The Sociable City

Five York experts discuss what makes metropolises succeed – or fail.

BY BERTON WOODWARD
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINDSAY LOZON

IN LATE MAY, York University will host the 75th Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, an event that will draw more than 8,000 academics to York's Keele campus under the location-aware theme, "The City: A Festival of Knowledge". Recently *YorkU* brought together an interdisciplinary group of five York experts to discuss urban issues and how they apply to Toronto. Participating were **Roger Keil**, professor of environmental studies and director of the new City Institute at York University; **Steven Flusty**, undergraduate program director in the Department of Geography, Faculty of Arts; **Engin Isin**, Canada Research Chair in Citizenship Studies in the Faculty of Arts and director of the Citizenship Studies Media Lab; **Warren Crichlow**, graduate program director in the Faculty of Education; and **Janine Marchessault**, Canada Research Chair in Art, Digital Media and Globalization in the Faculty of Fine Arts and director of the Visible City Project. Here are highlights of the conversation:

To begin with, what does it take to make a successful city? What are some key elements?

Roger Keil: There's a tautological answer to this: a successful city is a city that works. Toronto used to be called the city that works. There are different challenges now, and it may be more difficult than it used to be, but it's also more promising. Because if we overcome some of the challenges we have now, we can build a much better place than Toronto was, say, in 1954 or 1970.

Steven Flusty: When I hear a question like that oftentimes my first response is, "Well, okay, successful for who?" One of the things I've seen over and over again in many cities – and I'm seeing here in Toronto as well – is issues of displacement, issues of focusing on making a city good and safe for the rights of capital. Too often, the priorities wind up being things like how do we go about bumping up real estate values in certain areas for certain classes of people, how do we go about rationalizing and improving vehicular flow at the same time as we can barely keep our mass transit systems funded and only give lip service to alternative forms of transportation.

For me, this often folds in with the question of the world city, pursued in ways that guarantee if you succeed in acquiring the infamous world-class city, you'll have one of the most inhumane cities in terms of everyday life.

Engin Isin: When you think about "the city", almost all written history is coeval with the city. At a minimum we can put it at 5,000 years, if not 10,000 years. What is it that the city provides, whether it's for empires, states, nations, or regions? It is that it provides social order. That order may be unjust, it could produce inequalities, but there's at least this inevitable understanding: given that we are now thrown together in the city, how do we live together? What the city provides is that sense of belonging.

Warren Crichlow: I think one of the things that the city should provide is opportunities for people to become educated. A city should be a place that really inspires people to produce creativity, to do new and different things. People come to the city because they want to be part of a neighbourhood, they want to raise families – and they want to develop themselves individually.

Janine Marchessault: My interest is in cultures in cities, and the way that cultures are expressed. Toronto is now trying to reinvent itself, and it's talking about world-class cities, and we have several architectural projects that are quite spectacular. So, is that going to make Toronto a world-class city? Is that going to create the social bonds that make people feel that they belong? I don't think so.

But despite this, what's going on in Toronto right now is very interesting. There is, underneath it all, a sense of being quite proud, all of a sudden, to be part of Toronto. And I don't think it's simply boosterism, and I don't think it's the mayor setting up community and cultural committees. I think there is maybe something opening up – networks of communication and culture at a ground level – which is connecting people to the city, maybe in smaller ways rather than in these spectacular ways.

Yet people do often point to grand buildings. Does great architecture make a great city?

Flusty: I don't think so, and I'm speaking as someone who was an architect. But there is the idea that great buildings make great cities, and there are certain "starchitects" who are brought in to airlift their signature brand of building and drop it here. Frank Gehry is the classic now.

But why do we have great buildings, great museums, great opera houses, that sort of thing? Why do we look at places like Paris and London as great cities? Well, they were imperial centres, and to a certain extent their greatness and their great architecture had a lot to do with the kinds of violences and extractions that were going on for many other people elsewhere.

Isin: The problem is that large-scale projects do not create sociability and social patterns over time, they don't have the capacity to create the kinds of social relations and encounters that really take time. If you try to impose order, for all the best intentions you destroy the fabric that has created that sociability.

A case in point is Yonge and Dundas in Toronto. Before, it was a very sociable space, not liked by those who wanted to impose a particular order and who said, let's have a grand space. So you wreak havoc with social relations that evolved in Yonge and Dundas for nearly 200 years. It's not always pretty, but it had its own particular history.

Instead, today, we built that square. It's artificial. Things are arranged there, there's heightened security. Certain classes are told not to go there. Frankly, I used to like Yonge-Dundas much better.

Marchessault: The Yonge and Dundas project is really interesting, also, because a lot of artists got involved in creating demonstrations inside of that very controlled, militarized space, really heightening public awareness that this was a vital space that's been lost. One of the reasons I feel more hopeful is because there seems to be the capacity in Toronto to articulate social need in public.

Keil: Can I interject one thing, which is the question of freedom and security in these public spaces. I don't think the question is new at all. Central Park in New York is not at all an uncontrolled space, but it is a great civic space. When it was proposed and built, it was a matter of great public debate, and what we would now call the left was against its construction, and people thought of it as a playground for the rich, which it was to a certain degree. But over time it became something else, and it is impossible now to pose this argument solely in the framework of what it was 150 years ago when it was built. So it's important to keep this question open for any space, even Dundas Square, which I really, really despise.

Crichlow: I wanted to continue on the whole idea of parks, The focus on big Gehry-style buildings draws our attention away from places like High Park or other more interesting public spaces where there is much more…

Isin: Sociability.

Crichlow: …sociability, and much less surveillance, where you see all kinds of interaction going on. So maybe this discussion could give some focus to park space, as well as the much larger problem of the waterfront.

What is the way to proceed on the Toronto waterfront?

Crichlow: One thing is we have to stop these big buildings that block the city from the waterfront. But there's not much waterfront left, quite frankly, in the city proper.



QUESTIONS OF FREEDOM AND SECURITY: Keil (left), Flusty and Marchessault

Marchessault: It just adds a sense of belonging to the city. Driving in, the view of the city over water used to be incredible, and you used to go, *gasp,* "oh my," you know? And suddenly it's gone, and you can see the city in between two buildings. It's outrageous that that was allowed to happen.

Isin: That's interesting, thinking about the visual vistas of the city as public goods. We don't.

Keil: It's important to have a public debate about these things, and for the waterfront we didn't have a public debate.

Flusty: I've spent some time in Minneapolis over the last couple of years. It's a great example, because one of the things I constantly hear in Toronto is, "Well, of course we don't have this or that, we don't do this or that with our spaces, it's cold here and we have nasty, long winters." Whereas you go to Minneapolis, and they're faced with infinitely nastier and colder winters. Their attitude is, "Oh, yes, of course we protect as much waterfront as we can and put in bike paths and hiking belts. Of course we guarantee that absolutely every new high-rise has the largest amount of park space possible, which is publicly accessible, because our weather is so nasty that there's only brief periods of time you can enjoy it so we'd better make the most of it." Then I go to the waterfront here and I see this infinite, undiscussed process of building these massive towers out to the lot line.

Isin: Some of the issues we're dealing with go all the way back to the 1950s in Toronto. We have failed to think of the city as a regional city. In metropolitan government – and Minneapolis is a metropolitan government – there was the recognition that issues of planning, housing, transportation, would be dealt with through regional coordination and regional planning.

Metropolitan Toronto was supposed to have dealt with those issues. In 1971, instead of expanding metropolitan Toronto's boundaries, which was actually specified in its Act, we created regions, and the regions began competing with one another for development and investment, and began to consider themselves

A NEED TO BELONG: Isin

as not of Toronto but competing with Toronto. So we had regional fragmentation. And then the Harris government took totally the wrong decision. Instead of dealing with regional fragmentation, it dealt with what was happening with metropolitan Toronto by amalgamating its municipalities, which had no bearing on the regional pattern.

A number of consequences flowed from lack of government. Lack of planning translated into haphazard development that involves car-dependent development, the single detached family home dominating in 905 and certain parts of metropolitan Toronto, not accessible with public transportation.

And the kinds of spaces that this creates can hardly be called the city. There are numerous regional malls where people come in and out in automobiles. They are woefully planned, if they are planned at all. Stretching from Mississauga and Brampton all the way to Oshawa, the kind of landscape that dominates what we now call the regional city is not the city at all in terms of fabric, of what it can provide in terms of sociability. It is space that breeds isolation, real social isolation.

Now, here are a number of questions in terms of success in the future, and questions that we don't have answers to. There've been at least two generations, now, growing up in those spaces, who as they grow up only know the city from the car, being driven from one place to another in their parents' automobile. Most are our students now, but that generation is also getting into power positions, they are becoming professionals and so on.

So, we have a generation that does not have the kind of sociability that the city provides. What does that mean? If one were to judge by the amount of home entertainment systems sold in this very city – actually I find it frightening – there is that kind of increasing privatization of life.

Keil: There is an assumption that you're in it for yourself. What it doesn't entail anymore is what the great modern cities entailed as a promise, such as the one here for Jane and Finch, which was, "We're taking care of you." Now we have a city which people use like a hotel. You don't have to take any responsibility for that room that you inhabited.

There is the idea that great buildings make great cities, and there are certain 'star-chitects' who are brought in to airlift their signature brand of building.

What are your thoughts on the relationship between the city and the violence that we've seen in Toronto?

Crichlow: I think it's all part and parcel of what we've just been talking about, the failure to invest, the failure to take responsibility, the failure to create the means for people to belong in the city, the creation of means that increasingly segregate people, not just in terms of identity but isolation from the very productive capacities of the city.

No matter how much time you spend on your chat line, no matter how much time you spend on e-mails, there is no substitute for face to face interaction.

All of this is going to create more and more conditions where people simply have to make up a life for themselves, and this life is going to run completely counter to the notions of order that Engin is talking about. And completely counter to notions of what it means to attempt, in some small way, to love your neighbour as yourself.

In the suburbs, many people, including middle-class immigrants, might argue that they live there because they like it, that it's voluntary.

Keil: I don't think that the individualization or the sprawl, the single family homes out there, are the result of the marketplace and of the free will of the people, and – as the Harris government argued – this is what people want. The marketplace is structured by the laws of the land. I would say this is a concerted effort, a very strategically planned environment in which certain people are supposed to live in certain ways. So when new immigrants come, they're being presented with a very limited set of options.

What is a better way to cope in a city that needs to house a lot of people?

Isin: Medium density is the most brilliant response, in terms of environmental and sustainability aspects of Canadian cities and at the same time creating spaces that provide for efficient public services, houses, schools, public transportation and other amenities. On top of that, providing sociability.

There are really creative ways of doing medium density that don't even look alike. But when you look at the Toronto landscape it has always struck me as two symbols of a total lack of imagination. Either you build what a well-known urbanist, Lewis Mumford, called "filing cabinets for humans", or you build this landscape that's so homogenous and so sprawling as not to have any identity whatsoever.

SEGREGATION AND ISOLATION: Crichlow

What makes me worried is, what calamity are we going to wait for before we start experimenting? It could be environmental disaster, it could be simply running out of oil. Places like Toronto, especially large swaths of it, would simply be unworkable. We would not know how to get people from one place to another.

Marchessault: I'm a bit more optimistic about Toronto. I sort of think you have an old-fashioned view of what the city could be, a 19th-century view. I think the city is spatially changed. The city as we knew it in the 19th century has been completely transformed. And I think we *are* suffering under technology and we *are* suffering under this fragmentation and this lack of unison between various – I don't even want to call them communities, but developments.

But I also think that there is the possibility to create something. I mean, suburbs aren't bad. There are spaces that people can live in that are social, that represent diverse needs and cultures. I just don't think there's any going back. It's decentralized. The city has to be reinterpreted in terms of these decentralized communities that need to be connected.

Isin: The issue is to what extent they are severed from the fabric of the city. No matter how much time you spend on your chat line, no matter how much time you spend on e-mails, there is no substitute for face to face interaction. The fundamental aspect of being human is coming face to face with the other, and that cannot be done with communications.

Marchessault: I agree, but I think communications is part of it too. We have a new generation, and yes, they're into media and cellphones and all that, and their lives are completely mediated, but I think it's very old-fashioned to just say, "They're so bad and they're so alienated." I think this is what they're living, but there are ways to connect it to civic responsibility. I don't think it's just a physical, material, face to face world, I think it's that *and*.

Isin: A combination.

Marchessault: Yes.