Mediating a Common Sense of Place: The Toronto Archives' "A Visual Legacy: The City of Toronto's Use of Photography, 1856-1997"
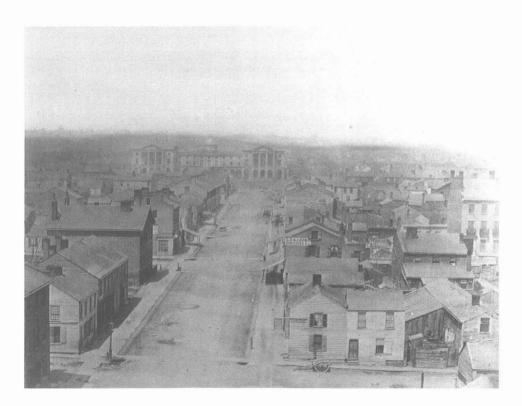
by Ian Robinson

Fig. 1
Looking north from King and Yonge Streets; City of Toronto Archives Fonds 1498, Item 16
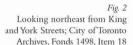
The Toronto Archives' recent public gallery exhibition, entitled "A Visual Legacy: The City of Toronto's Use of Photography, 1856-1997," consisted of archival photographs covering over one hundred years of Toronto's history. The exhibition traced the City of Toronto's official use of photography, from the grainy black-and-white streetscapes of downtown Toronto (submitted to the Colonial Office in support of Toronto's bid for selection as capital of the Province of Canada in 1857) to images of official ceremonies welcoming Pope John Paul II and the Dalai Lama in the 1980s and 1990s.

The historic photographs of the city are strangely compelling; the spectator is drawn in by images of de-familiarized urban spaces. In particular, the earliest photos of Toronto are some of the most captivating. In 1856, the Toronto firm Armstrong, Beere and Hime ("Land Agents, Engineers and Photographists") created a 12-image photographic panorama of downtown Toronto, covering roughly 300 degrees from the top of a hotel at the intersection of King and York streets. The images display a topography of Toronto that is barely recognizable today. Visitors of the exhibition are called upon to engage in their own detective work, piecing together the fragments in order to re-establish a sense of spatial and temporal continuity among the photographs and our lived experience of the same spaces. The spectator searches the images for reference points in the present, yet the landmarks are few. Quick recognition of the front of Osgoode Hall in one image (Fig. 1, looking north from King and York streets) provides only slightly more reassurance of historical continuity than a more provisional inference of St. Michael's Cathedral in another (*Fig. 2*, looking northeast from King and York streets).

To some extent, the old photographs demand that viewers accept their inability to redeem the images with personal and collective experience and memories of the city. These are images of a place from which we have little historical memories to draw upon. As one proceeds chronologically through the exhibition, the city becomes more recognizable. With the images of the construction of the Bloor Street Viaduct and the new City Hall, and visits by the royal family and the pope, Toronto's reference

Fig. 2
Looking northeast from King
and York Streets; City of Toronto
Archives, Fonds 1498, Item 18

points are immediately visible. However, even these photos demand a certain historicist approach to viewing, for they are always someone else's images of the city and need to be decoded as such.

However engrossing one finds the visual historical record of the city, what unifies the exhibit is not simply a fascination with urban history, but rather a historical record of Toronto's attempts to document its spaces and civic events. By mounting a display of Toronto's official attempts at archiving its history, the exhibition provides a critical site for reflection on the processes by which photographic documents of the city are strategically employed in the framing, mediation, and production of local history and collective memory. While the images of the city's past carry great "exhibition value" as historical artefacts, "A Visual Legacy" quietly reminds us of the various instrumental processes and sometimes conflicting values through which a record of collective history and the public archive are created.

In his short essay "Photography," written in 1927, Siegfried Kracauer reflects on the capacity of the medium of photography to relate historical knowledge to the present. For Kracauer, the proliferation of the photographic image in the early twentieth century is emblematic of modernity's attempts to eternalize the present moment. In documenting the spatial configurations of precise moments in time, photography reduces the meaningful lived history of the world to a sequence of isolable fragments. Whereas an image of the past survives in human memory because it bears personal significance in particular lived historical contexts, the photographic

image is unburdened by personal or cultural meaning. Kracauer finds much in common between photography and historicist thinking: as photography aims to present the world in terms of a "spatial continuum," historicism attempts to present the past as a "temporal continuum" driven by a belief that historical reality can be grasped by "reconstructing the course of events in their temporal succession without any gaps."[1] On the other hand, memory constructs an image of history through quite different means. In Kracauer's words,

> Photography grasps what is given as a spatial (or temporal) continuum; memory images retain what is given only insofar as it has significance. Since what is significant is not reducible to either merely spatial or merely temporal terms, memory images are at odds with photographic representation.[2]

Our everyday grasp of history is thus the product of cognitive, as well as social and cultural, filters. An understanding of history therefore represents and brings to life the meanings and values of the past. Conversely, the photographic image displays only a spectral presence of a reality that cannot be experienced, and therefore remains estranged from us. "The old photograph," writes Kracauer, "has been emptied of the life whose physical presence overlay its merely spatial configuration ... from year to year its semiotic value decreases. The truth content of the original is left behind in its history; the photograph captures only the residuum that history has discharged."[3] The photographic image wages an "assault"

Fig. 3
Southwest corner of Louisa and Elizabeth Streets; City of Toronto Archives, Series 372, Sub-series 55, Item 45

on memory and history as the lived truth of an era, such that "the resemblance between the image and the object effaces the contours of the object's 'history.'" It is to a world whose past is thoroughly mediated by the photographic image that Kracauer directs the polemical remark, "never before has a period known so little about itself."[4]

Kracauer's evaluation of the decline in "semiotic value" of old photographs is especially pertinent when it comes to viewing images of spaces that have been completely transformed. In 1912, City Photographer Arthur Goss set out to document a block of downtown Toronto that was to be demolished for the construction of the Registry of Deeds and Land Titles (*Fig. 3*, southwest corner of Elizabeth and Louisa streets; *Fig. 4*, postcard depicting the Registry in 1918). The modest block between Chestnut, Elizabeth, Albert, and Louisa streets was entirely removed from the city's grid. The streets, restaurants, and shops preserved in the archival photos are the only traces of a history to which we have little direct access. With the demolition of the Registry in the 1960s to build Nathan Phillips Square and the new City Hall, the collective memory of the site was even further displaced. In a formidable shot taken during the construction of City Hall in 1964, the facade of the Registry remains the

only part of the building left standing, a reminder of the contingency of the city's built landscape and our common estrangement from history (*Fig. 5*).

However, in Kracauer's analysis, photography maintains the potential to teach us something about the passing of time, even if its images work to increase the distance between the spectator and the meanings of a past era. Moreover, in depicting a world stripped of subjective meanings, it is this alienating quality of the photographic image that calls into question the "natural" arrangement of elements in space. As Kracauer writes, "a shudder runs through the viewer of old photographs. For they make visible not the knowledge of the original but the spatial configuration of a moment."[5] That shudder is the reaction of the viewer who confronts a world from which she or he is completely absent. Rather than redeeming a sense of the world as it was lived, replete with meaning and values associated with given objects and spaces, the photograph from the past shows the contingency of the world and its spatial configuration, which is taken for granted in everyday life. The city that "once clung to us like our skin" is alienated from us in the old photograph.[6] It is in the uncanny images of the past that we come face to face with the radical contingency of history

Fig. 4
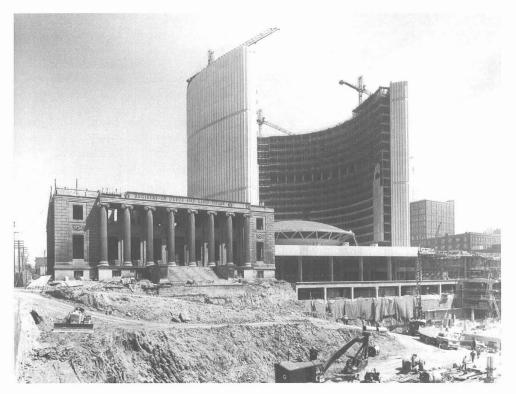Postcard depicting the Registry in 1918; City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 1222

Fig. 5
Site of the new City Hall and Nathan Phillips Square; City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1268, Item 462
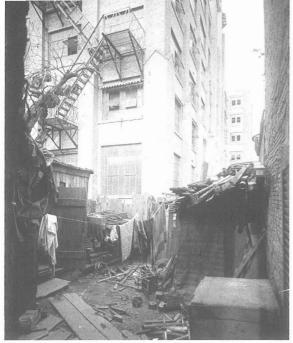
Fig. 6
City of Toronto Archives, Serie 372, Sub-series 32, Item 313

and memory. Here we are provoked to reconsider not only the foundations of our historical knowledge, but the taken-for-granted meanings and associations attached to the spatial configurations of the present that we inhabit everyday.

At stake in our encounter with the city's history through the Toronto Archives exhibit is what Raymond Williams refers to in his cultural analysis as the "selective tradition."[7] According to Williams, in the analysis of culture we must distinguish between the "lived culture of a particular time and place," the "recorded culture" of a particular period as it is documented, and the "selective tradition" as the set of complex processes that articulate the lived reality of a period and its documentation.[8] Part of the intrigue of the historical photographs of Toronto is that they rarely, if ever, succeed in conveying what Williams refers to as a "structure of feeling." Instead, viewers are left with a series of fragments; frozen images that we desperately attempt to put into context.

In the chronological display of the city's official use of photography, we encounter the instrumental and political processes and values by which history is constructed. Until the 1950s, much of the city's photography work consisted of producing images for all city departments, including health, parks, property, hydro. A strong focus was placed on the documentation of official department initiatives and associated infrastructure. The photographic record from this period reveals attempts to define the role of public infrastructure and social provisions in the city. Much of the photography therefore had political value for reform-minded officials. Between 1911 and 1929, photographs produced for the Department of Health

documented overcrowded and substandard housing conditions in the city centre, and initiatives such as health education, public nursing, and medical inspections in schools (*Fig. 6*). At the same time, the Parks Department documented the provision of public spaces and facilities intended to promote good citizenship and combat the maladies of slums, poverty, and delinquency.

The construction of a modern city is celebrated in photos of the Bloor Street Viaduct (built between 1913 and 1918) and the R.C. Harris Water Treatment Plant (built between 1937 and 1941). In these photographs, taken mostly by city photographer Goss and his successor Howard Macdonald, emphasis is on the construction of new urban infrastructure and social programs in order to create a new form of public citizenship. In the 1950s and 1960s, the role of photography shifted from its focus on documenting the activities of various departments to the recording of civic events and the provision of public relations photos. The official role of photography, as the exhibition notes point out, shifted from an active role in city-building to a function of the city's offices of public communications and records management.

To argue that the photographic images by themselves lack an inherent capacity to convey meaning is not to suggest that the exhibition fails to communicate a sense of Toronto's collective history. What the exhibition reveals is the selective tradition of how the city has been defined throughout its history. While Kracauer's distinction between the memory image and the photographic image is still relevant, in "A Visual Legacy," the process by which collective memory is formed and reproduced is made explicit. While viewing the archival photos, we come face to face not simply with iconic Toronto scenes and forms in the midst of their construction (the Bloor Street Viaduct, City Hall, the CN Tower) or with indices of Toronto's historical existence (the barely imaginable streetscapes in the city centre before the development of high-rise towers, for one), but with the culture of the selective tradition itself. That is, what unifies the exhibition is its emphasis on the ways that photography was officially used throughout history. In noting the shifting uses of photography for various city departments and agencies through the years, we begin to catch sight of the construction of a historical record. The importance of particular subject matter to different city officials and photographers reflects specific historical values in determining what aspects of Toronto should be documented. What is displayed is therefore no less than the archival process itself, a selective tradition of what is historically significant.

The archival record of the city's use of photography raises the question of the motivation behind official work in the production of images and documentation of the city in the present. In the archives, photographs acquire new value as historical resources and objects for exhibition. The archiving and exhibition of historic photos reflects the latest segment of the selective tradition of representing the city. Thus, at the same time that we encounter a spatial continuum that appears estranged from us, we also are brought face to face with the active construction of the city's public history—not as it is recollected in memories, but as it is stitched together into a collection of photographs.

It is this very sense of detachment from history invoked by the photographs that creates the conditions for a collective space of critical reflection, not only on a shared geographic heritage, but on a common sense of place regarding the city. As Hannah Arendt argues in *The Human Condition*, the presence of a politically-active public realm requires the existence of a "common world," a shared objective meeting ground that articulates a multitude of different positions, perspectives, and private experiences. Moreover, for a "public realm" to exist, a sense of a common world, or a common sense of place must transcend the subjective experience of time expressed by Kracauer's memory images and Williams' structure of feeling. Rather, for a public realm of political actors to exist, the objective world of appearances around which it revolves must be understood as permanent.[9] The historical record of selected moments of Toronto's past, to which citizens have little access beyond the archive, evokes a sense of the common world of the city. Estranged from memory and the subjective experience of "private" life, the photographic images in the archive exhibit provide the constitutive basis of a public realm through their mediation of a common sense of place. By calling attention to the selective documentation of history and the construction of the historical record in the archive, the exhibit further reminds us of the role of historiography in the constitution of the public and its common relation to the city. An enduring public history and a common sense of place are possible only insofar as the city is subject to continual public interpretation, exhibition, and scrutiny. By contributing to the collective project of rearticulating Toronto's shared public history and thereby fostering the conditions for an active public realm, "A Visual Legacy" fulfills a political and pedagogical role in providing a site for critical reflection on the historical geography of the city.

NOTES

1 Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," *The Mass Ornament*, ed., trans. Thomas Y. Levins (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 49.
2 Kracauer, 50.
3 Ibid., 55.
4 Ibid., 58.
5 Ibid., 56.
6 Ibid.
7 Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961).
8 Williams, 49-53.
9 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).