

## A CRITICAL URBANIST LOOKS AT THE GLOBAL CITY

## DOUG YOUNG

In 1975 Doug Young fulfilled a boyhood dream and graduated from the University of Toronto with a bachelor's degree in architecture. In those days the program, born in the 1960s, was open ended, student centered, and very exciting, something hard to imagine at big institutions today. But his first day at his first job was one of the most depressing days of his life and was nothing like what he imagined architecture to be. A few years later he drifted away from architecture and into urban planning, first for the city of Toronto, then for a nonprofit housing organization, and finally as a teacher.

Today Young teaches urban studies and planning at York University, is finishing his Ph.D., and is working at the City Institute, a recently established research center at York ([www.yorku.ca/city](http://www.yorku.ca/city)) where people in all the different departments doing urban-related studies can connect with each other. He's also a member of Planning Action, a radical group of architects, planners, and concerned citizens that believes that planning has more to do with the retention and preservation of traditional neighborhoods (and their residents) than with rubber-stamping expensive development projects (see *DESIGNER/builder*, July/August 2006). In a conversation from his base at York University, Young shared with us the journey he has taken from neophyte architect to radical planner and critical urbanist.

**DESIGNER/builder:** How did your disillusionment with traditional architecture unfold?

**DOUG YOUNG:** The first day on the job I was given a plan for a piece of property out in the suburbs and was told I had a free hand to lay out a development. I came up with what I thought was a very clever arrangement of streets with a mix of houses for wealthy people and houses for poor people. At the end of the day I showed it to my boss, who said very nicely, "This is not how development takes place." Mixing housing for different income groups was not going to happen and the street plan was too unusual. There was a template to follow that I wasn't aware of and if you were going to do that kind of work you had to follow the template. I remember going home absolutely devastated. All those years I had dreamed of being an architect and it all came down to satisfying some market idea of what housing should be like. As I worked for other architects I became increasingly disenchanted.

There's an architect in Britain named Edward Cullinan whose work I like. I've met him a few times. He said of all the graduates of architecture programs about one-third of them go on to really embrace architecture and have their own practices. One-third go on to something else related, like maybe planning. And one-third become fodder in giant offices. I felt like part of the fodder, given tiny, boring, minute tasks. I worked for small offices with neurotic relationships among the staff and the boss. I found it very unpleasant. Some projects were more interesting than others. One firm did social housing, and that was kind of fun, except as the junior I think the most exciting thing I was given was to come up with some decorative brickwork for this apartment building.

I was getting sick of what appeared to me to be the role of architects in facilitating how cities got built and what they looked like. I have an architect friend who worked for a practice where the partner once asked him to come into his office and said, "I

really want you to spend a long time designing this big building. I want you to spend a whole day on it." And I think that's pretty typical. It's just product.

So I left the last firm that I worked for and did a bit of freelance work with a friend. Six months later I was hired by the city of Toronto planning department to be a kind of architectural support to the other people who were trained as planners. It had dawned on them that here were planners reviewing projects and architectural drawings and they had no idea how to even read a drawing, making it very difficult to comment and negotiate. I was lucky in that it was 1979, the tail end of the most progressive era in municipal planning in Toronto that had been instituted in the early 1970s. The city was very much into having neighborhood satellite offices away from city hall and citizens involved in the planning process. In the city that was then about 700,000 people, at one point there were thirteen satellite planning offices outside of city hall. That was one office for every 50,000 to 60,000 people. When I arrived there were five. Now, in the city, which

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is about 2.6 million, there are a total of four. In the early days, they were all engaged in coming up with new official neighborhood plans, and they truly believed they should be out there talking to people who lived in those districts and having them be almost equal partners in determining what was good planning.

I was also lucky in that I became attached to this small group of very interesting people who were pretty much all politically on the left. That was part of the era as well. This new batch of planners had come out of the universities in the early 1970s having been exposed as students to what was a neo-Marxist kind of radical critique of traditional methods and ideas about planning.

**D/b:** Can you talk about what this philosophy looked like, this critique?

**DY:** Planning had been considered a rational science where planning experts knew everything about everything in a city and made wise decisions. Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, some

planning activists and theorists began to critique this view. People in the streets in the 1960s in the United States and Canada knew that that approach to planning had not delivered the good city it had promised. There still were lots of problems. People in their neighborhoods and some planners started to understand that planning is not a science. It is political; it is contested. And there are different ways of knowing a city and different ways of thinking about planning.

So I went to work with this group of planners. It was very exciting and I had fun. I thought what I was doing was good work. I was working in the public sector for the benefit of the people of Toronto. I thought I could help produce a better city. But even though we saw ourselves as working with the people and for the people, we still were technocrats who just gave professional expert advice to politicians who would decide on things. I remember one councilor called those of us who would be working in his part of the city down to his office and said, "I want to make it very clear. This is my ward. I don't want any of you to think that you're some kind of advocate planner stirring things up out there. This is my part of the city, and what happens here will be what I want to happen here." Another time I went to a public meeting with a councilor who, as we walked in, turned to me and asked, "What do I think about this project?"

So I became increasingly frustrated with my inability to actually effect any kind of real change. I would produce reports that went nowhere, or I would give advice to developers. A developer would come in with a proposal. I would look at the drawings and say, "I think you should make these changes." He would go away and do them, and then I thought, okay, what I've really just done is made it easier for this guy to sell these apartments or to rent this space. I've just helped him make more money. I became really troubled again by this role of merely being a support to private-sector development. And even though I was now operating from the public sector, I was just reacting to these developments that came in through the door, but couldn't on my own initiate what I thought would be something good for the city. So I decided in 1984 to take some time out. I went to England to study planning, thinking I really wanted a deeper, theoretical understanding of what planning's role is or could be in a capitalist society.

**D/b:** Why did you go to England?

**DY:** I was really eager to have an experience outside of Canada. It was a choice between M.I.T. and The Architectural Association (AA) in London. I decided to go to another continent. The AA was founded in the 1840s in the spirit of independent thinking. It's generally known as an important school of architecture, and at the time it also had a very small graduate

planning program. It was taught entirely by extremely radical critics of planning and critics of capitalism. It was a brilliant, wonderful experience.

**D/b:** What did you come away with?

**DY:** A very clear, radicalized understanding of the role of planning in a capitalist society. I saw that the state's role is to assist in accumulation and legitimation to help capitalists continue to thrive. It does things like establish a legal system and a banking system so that the capitalist system in general doesn't dissolve into total chaos. It enforces contracts and it sets rules about banking, etc. It also gets involved in planning cities where capitalists operate. A Marxist would say this is a system that is inherently unequal, coercive, and hierarchical. It's a system that treats a lot of people very poorly. And so planning, in supporting this system, also treats people very differently; it assists in the enrichment of some people and the impoverishment of others.

The legitimation function of government is to make people think that even though the system is inherently unequal in the distribution of benefits across society, it's not such a bad life after all and maybe one day they, too, will be able to move out to the suburbs to a new house. Government occasionally makes concessions to poor and working-class people. It will open a daycare center in a poor neighborhood or call public meetings to discuss planning proposals, giving people the illusion that their voice matters in the planning process.

**D/b:** What did you do after you got your planning degree?

**DY:** When I came back, I made the mistake of going back to my old job. I'd taken a leave of absence rather than quitting, because I think I was just afraid. But I was even more frustrated now because I was this radicalized planner. Yet how could I speak those words of a radical planning critique within the bureaucracy of a huge planning department. It was very difficult. I more or less kept it all inside me. But when I reviewed a planning application, I was very explicit in my own mind about who would win and who would lose, who was going to benefit if this was approved, and how could we possibly change this to benefit different people or more people?

**D/b:** Were you able to make a difference?

**DY:** In one neighborhood I worked on an issue where builders had illegally created tiny apartment units that were known locally as bachelorettes. A studio apartment in Toronto is called a bachelor apartment and these were even smaller. Typically somebody got a building permit to put an addition onto an old house and create a rooming house with maybe thirty rooms.

In a rooming house you could either have a bathroom or a kitchen attached to your room, but not both. They would generally show drawings with the bathroom and then sneak in a little kitchen. There were also questions of bribes. The result was a neighborhood with many buildings comprised of 150-, 200-square-foot apartment units, with no parking, with no amenity space within the building for tenants, etc. Somehow the situation had to be legalized, but I felt that whatever we did we should not punish the tenants, who could not afford to live anywhere else. My view was there are many people in our society who cannot afford even the cheapest product that is legally produced on the housing market. Either they get help from government, live in illegally created substandard housing, or live on the street. It's not their fault. So I tried to develop a policy that would guarantee at least a minimum standard of quality housing but do minimum damage to the living situation of the tenants.

We decided to identify those units that were below the Ontario Building Code, which I think for a

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studio apartment is 275 square feet. When people actually moved out and units became vacant, we then could combine units to create bigger ones that met the standards. In this way we would gradually upgrade the housing, we would not evict anyone, and we would minimize the upward creep of the rental costs by keeping units very small. In the end we would get legalized housing of at least minimum standard with as few people as possible de-housed. I felt good about that.

But I came to realize I was a tiny bureaucrat in this huge organization. My day-to-day power was to decide which file in my in-basket would go to the top. If an ordinary citizen came in to see me to talk about how to put an addition of one room on the back of his house, I could give him a lot of my time and be very helpful. I realized that one power I had was knowledge of the system. I could actually read the zoning bylaws and understand them, make them comprehensible to an ordinary person, and help him get through the system.

But I also realized that this was no way to have

any impact on the city in which I live. So I contacted a nonprofit organization called the Cooperative Housing Federation of Toronto (CHFT), which in those days developed nonprofit housing co-ops and also provided support services to those they had helped build as well as others. I just called them and said, "I would like to work for you people."

I quit my job as a city planner in 1989 and went to work as a project manager at CHFT. They somehow thought, "Oh great! We have a planner. He'll cut through all the red tape in the planning process that we have to go through with all of our projects." The late 1980s was a period of really generous financial support from the province and from the federal government for nonprofit housing. It was very stressful work because I had to deal with private-sector builders, private-sector banks, and bureaucrats in the provincial Ministry of Housing. But at the end of the process, I saw people move into their affordable housing units, and it was wonderful. It brought together my interests in planning, architec-

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ture, housing, and public policy. It had been a long journey from that first day on the job as an architect, but I reached a point where I was pretty happy with what I was doing.

Over a period of seven years I was responsible for something like 1,000 units of nonprofit housing being developed. In seven years as a planner, what did I produce? A lot of reports. In five years on the job as an architect, what did I produce? Some buildings that I'm not really thrilled to think that I had a hand in. In seven years with CHFT I produced housing for probably 2,500 people, housing that will probably last a hundred years. So it's like 250,000 person years of housing. And I'm really happy about that, not in any way to brag about it, but just in terms of having made or helped create material impacts on the lives of ordinary people.

But in 1995 a radically right-wing provincial government was elected in Ontario. Within a week they announced they were canceling all funding for new social housing construction. Subsidized housing so

contravened their ideology that the private market should provide housing and that it's the individual's responsibility to take care of themselves, to house themselves. They should not look to government. It was not government's business to provide housing. So a year later I was out of a job.

Today I see an absolute crisis in housing affordability in Ontario. Twenty years ago, homelessness was not an enormous problem. Now you kind of step over homeless people. I live in a very middle-class neighborhood in the center of the city, and adjacent to it is a very wealthy neighborhood. My apartment building looks onto some very nice bits of parkland with some very dense shrubbery. There are many homeless people who live there. I had no idea until I moved into this neighborhood. It's very interesting. Middle-class people leave my building heading off to the subway station in the morning, and then you see the homeless people moving through the neighborhood. I started recognizing the homeless people as my neighbors. I would see them shaving in the men's room of the food court under the office building where I take the subway. It's just extraordinary the social damage that eight years of radical right-wing government has done in this province – the damage it did to the city in terms of levels of poverty, people sleeping in the street, people begging.

**D/b:** What is your critique of Toronto as a new global city?

**DY:** While Toronto is going after new-economy knowledge workers, what is it doing about the old-economy factory workers, of whom there still are tens of thousands? Aren't they important to the city of Toronto? Do we really think all we need to do is create some glamour zones downtown, and that's doing a good job of making a good city? What about the neighborhoods where most people live? Don't they deserve good planning? Don't they deserve investment in public resources? Don't they deserve good public transit? Don't they deserve beautiful parks, libraries, and schools?

In terms of the new kind of approach to planning, I think it goes back several decades and tries to de-democratize the planning process. It now is virtually impossible for an ordinary person to participate meaningfully in a public planning debate. The new discourse is all about the idea of beauty and creating beautiful places. Gone are such things as density or height limits. The idea is all we should care about is design and whether or not a building "fits." If a world-famous architect stands up at a public meeting and says, "I believe that my proposal for a seventy-five-story condominium is a beautiful one that fits perfectly with this neighborhood," how does an ordinary non-expert resident of that neighborhood

challenge the opinion of the expert architect? It's impossible. It becomes "he said, she said," or "in my opinion and in your opinion," and the whole discourse is geared to being globally attractive and globally successful. It's geared toward, "We need buildings by Daniel Libeskind and Frank Gehry and any of these internationally famous architects." How can an ordinary person, living in a very ordinary house, stand up and challenge Daniel Libeskind and say, "I think your building is ugly?" Who is going to be believed? I think this has just completely gutted any kind of democratic process.

I tried to get involved in a development proposal in the neighborhood where I was living until about six months ago. I spoke against it at the public meeting and realized as I was speaking that I couldn't actually make an argument that would be recognized as a solid planning argument against this building. Under earlier rules I could have. I could have said, "There is a neighborhood plan that was produced twenty years ago, after extensive consultation with the neighborhood that determined that a building shouldn't be taller than six stories or have a density higher than three times lot area. And this proposal is for a twenty-two-story building with a density of nine." And I asked, "What is the planning rationale for quadrupling the height and tripling the density?" But at the same time I was asking those questions I realized under the new rules it doesn't matter anymore. You do not have to justify the density or the height. You just have to make, as the architect and developer made, an aesthetic argument about this being a future landmark and a gateway to the neighborhood, and that it supported the city's policy of intensification, which is pitched as being how you create a sustainable city. It's argued that you have a black-and-white choice: you either accept hyper-intensification in the city or you produce an unsustainable region of urban sprawl. There's no nuance to that argument. There's no gray area in between.

**D/b:** And there's no proof of that.

**DY:** No, there's no proof, but so far it's been very successful for developers and for politicians and planners who support these views. There is an unbelievable wave of intensification in the form of new condominiums being built in the city.

**D/b:** Do you think these politicians buy it on some kind of rational basis or because their pockets are being filled with campaign donations or whatever it's called in Canada?

**DY:** I think it's a mixture. I think the question of the donation applies, in fact, more in the outer suburban municipalities. A professor at York University did a study of one municipality. He went through all of the

donations and it was remarkable how many politicians in the outer suburbs are entirely bankrolled by the development industry. I think in the central city it's more a belief in the growth machine. It's a belief that this is good for the city, that investment is good, development is good. In one sense nothing has changed. It's the same kind of boosterist belief that we need development and without development we have a crisis. But now it's seen in a global context where we're competing with Brussels, we're competing with Chicago, we're competing with Hong Kong. We need as many people living here as possible. We need wealthy people. We need highly educated people. And we've got to give them a glamorous, pizzazzy city of glamorous condos and fancy shopping and world-class cultural facilities or they won't come here. And if they don't come here, we're a failure as a city. That's driving planning work at the moment. Although they still go through the motions of public meetings, etc. I think that kind of democratic, neighborhood-based approach to planning has been gutted and replaced by a belief that there is a global economic imperative and we have to comply with it or we die as a city.

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**D/b:** Meanwhile, prices go up, services get cut back, the city faces constant financial crisis, and it cannot afford any of the amenities that its people need.

**DY:** Absolutely. But it's so contradictory because on the other hand, there are signs of extraordinary wealth and glamour. It speaks to the unevenness inherent in capitalist development where, as the city gets wealthier, it also gets poorer. There are more millionaires than ever before. In Toronto, you can read in the same edition of the local newspaper that more houses were sold at prices over a million dollars last year than ever before. Then turn the page, and it talks about how more people are sleeping in the streets. This region is growing at an extraordinarily fast rate and the problems are at the point where they're almost strangling it.

Transportation is impossible. You would think that the people in the far-out suburbs who drive everywhere would demand more freeway speed belts. You would think that truckers, who carry everything that we use in our daily lives, who are stuck in traffic jams all day long, would demand some action. It takes me an hour, using public tran-

sit, to travel about ten miles from downtown to my university. You'd think that we would have the power to demand better transit. You would think that if a region wants to be globally competitive, it would understand that it's got to move people around from home to work and back again and allow trucks to move freely. You would think that government would actually open its checkbook. But there is such a political culture here of not raising taxes and of wanting to spend as little money as possible that apparently senior government is prepared to let six million people choke on their traffic.

We have nowhere to put our garbage, and presently it's shipped to Michigan. Hundreds of trucks go down the freeway every day carrying Toronto's crap to a landfill site outside of Detroit. But Michigan has recently announced that it's going to stop that a couple years from now. That's a big issue. We have very serious air pollution problems. In summer it's unbelievably bad. We have a crisis in

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affordability of housing. You read articles that trumpet how much the cost of housing went up last year. That's great if you're a developer or a landlord or you already own your own house. But there are 70,000 households waiting for subsidized housing just in the city of Toronto.

Many people have written about the global city and the dual economy. In the financial district we have a huge core of giant office towers and the headquarters of Canadian banks. Then there's an army of thousands of minimum-wage workers, many of them probably illegal, scurrying around delivering things and cleaning offices and living in crappy basement apartments and not able to take their kids to the dentist. Between 1995 and 2003 there was a radical right-wing provincial government that slashed welfare rates by 20 percent, de-listed services from public health care, and stopped building any more non-profit housing. They also decided they would cut all financial support to local public transit systems.

**D/b:** Does Toronto impose impact fees?

**DY:** Yes. But then the argument is if we set ours too high, development will go to the suburbs. There's a local competition for investment and people between the city of Toronto with about 2.6 million people and the outer suburban municipalities where about 3 million people live.

There's also something called Section 37 benefits. In the Official Plan, there's a section that says if you approve a development that in some way exceeds the zoning bylaws, you can make up for it with a cash contribution that would then be spent on some kind of public facility in the neighborhood. But the counterargument is that's just a sort of checkbook planning where a developer comes in and says okay, how much do you want? It takes the onus off of government from having any responsibility for building those social services, those libraries, and those improved parks.

**D/b:** Do they actually ever get built, or does that money just go down the rat hole?

**DY:** No, they get built, but it seems not to be a good way of making a good city. I went to the opening of an addition to a wonderful community center downtown that does wonderful work and has fabulous programs. But the city councilor, cutting the ribbon to this addition, said, "Isn't it wonderful that your future neighbors have paid for this addition in the form of the contributions that the developers made in exchange for permission to build all of these high-rise condo towers." And I thought there's a problem here. We should be getting this addition without having to accept this incredible hyper-intensification of the center of the city.

**D/b:** How is planning viewed today?

**DY:** There is a general belief that government should step back and allow the market more freedom. In the 1950s, 1960s, and into the early 1970s, while working within the context of a capitalist society, government saw that it could have an active role in producing good cities and good nations and that it should support individuals in terms of social welfare who could then go out into the market and buy a house or buy a car or buy clothing or whatever.

I think since the 1970s, there's been a global shift away from that to this fear that if you over-regulate investment will go somewhere else. Production is so global and so flexible that companies will, if they don't like your regulations, just pick up and move somewhere else. If you look at planning department websites for cities around the world they all have the same language. It's this fear of footloose capital: if you have too rigid or too demanding planning regulations, investors will go and build a shopping mall in another city, in another country, on another continent.

Toronto is completely caught up in the whole discourse of global economic competitiveness and sees itself competing for investment with every major American urban region and every major region around the world. The discourse is: we need to attract new-economy knowledge workers who can relocate to anywhere in the world, so we have to produce an exciting and attractive city for them. In the past, government saw that it had an interventionist role to play in producing a good city. Now, in terms of planning, the role is to completely loosen up regulations to make it easier than ever to build a glamorous, fifty-story condo tower or an office building, to draft a new official plan that encourages more development than ever, and to cloak it all under the guise of creating a sustainable and green city.

**D/b:** What impact has this had on existing neighborhoods?

**DY:** Now we have a different provincial government that is somewhat less conservative. There is a program called the Neighborhood Action Plan where the municipal and federal governments are channeling investment, however small, into thirteen neighborhoods (out of a total of 140) that have been identified as priority neighborhoods. But the damage is very difficult to undo.

As part of the new entrepreneurial approach, the school board made individual schools compete for money. In one of these priority neighborhoods that I have studied one of the schools was selected to serve as a model. That school received extra money, which means it can restart a music program that it used to have but had to cancel. This is now seen as an extraordinarily generous donation, or rather, not a donation but an investment in this neighborhood school. But you could also argue, why doesn't every school have sufficient money to fund a music program?

It's a very clever strategy that you pick thirteen neighborhoods and you – meaning government – channel money toward them, piddly little amounts of money compared to what would have been spent there thirty or forty years ago in terms of social services. The government can then say, "See, we care." And then private corporations, if they want to appear to be socially responsible, can announce that they are making an investment in one of the priority neighborhoods. And they get a lot of press out of it. This begs the question, what about the other 127 neighborhoods? They're absolute losers. In this new approach, the thirteen "loser" neighborhoods become the winners, because they're getting the attention and the money, however small it is. All other neighborhoods are left to struggle on their own with their crappy schools, their crappy libraries, their crappy bus service. The school that got the extra money, I'm sure,

should be really happy. But somehow that school, and all other schools, and all other community groups have to go public and political and argue that every school deserves that level of funding, not just one model school in one of the thirteen targeted neighborhoods. All 500 schools deserve that money.

**D/b:** Didn't that money go to tax cuts?

**DY:** Exactly. The systemic problem is the cuts that were made to education funding ten years ago in this province when our taxes were cut something like 20 or 30 percent. At the same time that education funding was cut, transit funding was cut, welfare funding was cut, and services were de-listed from public health care. I think the question is, and it's a question that was asked by those first radical planners in the late 1960s: If you want to create a city or a society of social and environmental justice, is planning the way to do it? Maybe planning isn't. Maybe it's broader-based political activity, which some planners will

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want to join. Maybe planning isn't the way to a socially and environmentally just and democratic city. I don't think it is. I think planning is institutionally incapable of being radical or progressive. It can be kind of reformist. Maybe under pressure, tweak this or tweak that. If all the planning rules and the planning policies have been rigged in favor of development, there's very little room for an individual radical or progressive or democratic planner to do anything. I'm very pessimistic about planning as an institution or state-regulated process to achieve what I would consider a good city. I think it has to come through broader social movements and political action. Planners can take part in that. Planners can form groups like Planning Action in Toronto. What's interesting in terms of framing Toronto as a case study is that this is the city that used to be looked to in the 1970s as a model of good planning, good governance, good transit, etc. I don't think anyone looks to Toronto as a model of anything good any more. ■