

# Visions of Toronto: Urbanity versus Industry

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As early as 1834, when the town of York was incorporated as the city of Toronto, city officials were discussing the need for an accurate map.<sup>1</sup> The Surveyor General, James Chewett, produced the first official map of the city in June 1834. The map simply plotted the existing city streets and the park lots that extended from the harbour, on the south, to the northern boundary of the city (Lot or Queen Street). At this early date a set of four watercolour views representing the architecture of Toronto was also produced. These images by architect Thomas Young, which were later lithographed by Nathaniel Currier, included an overall view of the city and views of the second parliament buildings, Upper Canada College, and King Street (the main thoroughfare of the city). The latter included notable buildings such as the gaol, courthouse, and Anglican church (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> These lithographs immediately became popular and remained so throughout the 19th century.

Toronto had grown remarkably by the 1840s, extending from the previous city limits of Queen Street (as delineated in Chewett's 1834 map) northward to Bloor Street. While the city did not officially request a new map, in 1842 civil engineer James Cane surveyed, drew, and himself published a substantial topographical plan of the city and its liberties (Figure 2). This map provided a great deal of information. It was large in format (approximately three by four feet) and had accurate plans of the public buildings — Cane had even borrowed architects' plans to ensure accuracy.<sup>3</sup> In addition, this map incorporated a vignette that illustrated the city as seen from the harbour (Figure 3). Although there is no concrete evidence, this view is probably from the hand of Thomas Young, the artist of the previous four views of the city.<sup>4</sup> The picture, though not particularly detailed and limited by its profile view, shows a substantially established city with fine architecture dominated by a church spire, that of St. James' Anglican.

By mid-century, urban growth had necessitated a new map. When Cane surveyed the city in 1842, the population was 15,000; less than ten years later, in 1851, the population had doubled to more than 30,000.<sup>5</sup> In that year, Sir Sandford Fleming compiled a new city plan that extended farther west than Cane's map to include the recently completed Provincial

Lunatic Asylum (Figure 4). The map also illustrated the trend towards denser development at the centre of the city, including the location of King's College. Fleming was praised for the precision of his plan. Newspaper accounts suggested that not only was every building, however small, included, but also every tree was found in its accurate position.<sup>6</sup> Fleming's map of the city was circumscribed by sixteen individual images depicting the city's most important buildings. Yet again, the artistic talent of Thomas Young was employed for this border of architectural drawings.

Looking specifically at these three maps by Chewett, Cane, and Fleming, it appears that their purpose was twofold. The city council in 1834 (when the Chewett map was commissioned) wanted a map in order to "prevent their jurisdiction and legislation acts extending beyond the limits assigned them by law" — that is, the councillors themselves needed a plan for practical, everyday purposes.<sup>7</sup> A second function of such a map was civic advertisement: as was a common practice at that time, the city of Toronto, from the outset in 1834, undoubtedly wanted to distribute the plan to other cities. This convention is evident from a letter found in the city council minutes dated June 1835. Accompanied by a plan of the city of Quebec, a Quebec representative wrote: "I beg you will have the goodness to present the accompanying Plan of the City of Quebec to the corporation of the City of Toronto and I shall be gratified to find that they will do me the honor of giving it a place in the Hall of the Council."<sup>8</sup>

This same propagandistic agenda for city maps is evident almost 20 years later, in respect to the Fleming plan of 1851. An announcement in the *British Colonist* best sums up the 19th-century opinion of such an illustrated map:

The publication is highly important and interesting not only on account of its usefulness as a work of reference, but also as a document which will show to our friends in the mother country our present state of advancement infinitely better than any written description.<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, it was presumed that a city could best show itself to the world through visual representations such as these maps, rather than through written descriptions. This assumption was



Figure 1. "View in King Street (Looking Eastward), City of Toronto, Upper Canada." Print by Nathaniel Currier after Thomas Young, 1835. (Toronto Reference Library)

not new — for centuries cities have exploited this technique, which appeals to the "sharpest" of the senses, sight.<sup>10</sup>

While Chewett's map was purely cartographic, the maps by Cane and Fleming included artistic views of the city similar to those made by Young in 1835. It follows that representations of cities that are created in an artistic context, as opposed to the technical context of cartographic maps, are vehicles for abstract ideas; that is, the artist can, through the choice of subject matter, be more expressive. These views are in fact more didactic, and build on the idea of visual civic advertisement.

One may reasonably ask, "How do we interpret these images?" That is, what was being advertised? Was that advertisement in fact realistic? And what do these views tell us

about the city of Toronto in the 19th century? The dominant interpretation of these images does not stray far from interpretations that can be made about many cities, especially in Upper Canada, at this date. Torontonians wanted to situate their city, or advertise it visually, as a refined, well-established, progressive place. Thus, the subject matter in the earliest city views (depicting important institutions that were architecturally substantial) was chosen to suggest an urbane character. And, indeed, Toronto was such a place: the visual image was a true representation of the spirit of the age, as can be ascertained by comparing these views to the city's actual physical development.

York was from the beginning a seat of government. The function of government brought to the town public officials,

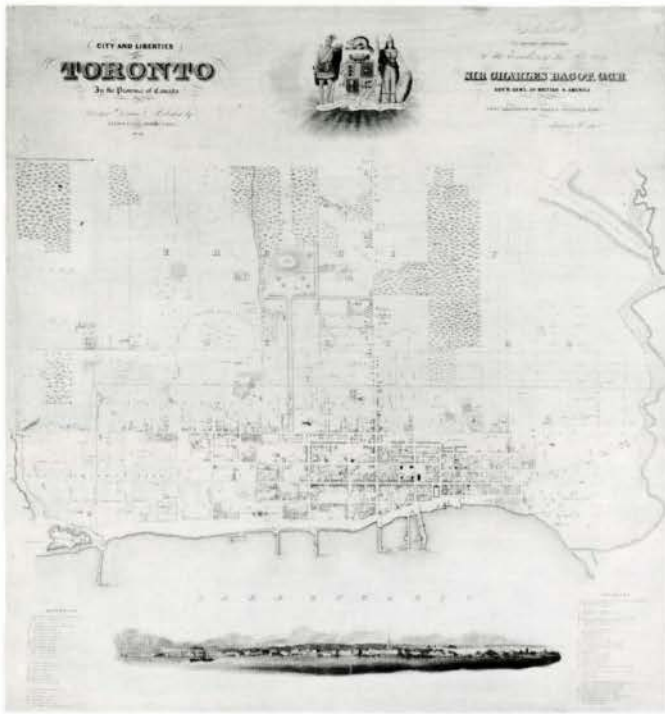


Figure 2. "Topographical Plan of the City and Liberties of Toronto in the Province of Canada." James Cane, 1842. (City of Toronto Archives)

generally members of the elite Family Compact, who had the influence and the capital to develop York beyond its muddy roots.<sup>11</sup> One repercussion of the wealth of these officials was the construction of architecturally substantial institutional buildings, which began to take shape parallel to the waterfront, spanning the city from east to west. The eastern section of the city (Figure 5) was a centre for local administrative buildings and market activity (this was the location of the gaol, courthouse, city hall, and market), while the western section (Figure 6) was the location of the provincial buildings, such as the parliament building and Government House. Business and political interests combined to foster the creation of numerous financial institutions, such as the Bank of Upper Canada. The economic growth of the city also served as the springboard for the foundation of cultural and educational institutions, such as Upper Canada College and King's College (the provincial university). The city's numerous churches were additional manifestations of financial prosperity, notably St. James' Anglican and St. Andrew's Presbyterian.<sup>12</sup>

It was these very aspects — government, finance, culture, and religion, the elements that underpinned the city — that were expressed in most of the earliest city views. The two important civic centres and their substantial architecture were depicted by Thomas Young: the eastern centre in his view of King Street (Figure 1), and the western centre in his views of the parliament buildings and Upper Canada College (Figure 7). The most important, and wealthiest, church in the city, St. James' Anglican, the state church, was included in both

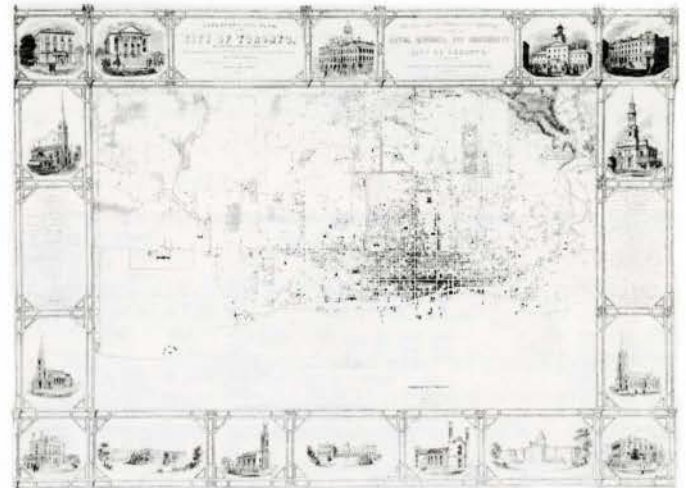
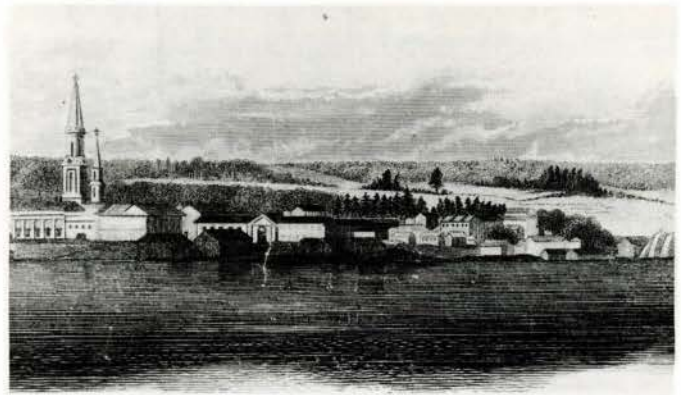


Figure 3. "Topographical Plan of the City and Liberties of Toronto" [detail of the vignette]. James Cane, 1842. (City of Toronto Archives)

Figure 4. "Topographical Plan of the City of Toronto in the Province of Canada." Sanford Fleming, 1851. (Toronto Reference Library)

Young's view of King Street and his 1842 vignette on the Cane map (Figure 3). In addition, the views around Fleming's plan show seven churches and four banks, along with official city buildings such as St. Lawrence Hall, City Hall, Upper Canada College, Osgoode Hall, and the Provincial Lunatic Asylum (Figure 8).

Thus, the city was portrayed not only as an important and dominant provincial centre, but as so economically strong that, from the first year after incorporation, it could support and maintain significant cultural, educational, and public institutions. This image of refinement reflected Torontonians' desire to be seen as the equal of the towns and cities of Britain, from whence most had recently come.

This interpretation begs the question, "Was this advertisement of the city's economic strength accurate in its visual representation?" First impressions suggest this was so. These buildings stood, and were the most important in the city. But in regard to this question, what was portrayed in these views is less important than what was *not* portrayed. The most

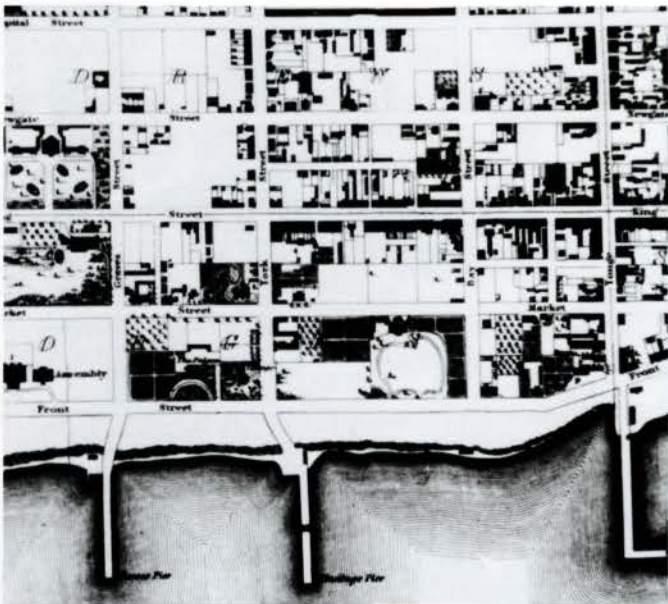
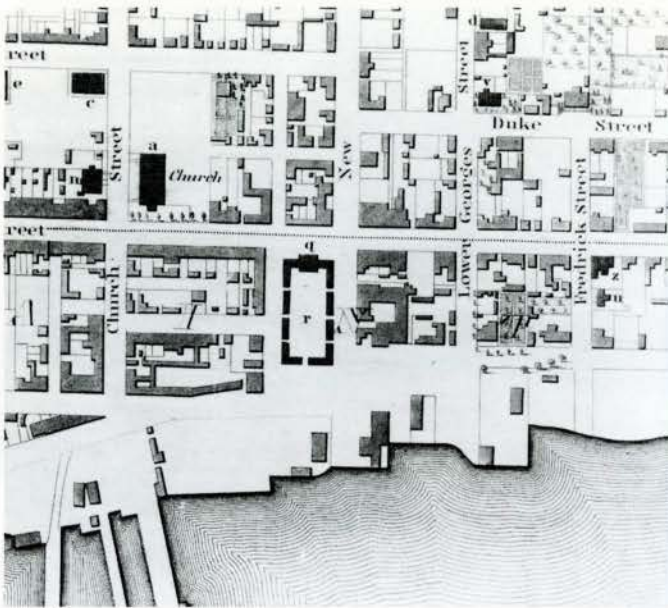


Figure 5. "Topographical Plan of the City and Liberties of Toronto" [detail of the map]: (o) gaol; (n) courthouse; (q) city hall; (r) market. James Cane, 1842. (City of Toronto Archives)

Figure 6. "Topographical Plan of the City and Liberties of Toronto" [detail of the map]: (l) House of Assembly. James Cane, 1842. (City of Toronto Archives)

important consequence of the influx of wealthy government officials was their ability to support specialized retailing and stimulate the wholesale trade.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, York was able to support a more varied retail function than any existing neighbourhood community, and with incorporation, Toronto became the centre of business for the western part of the province.<sup>14</sup> It was this commercial economy that in turn provided for the substantial physical growth in the city, necessitating, and allowing for, the construction of the notable buildings illustrated in the earliest views. In many of these

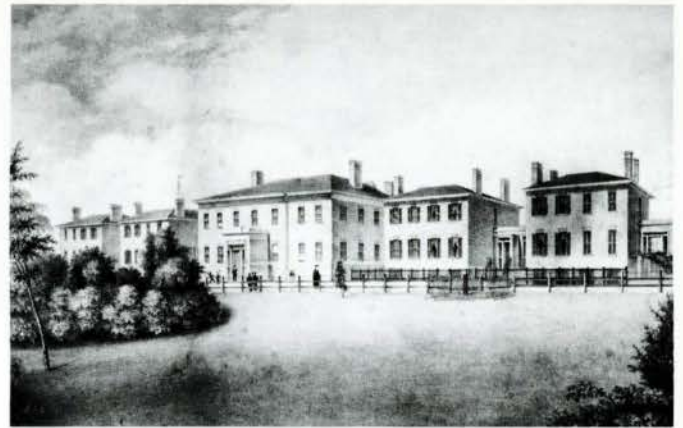


Figure 7. "Upper Canada College, Toronto, U.C." Print by Nathaniel Currier after Thomas Young, 1835. (Toronto Reference Library)



Figure 8. "Topographical Plan of the City of Toronto" [detail]. Sandford Fleming, 1851. (Toronto Reference Library)

views, however, there was one important aspect of the built environment that was not included: the commercial buildings themselves, those structures that housed this economic strength. Thus, while the city promoted itself as a strong centre based on commerce, the city's all-important commercial base was not visually expressed in a forthright manner in many of the views whose function was to serve as civic advertisement.

Views that included the commercial architecture of the city did in fact appear in the 1840s. Their existence makes the absence of commercial architecture in the above noted images even more conspicuous. Not surprisingly, this change in focus coincided with the introduction of brick in place of wood for the construction of city buildings, most notably for commercial structures.<sup>15</sup> A lithographic view by artist John Gillespie,

dated 1842, illustrates the beginning of an emphasis on commercial buildings in views of the city (Figure 9).

A few years later, Gillespie produced an oil painting as a response to a call in local newspapers for an updated official view of the city.<sup>16</sup> Gillespie chose as his subject King Street (Figure 10), the same street Thomas Young had depicted some ten years earlier but from the opposite direction. In Gillespie's view the emphasis was not on the courthouse, gaol, and Anglican church, as it had been in Young's view, but on King Street's commercial buildings. In fact, the courthouse and gaol are hidden in Gillespie's painting by a row of commercial buildings constructed in front of them in 1837 (those visible behind the trees).<sup>17</sup> In the same year, the land to the east of the church (depicted on the right in the painting) had been built up with commercial buildings. The market block on the south side of King Street (illustrated on the left), a major municipal project in its day, had been redeveloped in the late 1830s/early 1840s, the original wooden structures replaced by a continuous row of imposing brick buildings.

The focus in Gillespie's view was explicitly on commerce, commercial architecture, and the commercial classes — even the figures included in the oil painting are primarily middle-class members of society. The depiction of the city's commercial architecture would, from this point on, become more



Figure 9. View of King Street, Toronto. Print by Day & Haghe after John Gillespie, 1842. (Toronto Reference Library)

Figure 10. "View of King Street, Toronto." John Gillespie, 1844/45. (Royal Ontario Museum)

routine and numerous in views.

The image of the city from 1850 changed drastically, both in reality and on paper, with the introduction of the railways and industry that fuelled Toronto's economic boom. In Edwin Whitefield's aerial view of 1854 the emphasis was clearly on Front Street, which is exceedingly exaggerated in its width (Figure 11). While King Street had been the main street for both official and retail functions since the city's inception, Front Street by 1850 had become the premier location for the wholesale business and its warehouses.<sup>18</sup>

The railway and the harbour, both of which had such a great impact on the commercial and industrial economy of the city, were highlighted in later 19th-century views, such as that by G. Gascard in 1876 (Figure 12). The harbour and rail system had become a source of pride, symbolizing the city's growth and progress. Gascard's aerial view depicts at least six trains at the foot of the city and more than fourteen ships in the harbour. Buildings such as the churches and educational institutions that were so important in views before are still evident, but are secondary to the railways and harbour.<sup>19</sup> The popularity of this image was reflected in its use as the mast-head for a Toronto newspaper.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the best example of this trend towards the promotion of a commercial and industrial vision is a bird's-eye view by Peter A. Gross, also dated 1876 (Figure 13).<sup>21</sup> About 85 of the 120 vignettes surrounding the bird's-eye view relate to the city's economy, including retail, wholesale, and manufacturing establishments. The important, architecturally substantial buildings that conveyed an urbane image in the early part of the century were now in the minority among the views. One can still find St. Lawrence Hall, the Grand Opera House, Upper Canada College, and City Hall, but these institutions are dispersed among the commercial images, some of which are shown on a larger scale than important civic buildings such as City Hall. Conspicuous by their absence are views of the churches: only one is included, Jarvis Street Baptist. With its image pasted over a corner of the map, its inclusion seems an afterthought. The city was unquestionably transforming into an industrial conurbation.

As suggested earlier, the earliest images of the city were somewhat misleading due to the absence of commercial buildings. The subsequent change in focus to a city inundated with commerce and industry was also, in turn, somewhat inaccurate in that it neglected the cultural base of the city, which at the end of the 19th century was growing at an unprecedented rate. The rise of industry and developments in commerce and transport supported a concomitant rise in the cultural fields, as the commercial classes developed and maintained cultural institutions.<sup>22</sup> But, not surprisingly for the purposes of city views, commerce was more influential; while Toronto's cultural sector continued to play an important role, it took a back seat in published images. These maps and views continued to

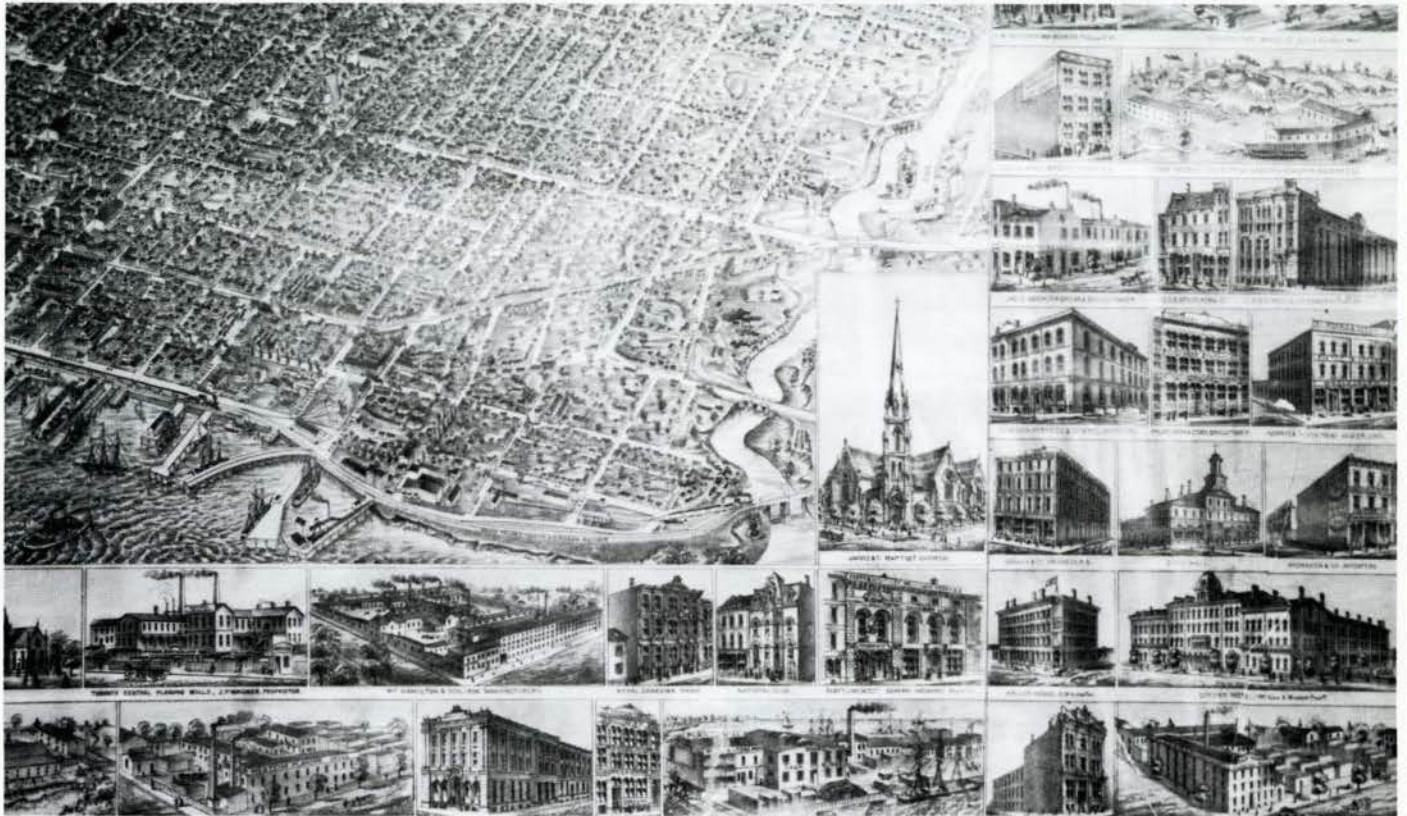


Figure 11. "Toronto, Canada West. From the Top of the Jail." Print by Endicott & Co. after Edwin Whitefield, 1854. (City of Toronto Archives)

Figure 12. "City of Toronto. From the Northern Railway Grain Elevator." Print by Alexander Craig after G. Gascard, 1876. (Toronto Reference Library)

Figure 13. "Bird's-Eye View of Toronto, 1876" [detail of the map]. Peter A. Gross, 1876. (City of Toronto Archives)

function as civic advertisement, and that advertisement was first and foremost a propagandistic image of progress. It could also be suggested that by the late 19th century cities did not have to blatantly advertise their cultural and institutional facilities. Their existence could be taken for granted, if a city was as commercially and industrially sound as appeared to be the case in Toronto.

Finally, an important aspect to be considered in the interpretation of these images is who commissioned their production.<sup>23</sup> While the earlier views were often commissioned or sanctioned by the city itself, thereby reflecting an ordered, architect-built environment, the later views were produced by

or for the commercial sector (both the Gascard and Gross views being surrounded by commercial advertisements and obviously used for that purpose). Thus, the choice of subject matter should not seem at all surprising. The views were no longer an advertisement for the city as an entity, but for the city as a product of its numerous commercial enterprises.

While commerce clearly existed in Toronto's early history, it was not always visually expressed in images. And, while the cultural sector continued to exist later on, it was less often shown in overall city views. Only a version of the "ideal" was shown at any given time, and Toronto's evolving ideals or visions throughout the 19th century were reflected in its urban image.

## Endnotes

- 1 Draft of petition to Sir John Colborne, Lieutenant Governor, requesting a plan of the city, 22 April 1834. Council papers, City of Toronto Archives (hereafter CTA). See also council minutes of 22 April 1834, CTA.
- 2 These images were initially created in watercolour in 1835. That year, Thomas Young travelled to New York City, probably to meet Nathaniel Currier, lithographer. Young's views are among the earliest productions from the Currier shop. See F. St. George Spendlove, *The Face of Early Canada: Pictures of Canada Which Have Helped to Make History* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1958), 58. By May 1836 the lithographs were ready for public sale and advertised as such in the newspapers. See *The Patriot* [Toronto], 27 May 1836.
- 3 Architect John George Howard recorded in his journal that he met with James Cane on 14 January 1842, and on 24 January 1842 Howard wrote: "Mr Cane came lent him the setting out plan of the gaol."
- 4 An advertisement in the *Toronto Herald* dated 30 Dec 1841 refers to "Messrs Young & Cane, Architects and Civil Engineers, office 19 King Street, east of the British North American Bank." The partnership was dissolved on 14 May 1842 (*Toronto Herald*, 16 May 1842). It is unlikely that Cane would not have taken advantage of Young's artistic talent, as he was working with him at the precise time the drawing was made.
- 5 Census, City of Toronto, 1851.
- 6 *British Colonist* [Toronto], 29 August 1851.
- 7 Draft of petition to Sir John Colborne, Lieutenant Governor, requesting a plan of the city, 22 April 1834. Council papers, CTA.
- 8 Letter from Alfred Hawkins, Quebec, to the Secretary of the Corporation of Toronto, accompanying a plan of the city of Quebec by Hawkins, dated 12 June 1835. Council papers, CTA.
- 9 *British Colonist* [Toronto], 29 August 1851.
- 10 In her article "The Perspective Plan in the Sixteenth Century: The Invention of a Representational Language" (*Art Bulletin* 76:1), Lucia Nuti discusses Georg Braun's *Civitates orbis terrarum* of 1572, which was a compilation of views of towns from every part of the world. It was Braun who noted that towns presented in images to the sharpest sense of sight will provide the greatest amount of information. The primacy of sight among the senses was, as Braun reminds us, developed in Aristotle's *De anima*.
- 11 J.M.S. Careless, *Toronto to 1918: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Co., 1984); Frederick H. Armstrong, "Metropolitanism and Toronto Re-examined, 1825-1850," *Canadian Historical Association Papers* (1966): 29-40; and Donald Kerr and Jacob Spelt, *The Changing Face of Toronto: A Study in Urban Geography* (Ottawa: Geographical Branch, Mines and Technical Surveys, 1970).
- 12 The relationship between commerce, culture, and religion in 19th-century Canada was of a complex but complementary nature; that is, each element of the society was a determining factor of the others. I thank Christopher Thomas for broadening my knowledge of 19th-century Canadian cultural history.
- 13 D.C. Masters, *The Rise of Toronto: 1850-1890* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1947).
- 14 Kerr and Spelt, 45.
- 15 While it was suggested to use brick in city buildings for reasons of fire prevention as early as 1834 (see "Report of the Chairman of select committee on Fire and Water," council minutes, Wednesday, 23 April 1834), its use was not enforced until the late 1830s.
- 16 An article in the *British Colonist*, 7 May 1850, 2, noted the number of prizes that would be given to the successful competitors for the upcoming Mechanics' Institute exhibition, including a sum of £25 given by the Corporation of Toronto for the best view of the city.
- 17 The Wellington buildings, King Street East, were constructed 1837-40 by Thomas Young.
- 18 Whitefield's was the first bird's-eye view of the city. It was only through this medium that all aspects of the city could be shown. The very nature of the perspective views by Young and Gillespie necessitated that they be single images or single street views, therefore every aspect of a city's makeup could not necessarily be shown. However, in a bird's-eye view all elements of the city — commerce, industry, institutions — could be included in their respective placement, and some could be magnified more than others.
- 19 Commercial architecture was further advertised in this view by surrounding the bird's-eye view with separate depictions of buildings. Only one edition employing these extra images has been found (now in the Archives of Ontario, although it is damaged and many of the images are missing). Other known copies (for example, those found at the Royal Ontario Museum and the Toronto Reference Library) do not include these vignettes.
- 20 An engraving after this print by the Photo Engraving Co. of New York was frequently reproduced, and was used as the masthead of the *Toronto Advertiser* beginning on 26 January 1878. See Edith Firth, *Toronto in Art* (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1983), 54.
- 21 For a reproduction of the entire map, see R. Louis Gentilcore and Grant Head, *Ontario's History in Maps* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 262.
- 22 Careless, 107.
- 23 I would like to thank Howard Shubert for suggesting that this aspect be examined as part of the interpretation of these views.