

HIPSTER URBANISM

Deborah Cowen

Hipsters have declared *peace* on Toronto. They have announced their arrival and affirmed their own future to be synonymous with the City's. They recount heroic struggles for livable streets and people-friendly places, struggles that promise to bring better and bolder patios to the people where organic foods can be consumed from stylish and well-coordinated vessels. They struggle for good design against evil, for public spaces for the well dressed though slightly scruffy. Theirs is a struggle for the freedom of designer glasses, cutting edge hairstyles, and yoga for all. Their justice is not just for people; they demand 'doga' for their canine loved-ones. By unspoken but practiced decree, hipsters must all be individual, different, or else membership may be revoked. And, the spaces they frequent are all so different. One after the next, block after block, downtown strips are becoming so hip and so different, lined with very different bars and cafes and art spaces and restaurants and bars and cafes and arts spaces and restaurants and bars and cafes...

Their tales of trials and triumphs have recently been fashioned into founding myths that they offer up to the whole city.* Not just hipsters benefit from their visions - *everyone* does. A hip downtown is a good for all, a universal good perhaps. Despite a self-proclaimed progressive pedigree, the histories they tell aren't of class exploitation, racialized violence and institutions, hetero and masculinist norms and laws, a public sphere hostile to immigrants, queers, workers, and so on. Instead, their tale takes them back to the evils of the car and the modernist city planned in its honor. Their Toronto is one that has oppressed *pedestrians* and unique *individuals*, and instead favored banality and bad architecture. Crafting these narratives of the past donates purpose and pride to their present cause. It makes their current movements right and good. Once the 'storm troopers' of gentrification, who were readily displaced the moment people with financial capital (as opposed to hipsters' 'symbolic' and 'social' capital) bought up the cool spaces, today's hipsters are actively working to institutionalize themselves in the city. They have recently found allies in government and business who see possibilities of accumulation by good design.

We might be wary of their declarations of the coming peace and of the city's salvation. While their guerillas may well be *gardeners*, bringing style to neglected turf in neighborhoods everywhere, hipster urbanism is not a benign force. But is their gentrification of activism actually another kind of war? Wars are typically fought for power over places, and in this sense the hipster struggle for the downtown does not deviate. "Hipster territory" is the prize, as the New York Times suggests in a recent story on the 'transformation' of Toronto's Gladstone and Drake Hotels and surrounds. Indeed, hipster violence is subtle but significant, and easily traceable through the changing geographies of neoliberal Toronto. Hipsturbanism elects young white professionals to "reclaim" the downtown in denial of their own occupation.** It ushers in a future where difference has firm class limits. Trades people are routinely denied parking permits for work vans in the downtown, and while hipsters might never tell these workers to 'move it along' to the inner suburbs alongside other non-profes-



HIPSTER TRAP!!!

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sional and ‘non-creative’ labour where they belong, they are nevertheless delighted when ‘something’ is finally happening with the neighbourhood – (did you know there used to be *nothing* here at all?).

Hipster urbanism sees only the downtown surrounded by ‘enemy forces.’ Still living with a mythology of inner city diversity and suburban class and ‘race’ homogeneity at least 30 years expired, hipsturbanists have been overheard recommending that ‘we’ just ‘*bomb* the suburbs’ and be done with them. The contemporary configuration of the inner suburbs – home to so many of the city’s new immigrants, racialized groups, and the precarious workers who clean, feed, and care for the city’s citizens - make the class and racist violence of this suburban bombing fantasy obscene.

The glossy maps that accompany the recent book *uTOpia: Towards a New Toronto* give a sense of the designer violence embedded in hipster fantasies of local geography. The maps take us from High Park in the west to Riverdale in the east, extending just above Dupont St. in the north, and south to the islands. Beyond the conspicuous absence of most of the city, the maps also do violence to what they show. Inner city public housing projects have been quickly, quietly and painlessly airbrushed. Cutesy doodles of bunny rabbits in fields, rainbows and unicorns replace the low-income neighbourhoods that have been at the centre of political resistance in the city. One map plows street grids through the modernist ‘buildings in parks’ of Regent Park, and replaces nasty density with Victorian-esque single-family housing. The symbolic spatial violence of a second map surpasses the first; it substitutes pesky poor people with a big new green park. Hipsters are not oblivious to the need for rent-controlled spaces in advanced capitalist Toronto – their utopian cartography includes ‘affordable studios’ and ‘mixed housing lofts’.

But of course hipster peace is not like other nasty struggles of armed people against people. Hipsturbanists are often adamant in their critiques of more traditional wars being waged at larger spatial scales. *War is so passé, how can they still think like that?*

In fact, hipsters constitute themselves in contrast to an alternative social and spatial project of neoliberalism, one that is more candid about the usefulness of organized violence. The ex-urban (anti)urbanism of ‘the 905’ offers a competing neoliberal vision of Toronto that is tied to a military-religious complex more popular south of the US border and west of the Albertan one. The outer suburban belt of the GTA is Harper country in contrast to our Miller land. 905 neoliberalism promises big guns, private property, private prisons, and workfare for the people, and in this sense certainly differs from hipster downtownism. But the fact that hipsters invent themselves in opposition to this competing neoliberalism is no redemption for their violent peace. Rather, it gives them a greater evil against which they can see themselves looking even lovelier.

Hipster urbanist claims for a new commons might have potential if they weren’t so blatantly exclusive. Their rhetoric recounts some noble promises of public spheres and public spaces. But the gap between hipster rhetoric and reality is wide and growing; its own form of neoliberalism, hipsturbanism may not be the lesser of two powerful evils. Banal, mimetic ‘creativity’ is their favored medium of creative destruction. Marx and Schumpeter taught us that destruction brings its own creativity, and by the same token, social creativity is also an act of destruction. For people in the path of the creative city it is indeed a very destructive project. **R**

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*See the fascinating discussion about Toronto’s lacking mythology and the ‘opportunity’ this opens for artists and other hip locals in Edward Keenan’s “Making a Scene: A bunch of youngish indie-rockers, political activists and small-press literati are creating the cultural history of Toronto” in McBride and Wilcox (eds.) *uTOpia: Towards a New Toronto*. Coach House Press, 2006. More broadly, this book has become an important milestone in the consolidation of hipster urbanism in Toronto.

**A good example is the 2000-2002 exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum, “Growing Cultures: Immigrants and their Gardens” wherein a young hipster describes how he has ‘reclaimed the land’ by organic gardening his new property in the gentrifying area of Queen West. The (bloody) irony of the language of ‘reclaiming’ land is only intensified by the ongoing indigenous land claims on much of Toronto.