

# An Architectural Theory of the Lot:

## A Conversation with George Baird

Adrian Blackwell and David Fortin

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.

Adrian Blackwell:

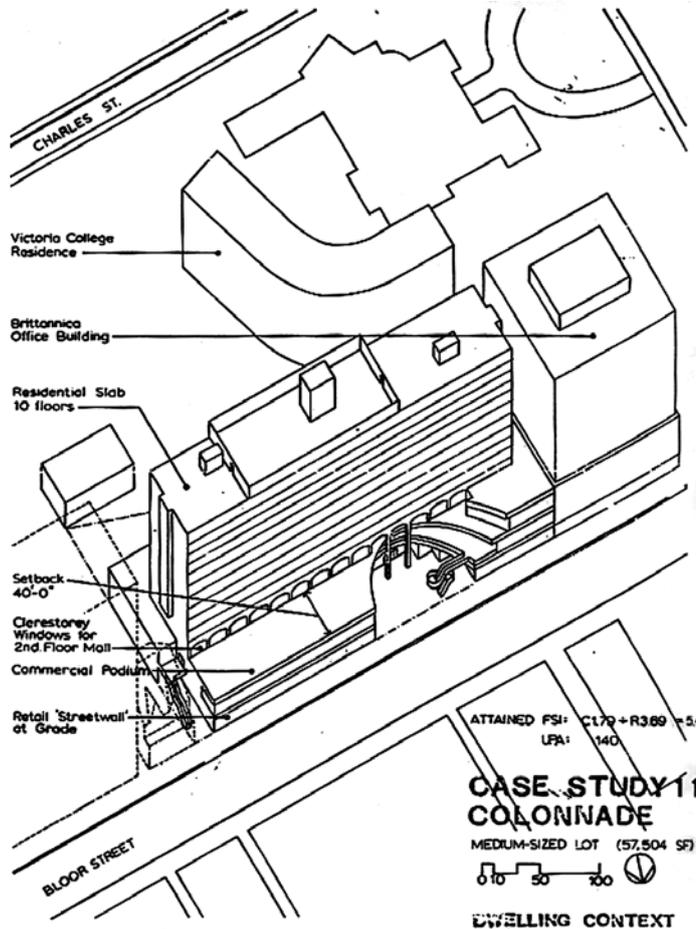
As far as we're aware, you first addressed the relationship between property division and architectural form in the essay "Theory: Vacant Lots in Toronto," in *Vacant Lottery*, the special issue of *Design Quarterly* published in 1978.<sup>1</sup> What led to this work? How was it informed by both writing 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 Ungers 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*<sup>2</sup> 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*.<sup>3</sup> It also was well received, but I was not happy with it. I felt it was a little too

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.



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 Housing<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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 Reports<sup>6</sup> that predated 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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 sociological 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 railway 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 città capitali del XIX secolo* (Figure 3).<sup>9</sup> 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 later 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





**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 città capitali del XIX secolo*, Plates 82, 83.

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

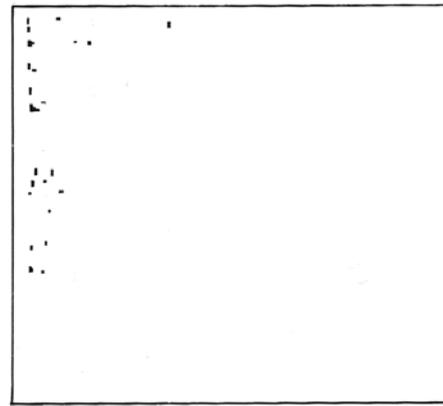
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an earlier stage, the city grew from the ten blocks up to Lot Street, now Queen Street, and that was its northern boundary. North of that was the series of so-called "park-lots" which extended all the way from Lot to Bloor Street, so they were astonishingly 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

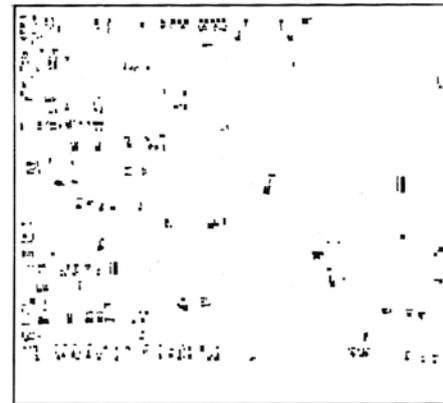
It would seem also that there was an idea imported from Britain that this colonial elite was going to house itself in both city houses and country villas. In *Toronto: No Mean City*, Eric Arthur shows one example of such a villa, in an astonishing photograph of the Allan mansion which sat on their park lot, at the northwest corner of what is now Queen and Sherbourne, right where the John Innis Community Center now sits.<sup>13</sup> 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

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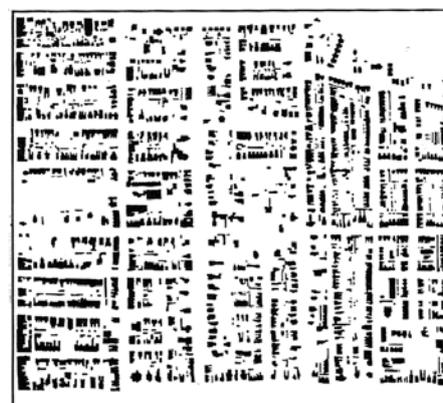
Built Context 1848



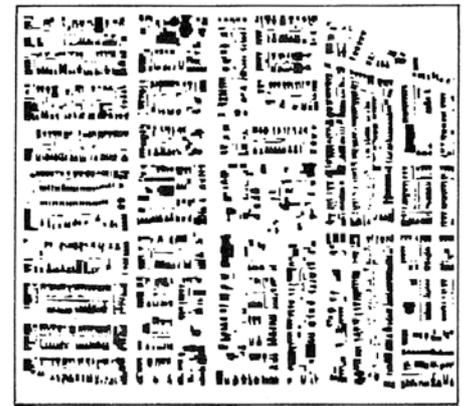
Built Context 1858



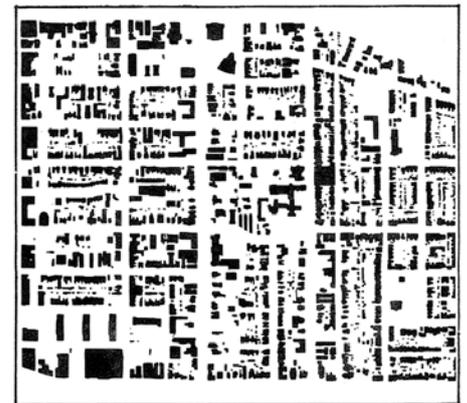
Built Context 1884



Built Context 1903



Built Context 1923



Built Context 1960

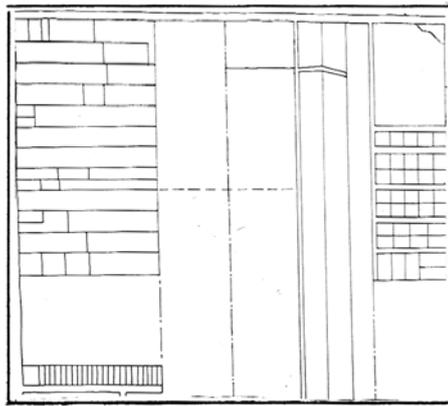


Built Context 1970

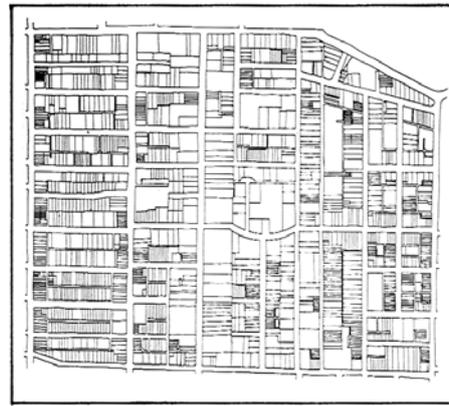


Built Context 1976

**Figure 4.** "Sequence of drawings showing the evolution of the gradual pattern of land subdivision, and later land assembly in the North Jarvis district, from 1848 until 1976." Baird, "Theory: Vacant Lots in Toronto," 114.



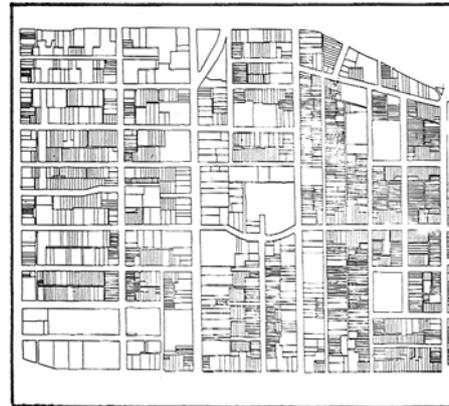
Lot Divisions, 1848



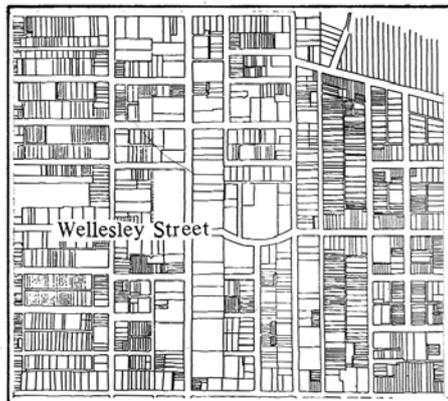
Lot Divisions, 1923



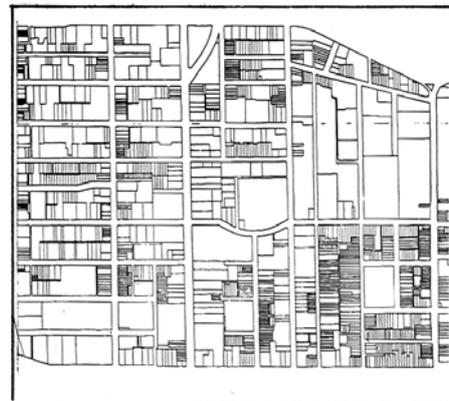
Lot Divisions, 1858



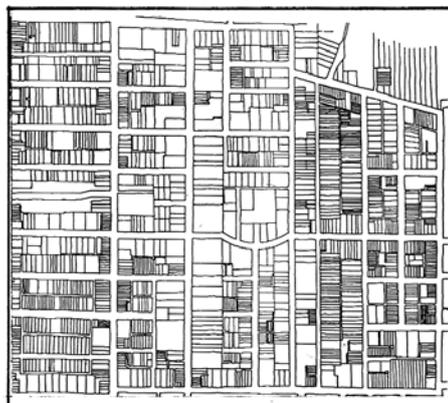
Lot Divisions, 1960



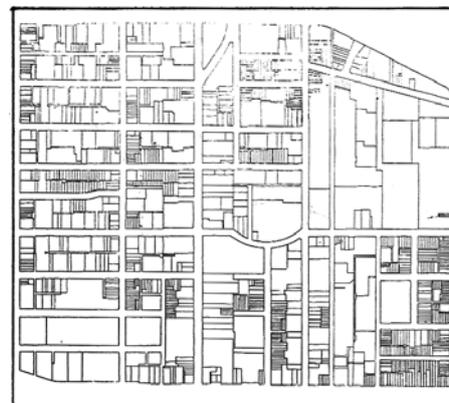
Lot Divisions, 1884



Lot Divisions, 1970



Lot Divisions, 1903



Lot Divisions, 1976

**Figure 5.** "Sequence of drawings showing the evolution of the built form in the North Jarvis precinct from 1848 [to 1976], by means of figure-ground drawings." Baird, "Theory: Vacant Lots in Toronto," 115, 121.

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

involves the repetition of architectural typologies, and 4) the diachronic dimension of urban form involves the substitution of architectural typologies in time.<sup>13</sup> Does this succinct statement continue to represent your current thoughts on this relationship?

GB: The short answer to this question is yes, to *some* degree. If you go back to *Vacant Lottery* and go through the trajectory of development from 1848 to 1976, what you discover is that up until about 1900, what you're seeing happen 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.

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 building 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<sup>15</sup> 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

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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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: We know that you are very interested in the recent typological developments in large Canadian cities with their rapid proliferation of tall buildings. How do you

analyze these contemporary developments in Toronto and Vancouver with this theory of the lot?

GB: Well, I suppose, the good news is that some of the lessons about the modifications to the typology to get rid of the tower in the park in favour of some relationship of typology to morphology, which is more urbane, have in fact been learned. It is interesting that the first iteration of Toronto's Railway Lands development is more like St. Jamestown, while the second iteration west of Spadina, which was redesigned in response to criticism, has more street wall, and more diversity of uses. So there you can read an incremental shift in built form of some significance. And then of course, if you think about the re-zoning of "The Kings," there we have extensively differentiated land ownership, and so all the many buildings going up there are on individual parcels.<sup>19</sup> So, theoretically, insofar as I'm in favour of differentiated land ownership, I suppose I ought to be in favour of this pattern of redevelopment. But the catch is that when the city scrapped the land-use restrictions in The Kings, it introduced urban design guidelines to control built form. And then developers and the municipal lawyers acting for them persuaded the Ontario Municipal Board that the guidelines did not have statutory authority and were only advisory. And so we now have buildings in downtown Toronto with windows to private apartments right on the property line of their parcels. It's as though we were going back to 1913, when this was most recently legal. The city's setback requirements, which would prevent this, are part of the guidelines that the OMB decided have no legal force. So now, the city tries to negotiate with the individual developers, but they are playing a weak hand. In short, we don't have a regulatory framework which is adequate to the scale and intensity of current development.

And the other thing that goes back to differentiated ownership is the condominium. Because a condominium *is* differentiated ownership. It is comprised a large group of owners, each of whom possesses

only a modest amount of equity. So, from that point of view one might think I should be in favour of this. However, many of the lower-quality buildings have very problematic building envelopes, which everybody who knows anything about building science says will eventually fail. It's only a matter of time. In my view, we face an eventual social catastrophe with older, lower-quality condominium buildings basically going bankrupt because the condominium corporations do not have the economic means to cope with the remedial measures those buildings are going to require. And that conjures up the spectre of large-scale building abandonment. In short, it is my view that the potential downside of this is very severe, yet nobody is saying anything about it. The lack of regulatory framework for these buildings brings us back to morphology and typology.

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.

GB: 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 here 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 first-hand 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.<sup>20</sup>

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.

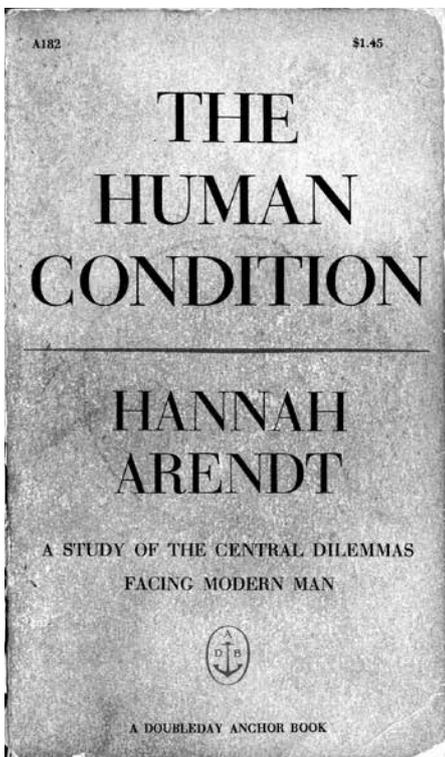
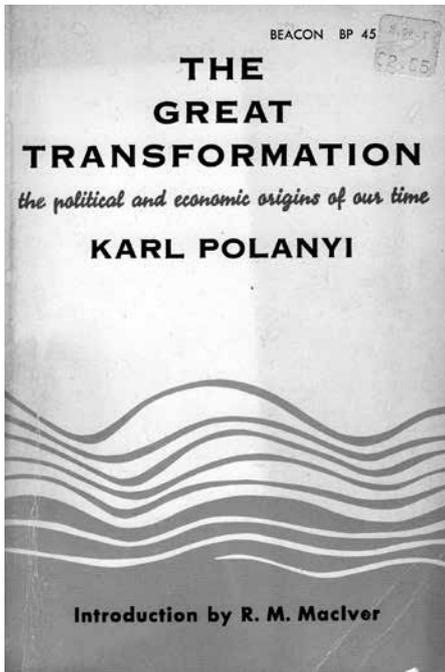
AB: In “Thoughts on ‘Agency,’ ‘Utopia’ and ‘Property’ in Contemporary Architectural and Urban Theory,” you use your observations in Japan as a way of returning to your 1978 argument, in this case more explicitly arguing that smaller lot sizes increase the agency of urban inhabitants. You argue that a “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 Saunder’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.<sup>21</sup> I would not



**Figure 6.** The well-worn covers of Baird's copies of Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* and Arendt's *The Space of Appearance*.

say that it hit me as Arendt did, but it is an incredibly impressive book. If I were to write another book it would be called *An Unforeseen Complementarity* and the complementarity would be between Polanyi's political economy and 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.<sup>22</sup> 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<sup>23</sup> 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 interests 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.

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 commons." 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*.<sup>24</sup> 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 people 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

- 1 George Baird, “Theory: Vacant Lots in Toronto,” in Baird, *Writings on Architecture and the City* (London: Artifice, 2015), 106–123.
- 2 George Baird, Roger du Toit, Robert Hill, Bruce Kuwabara, Alan Littlewood, Donald McKay, Stephen McLaughlin, Belinda Sugaraan, and John van Nostrand, *On Building Downtown: Design Guidelines for the Core Area* (Toronto: City of Toronto, 1974).
- 3 George Baird et al., *Built-form Analysis: A Working Paper on the Implications for Built-form of Land-use Policies Relating to Housing, Mixed uses, and Recreation Space in the Inner Core Area* (Toronto: The City of Toronto Planning Board, 1975).
- 4 City of Toronto Housing Department and George Baird, *St. Lawrence Neighborhood Report: The Block Study* (Toronto: City of Toronto Housing Work Group, 1975).
- 5 GB: Eberhard Zeidler was the architect *du jour* in those days, because the Eaton Center had been such a big deal and he had done Ontario Place before that.
- 6 Zeidler Partnership Architects, *Design Guidelines for the Proposed St. Lawrence Neighborhood Site* (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 Lewinberg, with Baird and Barry Sampson as advisors). Alan Littlewood authored the final site plan for St. Lawrence Housing.
- 9 Carlo Aymonino, Gianni Fabbri, and Angelo Villa, *Le citta capitali del XIX secolo* (Rome: Officinca Edizioni, 1975), Plates 82, 83.
- 10 The standard dimension of the parklots 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.
- 11 The Family Compact refers to a small group of powerful men who acted as an oligopoly over political and economic power in Upper Canada, now the Province of Ontario, in the first half of the nineteenth century.
- 12 See Eric Arthur, *Toronto: No Mean City* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), 53.
- 13 See George Baird, “Studies on Urban Morphology in North America,” in Baird, *Writings on Architecture and the City* (London: Artifice, 2015), 124–131.
- 14 The City Park Apartments consist of three fourteen-storey slabs oriented north-south, and running the full block from Wood to Alexander Street. See Chris Bateman, “The First Modern Apartment Complex in Toronto,” *Spacing Toronto*, 26 August 2017, [spacing.ca/toronto/2017/08/26/first-modern-apartment-complex-toronto](http://spacing.ca/toronto/2017/08/26/first-modern-apartment-complex-toronto).
- 15 Faludi 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.

- 16 George Baird, *The Space of Appearance* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1995). GB: “I read Hannah Arendt in 1965 and it just blew me away; I found it completely astonishing. Mary McCarthy, who was a friend of Arendt’s, has been quoted saying: ‘her insights are both amazing and obvious,’ and that is a paradoxical combination of adjectives, but it’s exactly right that when you read Arendt you think ‘of course,’ all of a sudden, all of these things that I have been struggling to understand, fell into place. She solved the problem of functionalism for me. Arendt was a huge influence on my thinking—and still is. I don’t disavow any of my interests in her work.”
- 17 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1990 [1963]), 137–140.
- 18 See George Baird, “Thoughts on Agency, Utopia and Property in Contemporary Architectural and Urban Theory, 2013,” in Baird, *Writings on Architecture and the City* (London: Artifice Books, 2015), 153.
- 19 “The Kings,” or “The Two Kings,” is the name of a City legislation that re-zoned what were industrial areas along King Street east and west of Toronto’s Central Business District, filled with large multi-storey warehouses, many built in the late-nineteenth century, to mixed-use zoning. The new legislation was led by Chief Planner Paul Bedford and Mayor Barbara Hall, and led to lower-value industrial uses being displaced by residential and office uses, initiating a development frenzy in the core of the city.
- 20 GB: “There are two of my essays that are much more phenomenological than they are structuralist.” See George Baird, “Alvar Aalto” and “On the Phenomenology of Spatial Sequences: Frank Gehry’s Disney Hall and Hans Scharoun’s Berlin Philharmonic,” in Baird, *Writings on Architecture and the City* (London: Artifice, 2015), 78–92, 98–103.
- 21 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957 [1944]).
- 22 *Ibid.*, 116, 117, and 180.
- 23 Arendt actually starts her chapter on labour with this wonderful statement: “In the following chapter, Karl Marx will be criticized”—but then she talks about how badly she feels about that, because here is a great thinker that she disagrees with, and meanwhile there are all these hacks working around the U.S. in the 1950s, former Marxists are now disparaging the great man, who she says are like midgets in comparison, if you assess them intellectually. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1958]), 79.
- 24 Arthur, *Toronto*, 9.