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Canada Teaches Some Simple Lessons

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Urban Deeds

Canada teaches some simple lessons in city living

By Chester E. Smolski

It's an odd person who doesn't marvel at the cities of Canada on his or her return from a visit to our neighbor to the north. Whether this be a trip to Canada's largest city of Montreal or to a Providence-sized Quebec City, people speak of the cleanliness, the safety, the beauty, the good public transport and the relaxed way of living. What accounts for the livability of these urban centers? And is there something that we can learn from the Canadians that we can use in our own cities?

Direct comparisons are not easily made between countries because of cultural, economic and historic differences, and even though there are some considerable similarities between our two countries, it is the differences between ourselves and our biggest trading partner in the world that catch our attention.

Fewer murders

Consider, for example, the fact that there were 524 homicides in all of Canada in 1986, a figure less than the number of homicides in Chicago or Houston alone. And, while the number of homicides continues to increase in our country, the 1986 figure for Canada is a 20 percent decrease from the previous year.

Such impressive numbers for Canada can be gathered from publications, by visiting there or, conversely, the numbers and the story can come from Canadians visiting here. This is what happened at a conference on Canadian cities recently held at Rhode Island College, where the directors of planning and development from Halifax and Toronto were joined by His Worship, the mayor of Ottawa, Jim

Durrell. Geography professor John Mercer of Syracuse University was also there to put a proper perspective on Canadian and American cities.

Durrell pointed out that the nation's capital, Ottawa, was so designated only in 1857, and until 1900, it was a small, brawling, Irish-Catholic lumber town. But all of this has changed, and today one goes to the tulip festival in the spring, where a million plants blossom in all their glory, and the winter festival, which will draw 800,000 people to skate the canals and rivers that are found here. And this summer promises to bring large numbers of visitors to the newly built national art gallery, exciting in both the architecture and the promised exhibits.

But more than pitching his city, Durrell spoke of an attitude on the part of people toward their city and the role of government regarding Canadian urban centers.

Canadians love their cities, he said, take pride in them, encourage relatives to move to them and plan the future of their children there. This is vastly different from Americans, who still continue their exodus from cities to where they feel the better life is to be found—in the suburbs and small towns.

It is this sprawling of our urban complexes that creates so many driving problems, according to Mercer, because 85 percent of Americans drive to work in their private cars, and only 12 percent use public transport. In the more compact cities of Canada, by contrast, only 67 percent use private vehicles, and 25 percent use public transport.

This greater use of public transport allows greater expenditures to be made, and the Canadian result is one of the best public transit systems in the world. Toron-

to continues to be a model of efficient public transport, and Ottawa was recently recognized as having the best bus system in all of North America.

All of the speakers singled out the Canadian attitude of collectivism, which means working together for community and having respect for the other person's property. While we in this country speak of "life, liberty and pursuit of happiness," in Canada the phrase is "peace, order and good government." Individual freedom is a wonderful attribute of American life, but in the city, where people live in very close proximity, community needs must be paramount. And this view is reflected in the actions of government in Canadian cities.

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Government has greater control over individuals in Canadian cities. They use strict zoning enforcement to prevent absentee landlords from coming into the city, and they require housing to be tidy—if a property is not fixed, the city will do the work and bill the home owner.

In the view of Durrell, it is the developers who are the opportunists that will take advantage of any situation. And in Ottawa they are not given any tax incentives. While it is the responsibility of political leaders to provide the vision for the future

of the city, planning is the means of reaching these future goals, a process that all speakers stressed.

Financial support for the cities of Canada has strong central government backing, and a New York example years ago of near bankruptcy would not happen there. Durrell said that no cities of Canada have a bond rating below AA, according to Moody's Investor Service, while he claims that more than one-half of American cities are below an A.

A better use

Referring specifically to Providence, Durrell said it is a gift to be a port city, but he added that we should be doing a better job of using the waterways in the downtown. In Ottawa, they are investing \$6 million in a new pedestrian mall in the downtown, and he felt that it would be a mistake to not use the Westminster Mall for a pedestrian mall. He was surprised to see the filth and numerous potholes in the streets, and he stressed the importance of having housing downtown because this allows the downtown to be alive 24 hours a day. He also praised our historic preservation efforts and sees potential for the city and would invest in it himself.

The livable cities of Canada do not just happen; rather, they are controlled by people who like to live in them, take pride in them, work to keep them clean and financially sound, and who look to their political leaders to provide the farsightedness for what the future will bring. If this is what makes Canadian cities work, then it may be a long time before our own cities will be a match for those of our neighbor to the north.

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