in the first of York's new buildings; some far from completion. The first structures (Founders college, Farquharson Life Science building, Steacie Science Library, Burton Lecture Hall and the physical plant building) stood in rather bucolic surroundings. In fact, when the Governor General (the late Hon. George P. Vanier - Vanier College) officially opened the school, sheep were said to be grazing on portions of the campus.

Not only did York witness the birth of its highly touted new campus in 1965, but it also became completely independent with the cutting of its umbilical cord with the U. of T. in that year.

Frequently referred to as the first of "the new crop of Canadian universities," York developed within and even surpassed some of its projections in its initial years of growth. But as the seventies approached, its direction began to change.

The increasing number of influential faculty members and the change of administration (the university once actually had three presidents in one day!) acted to shift planning phases established in 1963.

For example, the formation of an engineering faculty did not occur because in the late sixties the science faculty decided it did not want to expand into the applied sciences.

External forces also had profound effects on York's destiny. In particular, the future of the school's health service faculties (i.e. medicine, dentistry) fell into jeopardy when the provincial government began cutting back their funds for such purposes.

While York's growth has been modified, it still has certain definite plans for the future. At the present a student service building, student centre and extension to the physical plant building are all high priorities on York's list for development.

Allied institutes, such as the Kinsmen National Institute on Mental Retardation in the campus' northeast end, is one promising concept for development which York planners hope to adopt in the future. In this plan a firm or institute leases land from York, constructs a building, and in turn both institutions cooperate to derive benefits from the other.

While we may never actually see the campus that York's planners visualized in the early sixties, the formative years of the university will always be regarded as crucial in forming the future of York.