

Of Strikes, Subways and the Big-Box University:

Reconsidering the Spatial Fixations of Infrastructure²

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Introduction

In the months leading up to the strike by CUPE 3903 at York University in late 2009, another labour dispute erupted nearby. Workers at an auto parts manufacturing plant in Vaughan blockaded roads, preventing access to the facility, protesting the elimination of more than 2,000 jobs in the area. The company, Progressive Moulded Products, had earlier obtained bankruptcy protection and had closed several plants, without paying severance.³

A product of the ongoing deindustrialization of the municipality of Vaughan, and more broadly the Greater Toronto area – as well as a

² This paper has been produced through research undertaken with the In-between Infrastructure Research Project at York University's City Institute. Funding for the project has been provided by Infrastructure Canada and the Toronto Community Housing Corporation.

³ The workers, members of the Canadian Auto Workers, were attempting to prevent the removal of machinery that would be auctioned off to pay suppliers and other creditors.

harbinger of the potential collapse of the North American auto industry – the short-lived action was very closely tied to the dispute at York. Both events were cast within the context of a global economic crisis, in which organized labour is seen as either ineffectual or obstructive to its resolution. Both are, in a sense, bookends to the continuum of transformation and redevelopment associated with the move from an older, industrial economy, to what we have been told should be a knowledge economy.

Beneath the rhetoric of change and crisis – that new skills and ways of thinking and working are required to survive the downturn and to prosper in the future – lie other connections. Both disputes were set within a profoundly changing economic and infrastructural landscape in what we may call the in-between city.

Neither traditional city centre nor conventional bedroom suburb, the in-between city reflects the ongoing rearrangement and relocation of urban development (Sievarts 2003). For some observers, it is the postmetropolis (Soja 2000), or metropolis unbound (Isin 1996), defined (or at least delineated) by market-driven development and car dependency. The resulting landscape reflects a fragmented or recomposed mix of residential, commercial and industrial spaces that are oriented towards low-density economic growth.

This short paper addresses questions of redevelopment and reterritorialization through infrastructure investment and expansion. I argue that the strike at York University can be understood as not just a sector-based response to neo-liberal restructuring of post-secondary education, but also as a potential threat to the economic and regional stability currently proposed by municipal, regional, provincial and federal governments.

Through renewed investment in public transit (notably the proposed extension of the Toronto Transit Commission's subway system beyond city limits into the municipality of Vaughan), growing residential development (on and off campus), and a move away from industrial to service and white collar employment, a co-ordinated strategy of urban development emerges as a means of stabilizing economic uncertainty. Here, education, transportation and economic development combine as a sort of infrastructural fix to the current crisis of capital.

At the Centre of the In-Between

The area surrounding York University reflects a rapidly changing landscape. Mixed industrial and commercial sites run up against housing developments, high-rises and major roadways. To the north is the municipality of Vaughan, currently facing challenges to its long-term economic health, due to waning residential development and the loss of manufacturing employment. To the south is Downsview Park, Canada's first "urban national park" and site for potentially thousands of new housing units (through condominium and townhome construction) (Parc Downsview Park 2008). The proposed subway extension would connect these sites, extending the transit line from the current Downsview station into the park itself, north to York University, and into the proposed Vaughan Corporate Centre (see Map 1).

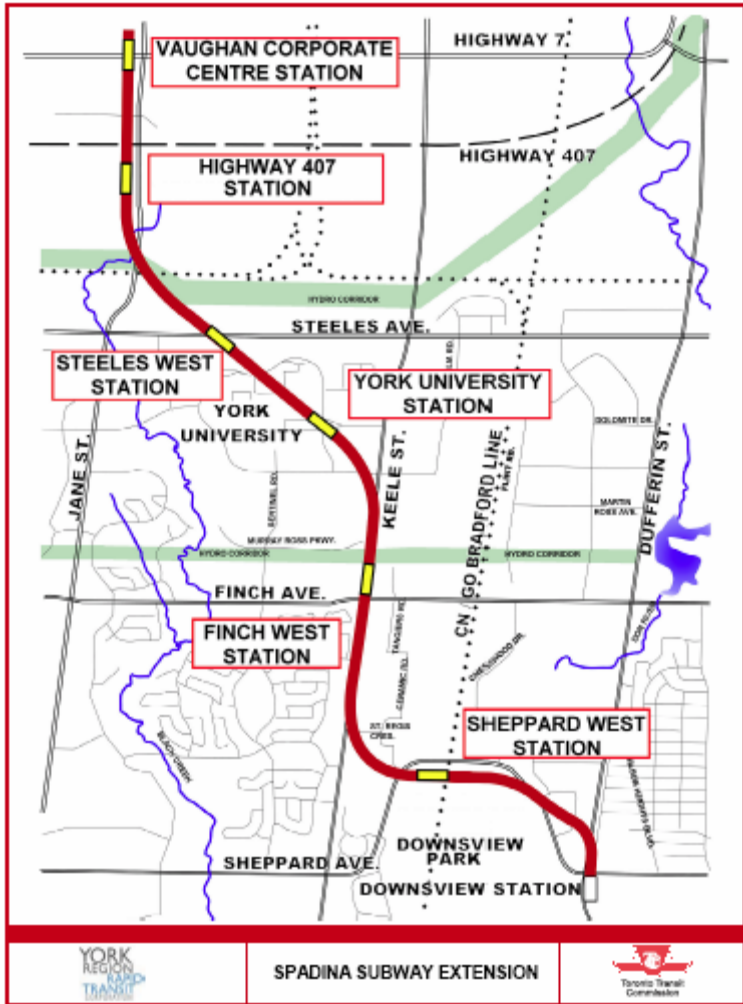
In-between lies York University, arguably the most prominent actor with regards to the subway extension, but also a major actor in the redevelopment of the surrounding landscape. Through the York University Development Corporation, for instance, the university has entered the private residential development market, selling land for the construction of more than 500 homes next to the Keele campus (YUDC 2005).

Taken together, these areas can be seen as points on a line of intensifying investment and redevelopment, running roughly along Keele Street. The university serves as an anchor, and will connect Toronto and Vaughan through public transit for the first time, while also spurring other forms of development, through the creation of new roads and buildings on campus, as well as commercial and residential growth beyond its borders.⁴

Challenges to the integration of transit and development plans for the area are considered threats to economic stability and longer-term development, not just for the immediate area, but the greater region as well. What follows is a description how physical and economic infrastructure emerges as a means of resolving a series of crises, and in which the CUPE 3903 strike figures as a significant obstacle to their resolution.

⁴ Consider, for instance, the YUDC's mixed-use development plans for the Pond Road and Sentinel Road area, which would include a multi-story office building, a food store and other retail buildings (YUDC 2006). See also City of Toronto (2008).

Map I: Proposed TTC Subway Extension



Source: Toronto Transit Commission

Vaughan Today, Vaughan Tomorrow

For several years, the municipality of Vaughan has been one of the fastest growing cities in Canada. The population grew by more than 30 per cent between 2001 and 2006, from 182,000 to nearly 240,000 (Statistics Canada 2009). This growth has contributed significantly to the municipality's economy, through revenues from building permits (\$1.3 billion in 2006) (Swainson 2007), as well as municipal taxes (accounting for more than 64 per cent of municipal revenues) (City of Vaughan 2008).⁵

However, this form of growth is not likely to continue. Provincial legislation has set goals for higher-density land use, as well as protection for greenbelt areas, setting spatial limits to development.⁶ The municipality has undertaken a review of its overall strategies for development and growth as part of the development of a new Official Plan. To date, the city has recognized these limits to growth through various planning documents and public statements. It has promoted an image of a more compact urban form for the future, based on establishing a new centre for economic activity, the Vaughan Corporate Centre.⁷

Essentially planned as a “downtown” space for a largely suburban area, the centre is to be built north of York University, in the Highway 7 and Jane Street area. Plans are not complete as yet, but the municipality is expecting to create a more dense mix of residential and business development, linking up with major highways and public transit, particularly the proposed TTC subway extension, which is to end at the corporate centre (Urban Strategies 2008).

Transit has been identified as a key component to this redevelopment. Subway access to Toronto is to be matched with greater bus service, operated through York Regional Transit, connecting the centre with other parts of York Region. There are concerns that lack of

⁶ These include the Places to Grow Act, the Growth Plan for the Golden Horseshoe Area, the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Act and the Greenbelt Plan. For a discussion of the limits to these legislative attempts to regulate growth, see Wekerle et al, 2007.

⁷ The corporate centre is also set to be a cultural and residential hub, but is not to be confused with the Vaughan Civic Centre, a revamped municipal government complex situated to the north of the area.

transit access could slow or halt development of the centre (Glauberzon 2008).

Yet a number of challenges remain for redeveloping the area. Currently, large-scale retail stores occupy the land (including Wal-Mart and a Home Depot), as well as the headquarters for Toromont, an industrial machinery and equipment distributor. According to one media report, Toromont has threatened to leave the area entirely if it is barred from moving assembly and maintenance facilities to nearby farmland (Gombu 2009).⁸ This signals a tension within Vaughan's economic development strategy. While seeking new business and cultural development in pursuit of sustainable growth, including ecologically oriented development, vibrant residential communities and good-quality jobs, the municipality risks exacerbating the fallout of intensifying deindustrialization.⁹ A number of Vaughan's largest employers are based in manufacturing and industry, including Canadian National Railway, which employs nearly 1,000 workers at its MacMillan Marshalling repair yard.

The corporate centre reflects some of the inherent tensions within the in-between city. There is a certain obduracy within economic and physical infrastructure – grounded in manufacturing and industry – that, while diminishing, still provides a good deal of employment in the area, but nonetheless is seen as either an impediment to economic transformation, or a source of risk. Recent Ontario investment in the area has also seen an emphasis on “green” companies that promise to deliver high-skilled employment.¹⁰

The Vaughan Corporate Centre can be understood as one strategy for overcoming the risks of industrial employment and development, as it seeks to capture some of the gains of the knowledge or creative economy. It is meant to provide a centerpiece to an otherwise homogeneous landscape, offering up office employment, retail space (more boutique than discount store, however) and more contemporary forms of housing, such as condominiums.

⁸ In a letter to the *Toronto Star*, a company representative denied it was threatening to move all of its employees (Wetherald, 2009).

⁹ Besides the more than 2,000 jobs lost through the closure of Progressive Moulding's plants, Canac Kitchens, a kitchen cabinet manufacturer, closed its facilities in Vaughan in late 2008, eliminating 1,000 jobs (Toronto Star 2008).

¹⁰ In 2008, the province of Ontario provided \$8 million to 6N Silicon, a solar-cell manufacturer, creating 84 jobs in Vaughan (Office of the Premier 2008).

Within this reorientation, York University becomes a vital source of training and potential employees. The announcement of the subway extension has seen greater interest in commercial and research development around the Keele campus, including the prospect of a research park (Wong 2006: D1), and more recently, York has become referred to as the “University of Vaughan”.¹¹

York Fail?

With the push for commercial, residential and infrastructural development, York University has seen serious financial shortfalls. Ontario universities collectively may lose \$200 million in 2009, largely due to the collapse of their endowment funds (Laucius 2008). For its part, York announced a loss of \$55 million (19 per cent) of the value of its endowment fund in December, 2008 (Brown 2008). Undergraduate applications have also declined by about 10 per cent, a drop attributed to the strike by CUPE 3903 (Brown 2009). Undergraduate applications to the Faculty of Arts dropped by 26 per cent, and graduate applications to the English Department declined by 40 per cent (Brown and Contenta 2009).

While much of the financial damage has been attributed to ongoing global economic turmoil, administrators and provincial legislators drew direct connections between the strike and the university’s economic security. After the striking workers rejected an imposed vote in January, 2009, the university’s president refused to continue negotiations. “We are not going back to the bargaining table... York is taking a stand to protect its academic and financial future,” (quoted in Church 2009). Similarly, Ontario legislators belonging to the Progressive Conservative and Liberal parties expressed concerns that the strike was ill-timed, selfish and irresponsible – and that back-to-work legislation was inevitable and necessary to salvage the academic year and to protect the interests of (undergraduate) students.

What remains unstated in these debates, however, is the role of post-secondary education (and institutions) in securing longer-term economic stability. This role is multifaceted, but two important dimensions will be discussed here. First, education is seen as a means of waiting out the storm, providing additional training or skills in the

¹¹ The phrase was voiced by attendees at a public forum on Vaughan’s Official Plan, May 6, 2008 (field note).

process.¹² As well, educational infrastructure can serve as a means of channeling investment (from the state) into the built form of the city. In this way, we can see how transit expansion and urban or regional planning strategies that are centred around a post-secondary institution reflect the confluence of what David Harvey (2005) would call secondary and tertiary circuits of capital, an infrastructure fix, as it were, to help ground capital within the in-between city.

Three Strikes to Win

What then, do we make of an academic strike in a deindustrializing yet redeveloping area? On the one hand, collective demands for job security, wage increases and stronger graduate funding by the very workers who provide the necessary education and training sought out during times of economic crisis indicate a strong resistance to the rhetoric of knowledge economy boosterism. The fact that three strikes have occurred at York within the past 11 years reflects a continuing challenge to the management of the university, and to promises that higher education and greater workforce flexibility provides greater economic opportunities.

At the same time, the strike of 2008-2009 occurred during a time of uncertainty within the area. While plans to extend the subway had been announced, funding had not been fully secured. Manufacturing in and around the region continues to shed jobs, and financial losses for the university (through speculative investment or declining enrollment) contribute to the image of an uncertain future.

This is a particularly challenging physical area of governance as well, as it connects not only two separate municipalities, but multiple levels of government, through funding arrangements, legislative purview, as well as other public and private agencies (universities, public transit, developers, investors). In one sense, the decision to legislate an end to the strike by the provincial government can be understood as one part of ongoing efforts to govern a spatially complex and economically volatile area. As Sieverts argues, the in-between city confronts planners and politicians with unclear boundaries and is practically ungovernable through the use of conventional strategies. With York University as an

¹² One recent report calls for post-secondary institutions to capitalize on this trend, by increasing tuition up to 25 per cent to help generate additional funding (Usher and Dunn 2009).

anchor to the area's redevelopment, securing its financial stability is key to ensuring the success of the infrastructural fix.

This is not to attribute the forced end to the strike solely to regional planning aspirations. Yet it is worth considering their presence in the process by which the Ontario government moved. The discursive strategies of shutting down labour dissent by referring to a context of global hardship, whereby workers should enjoy what benefits they have, are efforts to depoliticize and despatialize resistance, by referring to a universalized common interest or common good. By eschewing these tactics, and by implicating strikes and disputes within material, spatial contexts, workers may be able to connect specific struggles with other challenges and develop effective for reshaping the landscape of labour (Tufts 2006). For academic workers, this can include more direct engagement with management and development strategies for post-secondary institutions, and their role in urban and regional planning. This is but one additional way of calling to light the way in which labour shapes the economic landscape (Herod 1997), one that can contribute to an ongoing critical engagement with planning that resists privatization, downsizing and restructuring of employment, services and infrastructure (Young and Keil 2005).

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