The Lot is the Basic Unit of Urban Morphology and Architectural Typology

George Baird has been thinking about the relationship between architecture, urban form and property since the mid-1970s. Adrian Blackwell and David Fortin met with him in his Toronto home on 27 March 2019 to discuss the history of his engagements with this conceptual intersection. This conversation was transcribed by Tomi Laja.

An Architectural Theory of the Lot:

A Conversation with George Baird

Adrian Blackwell and David Fortin

Figure 1. Illustrations of The Colonnade on Bloor Street West, designed by Gerald Robinson Architect in 1963, the first building in North America to mix residential, office, and retail in roughly equal proportions. It appeared in both On Building Downtown and in Built-form Analysis (right), illustrating its setback above the podium to let sun shine on the North sidewalk and its typological hybridity.

Adrian Blackwell: As far as we're aware, you first addressed the relationship between property division and architectural form in the essay “Theory: Vacant Lots in Toronto,” in Vacant Lottery, the special issue of Design Quarterly published in 1978.1 What led to this work? How was it informed by both writing and your experience working in the city?

George Baird: At that time, Marc Baraness was at the University of Toronto School of Architecture, first as a master’s student, and then as a junior faculty member. He had come from France, where he had been a student of Bernard Huet, who was part of the European Rationalist group that most famously included Aldo Rossi, but also Carlo Aymonino and Georgio Grassi in Italy, Mathias Unger in Germany, Christian Devillers and Huet in France, and Bruno Reichlin and Fabio Reinhardt in Switzerland. So, there was a pan-European group of people, associated with Rationalism, who became interested in both a body of ideas concerned with building typology and urban morphology. Having just arrived in Toronto from Paris, Marc was familiar with this discourse, and he got me interested in it.

In 1972–1973 I had been part of the team hired by the City of Toronto to prepare new urban design guidelines for the Core Area of the city, and that is what led to the report On Building Downtown. And then, because On Building Downtown was well received by the City, I was asked if I would help them on building typology: the issue being that they were anticipating high-density residential buildings in the central business district, this having been a key recommendation of the new Central Area Plan. Up until that point there had not been many high-density residential buildings in the CBD, so they were interested in testing their feasibility. So, we did a second report called Built Form Analysis. It also was well received, but I was not happy with it. I felt it was a little too...
loosey-goosey, and that our methods of analysis were not adequately grounded theoretically (Figure 1).

Because of this methodological dissatisfaction, I was looking for more robust theoretical apparatuses with which to discuss the relationship between building form and urban form. When building typology and urban morphology à la the European Rationalists came along via Marc, it was a revelation for me. Basically, I took that theoretical apparatus as it had been employed by the Europeans and tried it out on a piece of Toronto urban fabric. It was as simple as that, and it seemed to work. There were significant differences because the urban form was not identical, but nonetheless the method seemed to be perfectly workable.

AB: Did your work on the Block Study for St. Lawrence Housings influence this in any way? It seems to be one place where the specific dimensions of the lot are very much at stake. The whole question there was about testing different lot dimensions.

GB: Well, that’s an interesting question. I would not say that the work for St. Lawrence influenced it, but it would be fair to say that it led to it. And here, the St. Lawrence story is a little bit relevant. Before I was hired to work on the project, Eberhard Zeidler had been hired by the city to develop design guidelines for St. Lawrence, because of his high reputation at the time. My understanding is that Zeidler came up with a scheme which, like his then recent proposal for Harbor City, had lots of wiggly roads and cul-de-sacs.

AB: His firm authored the Design Guidelines Report, which preceded the Block Study Report, which your firm consulted on. I can’t remember seeing a plan in Zeidler’s document, but there’s a clear section drawing showing a canal down the middle (which might be an echo of Harbour City) and the separation of pedestrians and cars on different levels.

GB: I have never seen the plan either. In any event, my understanding is that this scheme of Zeidler’s was not well received. And at some point, Alan Littlewood became one of the key site planners, and he got me involved.

Because of the fact that I had been living in Cabbagetown, I had come to the conclusion that the ghettoization of Regent Park was in part related to the truncation of the historical street grid. I was working on The Space of Appearance at the time, and there’s a section in it where I talk about the fact that cul-de-sacs are an interesting socio-logical phenomenon in urban form. If you live in a desirable neighbourhood and you live on a cul-de-sac, the address on the cul-de-sac in a desirable neighbourhood will be even more desirable than the neighbourhood proper. On the other hand, if you live in an undesirable neighborhood and you live on a cul-de-sac, the address on the cul-de-sac will be even less desirable than the neighbourhood. The lack of continuity of public space exacerbates the social imaginary of the precinct. And for that reason, I thought that if you’re going to design a new neighbourhood with a lot of social housing, you need the connectivity with the surrounding neighbourhoods in order for its normality to be perceptually evident.

And since there was an existing street grid in St. Lawrence—as it happens, the street grid of the original ten blocks of the city—I was very much of the opinion that the north-south streets should simply be extensions of the historical streets. In a nutshell, that was one of the two most important recommendations of the Block Study that did get adopted. I think my hypothesis was borne out, because St. Lawrence does feel like an extension of the city. And then I made a second suggestion which was also morphological. The St. Lawrence planners were trying to decide where to place the public open space. The historical shoreline of Lake Ontario had originally been just south of Front Street, which of course is why it was called Front Street in the first place and, of course, the open space of the Esplanade already existed as a set of railways tracks. So, I suggested that they should make the main public open space of the neighbourhood a linear park, representing the location of the historical shoreline (Figure 2). So, this linear park, originally called Esplanade Park, and soon thereafter David Crombie Park, was the second of my recommendations.

So, you could say that my receptivity to the European ideas about building typology and urban morphology influenced my work on St. Lawrence. I wouldn’t say St. Lawrence influenced my later thinking about typology and morphology, but it certainly was a further step in the same line.

AB: Can you describe the theory that you developed in the article “Theory: Vacant Lots in Toronto”?

GB: Well, I give the Lottery as one lecture in the Urban Form course, and I always start with a pair of images from the book by Carlo Aymonino, Gianni Fabbri and Angelo Villa: Le citta capitali del XIX secolo (Figure 3). In his section on Paris, he includes two figure-ground drawings of the Marais district, which are about 80 years apart. One is from the eighteenth century and the other one is from the nineteenth, and I always explain to students that one can describe the morphology as constituting what is constant between those two images. The first thing you discover is that the nineteenth-century image is much more filled-in than the eighteenth-century one; there’s just a lot more black ink, or in other words, more figure in the ground. But the street structure is largely recognizable between them. You can still see the location of the old city wall with the Bastille at the lower right-hand corner. The Place des Vosges is constant, it’s already there in the eighteenth century and it’s unchanged in the nineteenth. The north-south streets through the Marais remain, but they don’t form a grid; it is, after all, medieval Paris. The biggest change between the two images is close to the Seine. The Rue de Rivoli was actually created between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. So, the Rue St. Antoine, a medieval street leading west-southwest, from the Bastille toward what we now think of as central Paris, hooks onto the eastern end of what becomes...
The Lot is the Basic Unit of Urban Morphology and Architectural Typology

the Rue de Rivoli, which then runs like a straight axis all the way to the Place de la Concorde (which is off this plan). Thus, there are some material changes to the street grid, the creation of the Rue de Rivoli being the key one. Otherwise, you don’t have difficulty looking at these two images, recognizing them as the same neighbourhood, and that sameness is the morphology which is largely to do with the streets and the blocks.

And then, as for the building typology, that of course is governed not simply by streets, but by parcelization. Streets merely establish the fronts of parcels, but there are a variety of modes of lot division possible on any given street. In my Paris example, parcels tended to be a bit higgledy-piggledy, but their depths were always greater than their frontages, because frontages were worth more than depth in real-estate terms. Lots in most urban morphologies are deeper than they are wide, unless the local population is very wealthy, but that’s always an exceptional condition in the urban fabric. And then of course, building form is itself governed by the shape of the parcel, so that the typical building is always longer than it is wide. In Toronto, one of the things we discovered is that the front is the primary public face of the building, but there is also a very strong tradition in Toronto that if you are in a single-family house on the east or west side of a north-south street, that the orientation is usually biased to the south, as a response to the sunlight. Thus, if there’s any lee-way for placement of the building on the lot, it is always pushed to the north-side lot line and pushed away from the south, so as to make as big a side yard as the width will permit, and then of course that usually means that the building’s circulation is pushed to the north side because that is the dark side of the house. Thus, the principal rooms have either a front view to the street or side view to the south. On a street like St. George with its many mansions, that pattern is absolutely consistent. All the houses are located to the far-north facing Saint George frontwards and facing south sideways. So, those would be examples of typologically consistent configurations of buildings deriving from the combination of the lot structure and solar orientation.

Figure 2: Plans of the two possible locations of the park in St. Lawrence Neighbourhood, described in George Baird and Barry Sampson’s memo to the Housing Department published in the The Block Study. “At the moment, we are inclined to recommend that the esplanade rather than a berm across the southern edge of the site ought to comprise the park of St. Lawrence. This has the following advantages: a) it respects most straightforwardly the historic form of the esplanade, b) it involves least reorganization of the existing street system in the area, c) it locates the park most accessibly to most St. Lawrence housing, d) it could serve, if developed early as a large scale, well treed amenity, to kick off and interrelate all St. Lawrence development parcels, from the very beginning of the development process.”
AB: Thanks for this distinction between the way urban morphology can be illustrated in the consistency of the street grid over time, while architectural typology is structured by the lot. As you discovered in *Vacant Lottery* by comparing a longer series of historical moments that traced much of the urban form to pre-urban lot divisions, lots predate streets in many cases. So, the effect of lot division isn’t only an architectural typology, but is also fundamental to urban morphology. How did lot division shape the urban form of Toronto?

GB: Well, we traced the lot structure and figure-ground of the city back as far as we could (Figure 4). We were reliant on the historical documents that existed, such as fire insurance maps. So, in *Vacant Lottery*, the earliest documentation that we could find was dated 1848, so that is where we began our sequence of parcelization and figure-grounds (Figure 5). Of course, one of the things I learned is that the original layout of the city—the so-called ten blocks, five across and two deep, with King Street running through the middle—first appears in a 1793 drawing. And then the city grows outwards from that, and it grows more west than east. It appears that from a very early date, people were spooked by the Ashbridges Marsh at the mouth of the Don River, which they thought to be breeding grounds for disease and mosquitoes. So, that’s why urban development stayed away. The Don River was also challenging to cross in the early nineteenth century. The other factor that pulled the city west was the establishment of Yonge Street. I don’t know how Yonge Street got established independently of the original ten blocks since they do not even abut to one another; Yonge is several blocks west. Nevertheless, as a circulation spine to the hinterland, Yonge was also established from a very early date. So, this also encouraged urban development to grow west-northwest, which is how most of the city developed in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In

*Figure 3.* "The transformation of the Parisian east (Marais) by progressive ‘filling’ of the undeveloped land... (Land occupation in the Turgot plan, 1733 and Vasserot plan, 1810)." Aymonino, Fabbri, and Villa, *Le citta capitali del XIX secolo*, Plates 82, 83.
an earlier stage, the city grew from the ten blocks up to Lot Street, now Queen Street, and that was its northern boundary. North of that was the series of so-called “park-lots” which extended all the way from Lot to Bloor Street, so they were astonishingly large. They had relatively narrow frontages along Lot Street, but they were very deep, running all the way up to Bloor, which in those days was only a rural concession road. And those park lots were mostly given out to important early settlers. Mostly members of the so-called family compact who had military and/or ecclesiastical connections, such as the Jarvises, the Baldwins, and the Allans, who were all important families in the city’s early settlement.

It would seem also that there was an idea imported from Britain that this colonial elite was going to house itself in both city houses and country villas. In Toronto: No Mean City, Eric Arthur shows one example of such a villa, in an astonishing photograph of the Allan mansion which sat on their park lot, at the northwest corner of what is now Queen and Sherbourne, right where the John Inns Community Center now sits. That house sat where we now have emergency tents for homeless people and overdose prevention sites.

Then, as the city grew in the second half of the nineteenth century, all these wealthy people turned into residential developers and developed the parcels of land they controlled. One of the morphological implications of this is that in the street pattern of downtown Toronto up to Queen Street, east-west streets are dominant over the north-south streets; but when you go north of Queen, the geometry rotates ninety degrees and from Queen to Bloor, the north-south streets dominate the east-west ones. And these east-west ones were not even continuous because they were developed incidentally from park-lot to park-lot, depending on the rate of urban development of the respective parcels. There were certain idiosyncratic sequences. For example, you would think that development would start near the existing urban centre and grow...
continuously outward, but it did not quite do that. Obviously, some owners had more incentive to develop than others. So, the Jarvis’ family park-lot, for example, which has Jarvis Street running through the middle of it, comes late in the development sequence, which is odd because it’s relatively close to Yonge. Then all these land-owners quickly discovered, as the rich always do, that you make the most money catering to the bottom-end of the market, because it’s larger than the other parts of the market. So, what we now know as the typical residential Toronto lot, twenty to thirty feet in width and 120 or 130 deep, quickly became the norm for nineteenth-century Toronto residential development. Eighty-percent of the city from the Don to the Humber, and from Queen to Bloor, is laid out with that kind of lot structure, on mostly north-south streets. Some three-quarters of a century later, when traffic engineers first began to gain influence, they found themselves wanting to create more continuous east-west streets than there already were. The way they created them was to connect east-west streets which were not yet connected. This is the process that produced the dog-leg intersections that now exist on east-west streets between Queen and Bloor, such as both Dundas and Carlton east of Yonge. Both of these dog-legs are twentieth-century amendments of a nineteenth-century street pattern to establish a greater degree of east-west street continuity between Queen and Bloor. The only other exceptions to the grid are the handful of routes which preceded colonial settlement like Davenport Road. It was there before European settlement, so it followed the topography, not the grid.

AB: In 1988, you developed this theory more explicitly in “Studies on Urban Morphology in North America.” This text develops four theses: 1) “the lot is the Basis of Urban Morphology,” 2) the laws which apply to it “will act as generators of building typologies,” 3) the synchronic dimension of urban form...
The Lot is the Basic Unit of Urban Morphology and Architectural Typology

When Jarvis Street started to be redeveloped, the first generation of developers discovered that lots for its mansions were so big that they did not even need to assemble them. They could simply buy one mansion, knock it down and then build a long, narrow apartment building on the parcel perpendicular to the street. Instead of being twenty-five to thirty feet wide, like the typical nineteenth-century Toronto house, these buildings had one-hundred-foot frontages, which meant they were wide enough to fit double-loaded apartment buildings onto the parcel with minimal setbacks to the lot lines on both sides. This produced the formula that still typifies parts of Jarvis, St. George north of Bloor, and, most notoriously, Jameson Avenue in Parkdale. All these streets share the same typology and morphology. My impression is that they were all relatively contemporaneous, all results of the 1954 re-zoning. But they very quickly fell out of favour on account of their relatively poor conditions of outlook from most of the apartments in them.

The prolific city planner and architect Eugene Faludi was instrumental to the second iteration of the zoning by-law, which tried to prevent these long, narrow buildings with the majority of the units facing each other across the side yard property line, creating such poor conditions of outlook. These revisions forced developers to assemble. They were still able to build double-loaded slab blocks, but they had to rotate them. So rather than being parallel to the side lot lines, they were parallel to the front lot lines, and were much more set back and taller. Instead of being eight or ten storeys, they started to be twenty storeys. This produced much better conditions of light and view for the people in the units, but it blew apart the relationship of morphology to typology, because any houses that were still left adjacent to them had their flanking side elevations that were meant to be virtually invisible edges because they would have been covered up by the house next door. As a result, there were ragged urban edges and sometimes even just broken party walls exposed, in cases where only part of a series of row houses was purchased. So, the conditions of amenity for the individual new units improved, while the coherence of the urban fabric as a whole was shattered.

By the end of our sequence of analysis, 1976, when I chose the study area for Vacant Lottery, St. Jamestown was already seen as the apotheosis of this new pattern of development. Maple Leaf Gardens was big for 1930, but it would fill only a tiny corner of St. Jamestown. St. Jamestown is also significant because that was the project that turned the Toronto population against the high-rise form of urban development that had become so popular in this period. To sum up, in this process, you go from large lots being subdivided into smaller ones, and then starting in the 1930s a process of assembling small lots into larger ones, a process which accelerated rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s.

AB: So, the original “Vacant Lot” essay is a kind of critique of that process of assembly?

GB: Well, not entirely. It’s certainly is a critique of the urban fabric result of that pattern of assembly and redevelopment; that is correct. But of course, what we tried to contend was not that you couldn’t assemble. As far as the Vacant Lottery journal issue goes, we wanted to argue that you needed to come up with new building typologies, which mediated the relationship between the historical urban form and the new one you were creating in a more gracious and sympathetic way. We wanted to prevent the city from looking as though all older buildings still standing were to be demolished next week, which tended to be the visual implication of the first-generation pattern of assembly. So, we were not against redevelopment per se.

As opposed to assembly and redevelopment, if you have a pattern of redevelopment which does not involve the same degree of assembly, and which does involve a kind of typological responsiveness to the characteristics of the original fabric, it seems to me that it can generate an interesting urban development from 1848 to 1976, what you discover is that up until about 1900, what you’re seeing happens is an ongoing pattern of land subdivision—bigger parcels gradually being divided up into multiple smaller ones. I refer to the completion of that process as first-generation maturity of the urban pattern. By 1903, the zone that I was looking at—Carlton Street to Bloor Street, and Yonge Street to Parliament Street—was pretty well fully built up, there being hardly any undeveloped land left. And this mature, first-generation pattern of development lasted until the 1930s. After that, one can begin to discern the beginnings of a reverse pattern. A process of land assembly begins. Instead of larger parcels being divided into smaller ones, you start to see smaller parcels being assembled into bigger ones. One of the notable early examples is Maple Leaf Gardens. The site of Maple Leaf Gardens was formerly filled with nineteenth-century houses that were all assembled and replaced by the big footprint of the 1930s building.

And then in 1954, the city passed a new zoning by-law which for the first time in the city’s history, actually encouraged higher-density development in low-rise residential neighbourhoods. One of the best early examples of that is the City Park Apartments, which are on the block north of Maple Leaf Gardens. Their site doesn’t stretch to Yonge Street, which was so desirable that you couldn’t assemble the lots along it, but they do replace most of the rest of the block. The Yonge Street Subway was built in 1954, so you also couldn’t build over its right of way east of Yonge. So, City Park Apartments builds east of this line.

vacant lottery
fabric because it actually acquires diversity and richness, but it still all coheres as a unified phenomenon. For example, I find it interesting now that the Toronto middle-class has finally embraced contemporary design, to watch how west-central Toronto now contains so many new and modern infill houses in historical neighbourhoods, and these recent examples fit in pretty well. And the result is a more complex urban form.

The overwhelmingly most important overall intellectual influence on my thinking has been Hannah Arendt. My most important book, The Space of Appearance, tries to see the ideological history of modernism through the lens of Arendt’s political theory. In one of her essays on the American Revolution, she makes the argument that a healthy republic has citizens that are not poor, but instead, comfortably well-off, but she also argues that it is not good if people are too rich, and especially if you have too many rich people. This is a very clear argument that she traced all the way back to de Tocqueville. I think there’s an analogue of her argument around the question of land assembly in urban form: once assembly goes to the extreme of St. Jamestown, then what we think of as the heterogeneous urbanity that constitutes a healthy city disappears. And, so, I think, that’s why I thought of the irony of comparing Scarborough and Mississauga’s Town Centres with North York’s. It is interesting that North York City Centre has a more differentiated pattern of ownership. Even though it’s all developed with high-density buildings, it has a far greater diversity of ownership than the other two. In Scarborough the whole thing is one company. Mississauga is almost as bad, and it’s boring, not to mention politically oppressive. So, I do think that there’s an implication of the political limitations to the process of assembly.

AB: Much of your earlier writing about architecture was influenced by theories of semiotics and phenomenology. How did your theorization of the relationship between lot structure and architectural type relate to this earlier work? Was it a departure or a development of these earlier preoccupations? I wanted to point to my own hypothesis, which I don’t think you’re explicit about, but it seems clear to me, that the lot structure acts as the langue for the city, while architecture operates as a kind of parole within. That’s one simple reading of that relationship. Your discussion of the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of the lot seems to be an elaboration of this reading.

AB: When I decided to undertake post-graduate study in 1964, I eventually found myself in London, where I was trying to figure out what I was going to choose as the topic for my dissertation. I stumbled upon semiotics, and it was a revelation for me. The dominant theory in architecture at that time, especially in London, was a revived functionalism. Christopher Alexander’s first book Notes on the Synthesis of
Form was the definitive first text for this approach and almost the entire Bartlett school—where I was studying—was committed to “systematic design methodology,” which was an effort in architectural theory to make architecture completely and exclusively rational. So when I came upon semiotics, I realized that there was a different intellectual apparatus with considerable richness and suppleness. It made me want to deal with the symbolic and pictorial aspects of architecture in a rational and coherent way. I was quite excited and from that came “La Dimension Amoureuse in Architecture,” which was quite influential at the time. Since then, I’ve never lost my regard for the insights of semiotics. Then the architectural historian Joseph Rykwert, who was a mentor to me in London, encouraged me to look into phenomenology. So, I was independently interested in semiotics and phenomenology in the early days before the intellectual war between the two broke out. In fact, I’ve always been struck by the fact that a major intellect such as Claude Levi-Strauss, who was himself a structuralist, was nevertheless not anti-phenomenological. But alas, as the 1970s and 1980 went by, the Heideggerian phenomenological discourse, as promulgated by architectural historian and theorist Dalibor Vesely, basically set itself up in militant opposition to structuralism.

AB: You experienced that firsthand teaching in Vesely’s class, right?

GB: Well, it was not his class, it was Joseph Rykwert’s program at Essex. I played only a minor role in that program, and Vesely finally took over the whole thing.

And to this day, I do not understand the conflict between phenomenology and structuralism. Structuralism wants to emphasize the relevant immutability of structures below the surface of consciousness, and phenomenology wants to emphasize the evanescence of experience. I’ve never said that the structure of structuralism was absolute, and I also believe in evanescence. Even phenomenology depends on some degree of stabilization of one’s understanding of experience in the world. So, at the end of the day, I admit that they have counterbalanced emphases, but I don’t actually think that they are intellectually opposed to one another. But for the radical Heideggerians like Pérez-Gómez and Vesely, structure and structuralism are anathema.

AB: Would you say that this work on property, structure, and lot division is much more tightly related to semiotics?

GB: Well certainly, it is more tightly related to semiotics than to phenomenology, that’s for sure. But on the other hand, when I came upon the importance of lot structure, I was temperamentally disposed to pursue it, because I’ve always been interested in the phenomenon of structures or potencies that are below the level of consciousness. Indeed, that’s what I would say is in common between semiotics, typology, and morphology. But I didn’t see the one as the outcome of the other, I just saw them as parallel discourses in which each of them was useful on its own terms. But I agree that they have a common preoccupation with something resistant to change that’s below the surface of immediate experience. Take sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus,” which is like the “langue” in semiotics, or the “morphology” in morphology/typology. The habitus is yet another intellectual invention which is intended to rationalize this sense of potency below the immediate surface of experience, and it has to do with recurrence. So, I think all of these are intellectual analogues of one another.

AB: In “Thoughts on ‘Agency’, ‘Utopia’ and ‘Property’ in Contemporary Architectural and Urban Theory,” you use your observations in Japan as a way of returning to your 1978 argument, in this case more explicitly arguing that smaller lot sizes increase the agency of urban inhabitants. You argue that a “pattern of differentiated ownership of land […] constitutes a sort of ‘deep urban structure’ that facilitates ‘agency’ in respect to small-to-medium-scale historic urban transformation, gradually over time.” This led you to championing Hernando De Soto’s writing in favour of land privatization, which has been criticized by many left critics as promoting a neoliberal enclosure of common land resources, and in some cases as a mode through which Indigenous land practices are erased in favour of capitalist ones. Have your thoughts on agency and property shifted at all since you wrote this piece?

GB: To be frank, I don’t know much about De Soto. I came to his work via an interest in squatter settlements. The book that’s had the biggest influence on me around these issues is Doug Sauder’s Arrival City, on the interesting phenomenon of rural to urban migration. It is impossible to stop this anyway, but he actually endorses it as a positive social-political phenomenon. For people living in squatter settlements, not having tenure is a problem because it constrains the community’s potential for economic growth, and so my interest in De Soto came to me through my sense that the establishment of tenure in relation to the plots of land that these shacks occupy in squatter settlements is an essential threshold that has to be passed for people to achieve that kind of economic security sufficient for them to actually build their lives and construct their way.

Until your question, I hadn’t thought of this phenomenon constituting a privatization of the commons. In fact, in the case of most squatter settlements, I don’t think it does that, but it may in some cases. You would have to go through them case by case.

But this may be an appropriate time for me to mention another figure that I have not written about, but who had a late significant influence on my thinking, the economist Karl Polanyi. I bought The Great Transformation many years ago—my copy is a $1.99 paperback, so that’s an indication of how long ago I bought it—but I didn’t read it until a few years ago. I would not
Complementarity

Arendt's political theory (Figure 6). Of course, Arendt is not a political economist, and she's not even particularly interested in economics. But she's very interested in etymology, and to the extent that, etymologically speaking, economy is associated with the household, she is very wary of the influence of the household on the political realm. So I think she might even have a slightly structural bias against economics for that reason.

Nonetheless, as I see it, Polanyi's book *The Great Transformation* did three fundamental things. The first was to explain the establishment of liberalism in Britain in the early nineteenth century as an intellectual construct, and sitting right in the middle of this is Jeremy Bentham, who is central for Foucault, and therefore for one of the chapters in *The Space of Appearance*; Bentham is also the ultimate negative influence in Arendt's *The Human Condition*, and she actually contrasts him to Adam Smith, by saying, scathingly, that at least the latter was still a philosopher. I hadn't really realized the power of Bentham. *The Great Transformation* describes him as being personally responsible for writing twenty bills that passed through the British Parliament in the 1820s, and these involved smashing the political power of the guilds, the pauperization of the peasantry, and prohibitions on the formation of labour union bills. This makes him appear as a precursor to Margaret Thatcher. It's not hard to draw a line between liberalism as described in Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* and what we would now refer to as neoliberalism: it's almost the same thing.

However, I thought it was interesting that Polanyi is not a Marxist. Like Arendt, he read Marx and held him in high regard as a thinker but he still believes in a market economy. There are three "fictional commodities" from which you should not make money in Polanyi's political economy. First, you shouldn't have a market in land, because land is a finite commodity. The whole point of industry is that you can make more things, but you can't make more land (without filling in a lake). Second, you shouldn't make money from labour; and third you shouldn't make money from money. But this still allows for markets, industry, and manufacturing—these are all perfectly legitimate for Polanyi.

The second thing that intrigued me about Polanyi was his description of the counter-movements of the second half of the nineteenth century, which are basically the reactions of the victims of liberal hegemony. This constitutes all the various programs of public improvement, unionization, and all the efforts made by the oppressed classes to resist their pauperization at the hands of liberalism, actually affirmatively characterizing the whole phenomenon that Arendt is wary of, which she characterizes as "the rise of the social." And so that's the other way in which I think Arendt and Polanyi are complementary to one another. He actually domesticates and rationalizes her weariness of the "social" with his account of these counter-measures starting from the mid-nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth.

The third is the most explosive of Polanyi's discoveries, because his second area of interest was anthropology—the first being economics. It was Polanyi who challenged the famous statement of Adam Smith, "All men have a natural propensity to trade and barter," which Smith sees as the historically legitimizing beginning of a market economy. Polanyi is able to demonstrate through his anthropological interest that Adam Smith, who was not an anthropologist, just got this fact wrong—his foundational supposition of his is simply not true. In most pre-modern societies, the mechanism of exchange is not barter and trade, but instead, the exchange of gifts. This is an argument that for me also has explosive implications, because it means that what we think of as the market economy is a relatively recent historical invention that started with mercantilism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and then gradually evolved into what we now know as capitalism in the nineteenth. It's not a universal construct; it's a specific, historically bounded invention, and it has certainly become powerful. But it's not as though it has some transcendent historical authority. It's an invention that's limited by its own intellectual construction.
The Lot is the Basic Unit of Urban Morphology and Architectural Typology

I was very struck by this recently, reading an opinion piece in *The Globe and Mail* by Tom Flanagan, that leading intellectual figure in Canadian conservatism, about his efforts to get the aboriginal population in Canada more interested in private property, which he sees as essential to their economic development. I couldn’t believe it, but he started out his piece with that very quote from Smith that Polanyi had already demonstrated many years before was a fundamental historical error. This surely demonstrates the considerable intellectual ignorance of the political right in Canada.

Discussions such as these can be seen to lead to the contemporary interest of architects (and other disciplines) in “the common.” Arendt does not talk about “the commons” at all. And I don’t claim to have a comprehensive grip on what it implies, but a few things are clear. Of course, the enclosure of the common lands started in medieval Britain, escalated over the next centuries, and was finally completed in the late nineteenth century, propelled by Bentham’s legislation. So, clearly the kind of opposition between liberalism and the commons is historically explicit. I am quite interested in the idea that the Indigenous population in Canada is politically split on this question of the “common” versus the private. If I understand it correctly, some Indigenous groups oppose the privatization of land in favour of the traditional practice of holding it in common, and others are actually persuaded by liberal arguments, that it would be economically expedient to move on from that. I don’t claim to know enough about this to have developed a strong opinion of my own, but because I’m interested in this history and I mistrust what Polanyi calls liberalism, it’s certainly clear to me that neoliberalism is a threat, and one of the things it threatens is the commons.

But the extent to which the commons exists as a contemporary entity is not clear to me at all. Nevertheless, Arendt, who does not use the term commons, does use the term “voluntary association” instead. I understand this as the essential component for what we now know as civil society. And civil society is the construction of those social groupings that are, on the one hand, outside the private space of the family and yet, at the same time, independent of the State. Arendt sees such groupings as essential to democracy, and I think that she’s absolutely right about that. I would have thought that there’s a potential relationship between civil society and the commons, but I’m not aware of scholarship which reads the two of them together. Conceptually they have in common a kind of arm’s length stance vis-à-vis the market economy, which I think is important. So, “the commons” is a kind of wildcard in my thinking, and I do not have a final position on it, but it’s clearly a subject of interest not encompassed by anything that I’ve written.

AB: In your 1978 essay, you use illustrations of the city that go back to 1793, just six years after the original “Toronto Purchase” by the British from the Mississaugas of the New Credit in 1787. You don’t reprint the famous 1805 map of the finalized “purchase” in your essay, but Eric Arthur had already used this map in *Toronto: No Mean City. 24* Although this is not at the centre of your analysis in 1978, do you see a relationship between the original division of a land which was held in common and shared by different Indigenous peoples and tribes, and the subsequent lot formations that you analyze more closely?

GB: I cannot argue it does not precede it because it does. I can tell you the reason I focus on the 1793 map is because it shows the ten blocks, and because it was so obvious that those ten blocks still exist today. They are there; you can walk along these streets today. So, they’re a palpable link from history to the present.

AB: The map of the Toronto purchase seems to have defined the current western boundaries of both Toronto and York.

GB: Yes, it had a direct link to urban form as well, but I focused on map with the ten blocks, because it had the most direct bearing on the urban form of the specific site of our research.

AB: With this issue of the journal we’ve been trying to extend the thinking you very eloquently illustrated in the “Vacant Lots” essay by tracing back the history of land division. We are trying to take this back one step further in order to think about the implications of these treaties and negotiations with First Nations peoples as significant for the way we think about cities today. And we were wondering if you have been thinking about it at all.

GB: Well, I would have to say only a little. I have recently read Peter Russell’s fine book *Canada’s Odyssey: A Country Based on Incomplete Conquests*, which argues that there are three historical constituencies in Canada: Indigenous populations, francophones, and anglophones. As a result of colonization, according to Russell, Indigenous presence was for a long time politically constrained. And of course, as a result of the conquest of 1759, the francophone population also became subject to the British. Still, he describes Canadian history as an ongoing struggle between these three constituencies for rights and for political agency. And his argument claims that as a result of the Quiet Revolution the francophone population has achieved a certain autonomy vis-à-vis the anglophone population, but that the Indigenous population is still in the process of achieving a similar autonomy that the francophone constituency has in fact successfully achieved. That sounds to me like an accurate assessment.

One of the things that Russell points out is that throughout the whole period that the anglophone political elite in Canada was attempting to achieve autonomy vis-à-vis Great Britain in first half of the twentieth century there...
were innumerable appeals by Indigenous people to the British Privy Council opposing those attempts. Apparently, many of these efforts to achieve autonomy for the Union of Canada were opposed by the Indigenous bands back in Canada who argued that their political relationship was with the Crown, not the Government of Canada, and that the Crown trumped the Canadian government; this sought-after anglophone autonomy could not be granted in the absence of a parallel resolution of Indigenous land claims. They were apparently successful at blocking a whole series of initiatives through the 1920s and the 1930s to get more independence for Ottawa from London by appeals to the Crown in Britain. A compelling historical backdrop to these disputes is that the earliest treaties—which were also the most even-handed ones—were established by Indigenous groups with the Crown in the eighteenth century. The most egregious oppression of the Indigenous population all takes place in the second half of the nineteenth century. It is, in effect, the Canadian version of Manifest Destiny, you know, “We’re important, and you don’t matter.” As the nineteenth century went on, the Canadian treatment of the Indigenous population gradually got worse and worse and worse. So, for me, Russell’s account was historically interesting. It was better, and then it got worse, and it’s only recently getting better again. But as Russell would say: we’re not there yet.

Endnotes
4. The standard dimension of the park lots were 10 x 100 surveyor’s chains, or 660 feet (one furlong) by 6,600 feet (1.25 miles). A chain was a standardized measuring tool, made of 100 links. The link (7.92 inches), the chain (66 feet), the rod (a quarter chain or 16 feet, 6 inches), the furlong (10 chains or 660 feet), and the mile (80 chains), became standard English units of measure and were used throughout the British Empire.
5. GB: Eberhard Zeidler was the architect du jour in those days, because the Eaton Centre was going up, and he had done Ontario Place before that.
6. Zeidler Partnership Architects, Design Guidelines for the Proposed St. Lawrence Floodway (Toronto: City of Toronto Housing Department, 1975).
7. GB: John Sewell was puzzled at my claim that Zeidler had done a proposal like that, because John was the councillor for the ward that includes St. Lawrence.
8. Allan Littlewood was one of the authors of the Block Study (it is credited to Joel Shack, with Alan Littlewood, Jurgen Henze, Barbara Dewhirst and Frank Lowinberg, with Baird and Barry Sampson as advisors). Alan Littlewood authored the final site plan for St. Lawrence Housing. Carlo Antonio Gabrieli, Sionni Fabbi, and Angelo Villa, Le citta del capitale del XIX secolo (Rome: Officina Edizioni, 1975), Plates 82, 83.
10. Faudi prepared two key reports for the city in this regard: “Report on Apartments in South Parkdale” (1961), and “Report on Building Development in the East Annex Planning District” (1963). The first of these dealt with the buildings that had been erected on St. George Street, in the blocks north of Bloor, and the second with those on Jameson Avenue in South Parkdale.