Toronto’s Working Class Self-Built Suburbs
Toronto’s Self-Built Suburbs

• Early C20th tradition of working class families building their own suburban homes
  – Former City of York, SW Scarborough, East York,
• Richard Harris led scholars to recognize this type of housing in Toronto
Toronto’s Self-Built Suburbs

• Two ways to house the worker:
  – High-density housing in the inner city
  – Worker’s suburbs

• Rail-based industry spreading to suburbs from 1880s
  – Beginnings of a suburban housing boom for working families
1880s boom

- Massive surge of real-estate speculation
- Large tracts of suburban land subdivided into small building lots
- Subdividers sell lots to small builders and self-builders
- Much of the land sits unsold 1890-1905
Selling Prospect Park, Toronto, 1889
Toronto’s Self-Built Suburbs

• Services were expensive
  – Roads, schools, water, sewers

• From 1886 home owners could petition to have these installed
  – Financed by installments paid by the owners who benefit
  – But municipality has to run up a debenture debt to finance the initial costs
  – Getting too expensive by 1914, suburban annexations cease
Two kinds of suburb

- **Serviced suburbs**
  - Wealthy purchasers buy/build professionally-built homes in serviced areas
  - Forest Hill, North Toronto, Rosedale

- **Unserviced suburbs**
  - Low-income families buy unserviced building lots and self-build their homes
  - Earls Court, Oakwood, Fairbank
Annexation

• Pre 1914:
  – Unserviced suburbs hope to get annexed to city and then acquire services

• Post 1914:
  – Annexation ceases
  – Unserviced suburbs have to finance their services without city tax base
  – Poor-quality and expensive services result
Earlscourt Mud,
Spring 1916
Earlscourt

- One of the unserviced self-built suburbs
- Early C20th:
  - Major wave of British & Irish immigrants to Toronto
  - The immigrants settled in self-built shack suburbs:
    - Earlscourt, East York, East Toronto, Runnymede, Junction, Weston, Mimico, New Toronto
  - Established British institutions
    - Churches, sports, political culture
Parson’s Estate 1910
Parsons Estate Location
Adams house, Parsons Estate, 1910
Earlscourt Area
Earlscourt Commuters
[Harris]
St Clair

• An old farm concession road, disrupted by ravines
  – The Don (never crossed)
  – Castle Frank Brook

• West End develops first
  – Junction & stockyards industrial district from 1880s-1890s
  – Bathurst-Lansdowne: an area of market gardens
St Clair Ave W

- Adopted as a streetcar route 1911-1912
- Castle Frank Brook ravine bridged, then filled
- Bathurst-Yonge develops rapidly as a wealthy residential area
  - Offers clean air
- Earlscourt develops a working-class suburb west of Bathurst
Commercial Landscape of St Clair Ave W

- 1912: 52 stores
- 1923: 235 stores
- 1994: 238 stores
- Most of the development follows the streetcar line, 1912.
  - Red-brick low-rise commercial, ‘Georgian’ detailing
  - Commercial below, residential above
Figure 1. Dufferin and St Clair, 1911. The two-part commercial building in Toronto’s neo-Georgian style. Reproduced with the permission of the City of Toronto Archives, SC 231, item 2116.
Silverthorn
Servicing

• Earlscourt mostly in York Township outside the City of Toronto
  – Hoped to be annexed, but wasn’t

• Homes built before services added
  – Expensive service installation afterwards
  – Corruption & incompetence
  – Most of the suburbs go bankrupt in 1930s Depression
Scandals

• Mid-1920s sewer system corruptly built
  – Under capacity, poor quality materials
  – Councillors, officials jailed

• Mid-1920s water supply system
  – Plumbing suppliers, Reeve, Township Engineers in conflict of interest

• 1950s
  – Duplexes/Triplexes
  – Sales of Land
British Institutions

• Attachment to the Crown:
  – Heavy enlistment in WW1
  – Prospect Cemetery becomes a war cemetery

• Politics
  – British style socialist politics dominates the political traditions of the area to 1980s
  – Bob Rae’s old riding
Toronto’s Self-Built Suburbs

- Forced to form separate municipalities
- Poor tax base: mostly cheap housing; Full services expensive
- Lack of access to lake for water supply/sewage disposal
- Servicing tended to be skimped
  - no-frills combined sewer systems, dirt roads
- Most Toronto suburbs go bankrupt in the 1930s
Shacktowns

• C19th-earlyC20th tradition of working-class shack and shanty-towns around North American and some European cities
Suburban Paris

• Shanty-towns in the 1930s
Suburban Paris 1920s
Rag dealers
Modesto CA: Airport Tract
The 1930s

• Shack and shanty towns multiply in the USA to house the homeless, the migrant and the poor
• Became known as “Hoovervilles”
Migrant camp, Elm Grove OK
Spokane WA

- Shacktown by the river in the 1930s
Self-building

- A global phenomenon
- Poorer folk self-provide housing
- Not just in the Third World
Toronto’s Suburban Fringe

- Housing legislation halts old style shacktown self-building in the 1930s
- By 1950 suburbs still poorly-serviced, poorly-financed
- Province steps in to create Metro Toronto
  - Improve servicing, financing
- Facilitates massive suburban growth