

Urban Profile: Toronto

'ugly duckling' comes to life in modern Toronto

by Alan Harvey

They used to call it Hogtown. They said it was dead, dull, a civic mausoleum, a graveyard with lights. The only thing you could do, they joked, was catch a train for Montreal.

That was Toronto the Good, that was. How times have changed! In a startling transformation, probably more striking than any other city in Canada has experienced, the urban ugly duckling of times past has blossomed into a chic and sophisticated metropolis, a place of quiet affluence and wholly new lifestyle.

Visitors are impressed. It has become, without much fanfare, the swiftest-growing civic conglomeration on the continent, hailed by United States author Vance Packard as North America's most civilized city. I can't cavil. Having been born and brought up in the old Toronto, and having spent much of my adult life in Britain and France, I have watched with wonderment as my native city evolved out of yesterday's murky image into today's envied reality. In a recent visit, I heard on every hand that Toronto has become one of North America's most pleasant communities. It is now a city of world class. In amenities and infrastructure, though not of course in history, tradition and hallowed landmarks, it begins to bear comparison with London and Paris.

Much credit must go to New Canadians. In a wave of postwar immigration, thousands of citizens from a score of ethnic communities in Europe and elsewhere have made Toronto their home. Italy, Germany, Poland, the Ukraine, Portugal, France, Greece, even Korea and Albania, have brought bright new colour and cultural enrichment into what used to be a monochromatic, fundamentally Anglo-Saxon city.

Straitlace untied

Once, citizens seeking relief from the staid provincial atmosphere of straitlaced old Toronto found diversion across the American border in Buffalo or New York. Now they stay put and Americans travel to Toronto, as tourists or immigrants. What used to be a Brain Drain from Canada to the U.S. is reversing itself as American draft dodgers and radical protest groups trek to Canada. They are surprised to find clean streets, attractive high-rise apartments, an enviable relief from petty crime and a fast, cheap 21-mile subway which takes you anywhere in the city, for 25 cents. Everything is as up to date as Kansas City.

The way some transplanted Americans feel was expressed in a newspaper interview by George Cohon, former Chicago lawyer whose favourite city was San Francisco. "Toronto is cleaner than either," he told the *Toronto Star*, "the schools are better and it's farther from many of the problems America faces, though these may come."

He said it is one of his delights to drive visiting Americans from Malton airport outside Toronto to the city centre. The big buildings never fail to impress. "By the time they get to the centre," said Cohon, "I have to pick their tongues up off the floor."

A Parisian visitor said Toronto is "booming like mad." And British travellers expressed surprise at the high standards of service and accommodation, especially in the cluster of new hotels girdling the airport. Visiting English engineers confessed that the luxury they encountered was a bit disconcerting. It made them question their standards at home in Britain. "To some extent, it shakes your faith in your own country," one of them told me.

Founded as a French fort in the 17th century, purchased by the British Crown from the Mississauga Indians in 1787 for a few thousand dollars, 149 barrels of flour, some axes and assorted knick-knacks, Toronto is now Canada's largest English-speaking city, with a population of 2½ million spread over 250 miles. The metropolis on the shores of Lake Ontario is overtaking bilingual Montreal as the nation's biggest city. Already it handles one-third more air traffic than Montreal.

City of wealth

Toronto is wealthy. It is the rich capital of a rich province, Ontario, which itself accounts for more than one-third of Canada's 22 million population and about 40 per cent of national purchasing power. It is the hub of a throbbing industrial complex benefiting by proximity to flourishing markets in the American Midwest and the Atlantic seaboard. Incomes in Toronto are nearly a quarter above the nation's average. The Toronto Stock Exchange, founded in 1852, has long been the largest in the country, handling some 70 per cent of all trading equities. It is second only to New York in value of shares traded and is rated the world's most important exchange for mining shares.

It is the insurance capital of Canada. Real estate, too, is strongly Toronto-based. In 1972, the city issued building permits

valued at more than \$1,200 million, the highest figure in Canada and perhaps in the world. German sources have invested more than \$1,000 million in real estate over the past decade, mostly through Toronto.

Prosperity is apparent in night lights twinkling along the waterfront, in posh residential areas such as Rosedale, Forest Hill and Bayview, in towering apartment buildings and office blocks. Toronto's skyline is dominated by the imposing Toronto-Dominion Centre, the nation's tallest building with a tower soaring 740 feet above the waterfront.

Typical of the new Toronto is its ultra-modern City Hall, designed by Finnish architect Viljo Revell whose concept was chosen after an international competition. Though nicknamed The Pregnant Oyster because of its unusual cylindrical shape, it is a city showplace.

Changing character

In the transformation of Toronto, whole districts have changed character. Sky-scrapers sprout amid old Victorian blocks. Colourful shops and boutiques abound; a city that once scarcely counted a single outstanding restaurant can point proudly now to a profusion of eating places worthy of mention in gastronomic guides. A single block may offer half a dozen national cuisines. One of the city's best-known restaurateurs, the highly extrovert Honest Ed Mirvish, also is credited with saving from demolition the Royal Alexander Theatre, which along with the O'Keefe Centre, built by Toronto tycoon E. P. Taylor, the Crest and Poor Alex Theatres, have helped to enrich Toronto's cultural and entertainment fare.

Along with a pride in their city's growing attractions, Torontonians appear determined to avoid the Big City Blues that have overtaken other large urban communities. There is considerable interest in community projects and a new emphasis on the Politics of Participation. Fittingly, Toronto has one of Canada's youngest mayors, 36-year-old David Crombie. An air of optimism and forward-lookingness characterizes a city once a little ashamed of its drabness. One of the most ambitious new undertakings in the making is the Metro Centre, a \$1,000 million joint enterprise of Canada's two major railway companies, Canadian National and Canadian Pacific. This will include an integrated transport complex, communications and broadcasting centre, commercial offices and resi-