

ESSAY

Bless this mess

It may seem counterintuitive, but there is a growing feeling that the ideal city is not clean and beautiful, but rather messy and all mixed up

BY DYLAN REID • SENIOR EDITOR /// PHOTOS BY PETER MacCALLUM

Streets with cars, bikes, pedestrians, and transit all mixed together; store displays spilling out onto the sidewalk, competing with street vendors for your attention; utility poles covered with posters and walls painted with graffiti; and buildings in a jumble of architectural styles beside and on top of one another. Is this a nightmare of a badly run, chaotic city, or is it an exciting vision of what a vibrant metropolis should be?

In 2003, David Miller won a tight race to become Mayor of Toronto with the slogan: “A clean and beautiful city.” At one level, the slogan targeted an ongoing corruption scandal at City Hall, but it also called up a broad and popular vision of an ordered, well-managed city that evoked positive connotations from Toronto’s past.

“Clean” recalled images of an idealized pre-amalgamation Toronto, where movie companies had to add graffiti and trash to the city’s pristine streets when they wanted it to stand in for a gritty US city. In the 1980s, Peter Ustinov described our city as “New York run by the Swiss” (not necessarily a compliment, but we took it as one).

“Beautiful” evoked a century of unfulfilled plans to create showpieces and grand projects that would make Toronto “world-class,” going all the way back

to the “City Beautiful” movement at the beginning of the 20th century — unfulfilled visions of coherent boulevards and ambitious waterfronts captured in Mark Osbaldeston’s recent book, *Unbuilt Toronto*. It was a clever slogan, and it worked. After all, who wouldn’t want their city to be clean and beautiful?

Yet, for some people the appeal of Toronto and other big cities lies in very different, even opposite, qualities. When Los Angeles urbanist James Rojas came to Toronto in 2007 to speak at the international Walk21 conference, he was so impressed with our city that he wrote a tribute to it on the *Spacing* blog. But it wasn’t our cleanliness or beauty that appealed to him. Quite the contrary; what he loved about Toronto was what he called its “messy urbanism,” the chaotic streets with streetcars, cyclists, motorists, and crossing pedestrians all mixed together yet respecting each other’s space, fruit stands spilling over sidewalks, and sleek modern buildings sprouting up beside ramshackle old ones.

“There’s a sort of less-than-manicured quality to the whole thing,” he wrote, “and coupled with a huge diversity of people, the city ends up feeling gloriously messy, in a functional and walkable way.” He found it refreshing after the slick, unreal

perfection of highly designed model cities such as Boston and San Francisco.

It may seem counterintuitive, but there is a growing idea, developing independently in the minds of city lovers of many different stripes, that the ideal city is not clean and beautiful, but rather messy and all mixed up. Celebrity urbanist Richard Florida, who arrived in Toronto at about the same time as Rojas, said in an interview in *Canadian Art* magazine that Rojas’s phrase “messy urbanism” encapsulated what he liked about cities in general, and Toronto in particular. He has been busy popularizing the concept since. “I like a messy city,” he explains in an email to *Spacing*. “Messy urbanism represents the disagreements and accords that come from contested space and the lessons learned from a sense of diversity, openness, and inclusion.”

Similarly, Québécoise writer and theorist Régine Robin recently published a book, *Mégapole*, in praise of large cities. In an interview on Radio-Canada, host Joël Le Bigot summed up her praise of their “mixity” and “heterogeneity” by saying, “what I am getting from our conversation...is that a city is made with noise as well, with ugliness, with beauty, it’s made with big changes, it’s made with life that lives and dies and is reborn” [my translation].





Change, movement, and buzz are inevitably a little messy and chaotic. And it doesn't have to be beautiful — think of Kensington Market, one of the most vibrant and attractive spaces in Toronto. There's nothing there that could be described as conventionally beautiful. But it has, as they say, personality.

Clean can also mean sterile, and beauty tends to be fixed in place. These words evoke a city that is tamed and controlled, which to some is the very opposite of what a metropolis should be about. Urban planner Mark Hinshaw, in his 2007 book, *True Urbanism*, castigates generations of politicians and planners who demolished messy cities to build sterile megaprojects. "They try to encapsulate, sanitize, and suburbanize the public realm," he writes. "There is no room for messy vitality, spontaneous commerce, and idiosyncratic, homegrown businesses....In real cities, not everything is tidy. Downtowns have many kinds of people with different income levels and many choices, and some things are simply not photogenic. That is what has always made great cities great."

Toronto's streets, with their diverse population of rich and poor, with their cluttered vistas of street-car wires, hydro poles, and long stretches of practi-

cal, unremarkable buildings, certainly seem to qualify as untidy and unphotogenic. Yet Toronto's photobloggers have still managed to turn the city into one of the most photographed cities on the web. Without a lot of traditional monuments, they've focused on developing a new kind of urban photography that finds the beauty and interest in unexpected places.

For all its orderly traditions, Toronto has in fact

ABOUT THE PHOTOS

Peter MacCallum is a Toronto-based industrial architecture photographer. His recent gallery exhibit at Toronto Image Works showcased his ongoing documentation of the gritty and chaotic Yonge Street strip south of Bloor. He is also working on publishing a book based on this collection. Peter has contributed over 700 photos to the City of Toronto Archives and the Archives of Ontario, and his work is represented in collections at the Art Gallery of Ontario and the National Gallery of Canada.

played a big role in developing the ideal of messy urbanism. Jane Jacobs, who first articulated an extensive and coherent argument for this concept, moved to our city and became our resident urban guru. Taking aim at grand schemes to create orderly, efficient, and uniform cities, she argued instead for an evolutionary city that grew in layers and mixed old and new buildings with varied uses, and many types of people.

Jacobs focused on planning, and her arguments are well established. Toronto has benefited from her insights, particularly in the formerly industrial neighbourhoods near the lake that are now thriving as areas of mixed residences and offices where old and new buildings stand side-by-side.

But Toronto doesn't just put old and new beside each other. It also mixes them together in single hybrid buildings. Some are cultural showcases such as the ROM or the National Ballet School, but others are simply practical residential and commercial buildings such as the Manulife (formerly Maritime Life) building at Queen and Yonge.

As my *Spacing* colleague Shawn Micallef has written, Toronto is developing a distinctive look where "the new stuff [is] built on top of and around



the old stuff.” Some people accuse this of being “façadism,” but in fact, as Micallef writes, it’s a sign of vibrant messiness, neither locked in historical purity nor all shiny and new — “a new beautiful,” he calls it.

Such hybridity follows the tradition of ancient metropolises such as Rome, where for millennia buildings have built on and incorporated their predecessors, so that classical, Renaissance, and modern are all visible in the same structure, constructed on top of and within each other.

But the heart of messy urbanism goes far beyond the built form. As Le Bigot said, it’s about the life of the city, not just its buildings — about how the city is governed and how people use it. It’s here that the “clean and beautiful” ideal of the Miller years clashed head-on with the burgeoning vitality of the city’s streets. One example is the ongoing saga of Toronto’s street food carts. City Council treats street food vendors as a messy nuisance. In 2002, it imposed a moratorium on new vendors in the downtown core, the area where they are most popular.

In 2007, young urban planners Katie Rabinowicz and Andrea Winkler organized a vending cart competition to highlight the lack of variety in

Toronto’s street food. “Vendors have come to be perceived as sidewalk clutter or the source of neighbourhood blight,” explains Rabinowicz, “and their removal from sidewalks is justified as ‘beautification’ or ‘urban renewal.’” Yet the reality, Rabinowicz argues, is that “vending contributes to an active, accessible public realm.” The sociologist William Whyte, in his study of New York’s plazas, found that the presence of a single hotdog vendor could be enough to make a plaza come alive with people.

In response to public clamour for street food that reflects Toronto’s diversity, in 2007 the Province loosened its regulations to allow street vendors to sell a wide variety of foods. It could have been an opportunity to create, in the words of the Street Food Vendors’ Association leader Marianne Moroney (who’s profiled on page 16), a “first-world street culture” that combined the vitality and variety found in the streets of developing nations with the health safety we expect in Toronto. But instead of seeing the new regulations as an opportunity to open up street food vending, the City took the opportunity to impose more control.

Rather than allow existing vendors to serve a wider variety of foods, the City established burden-

some and expensive regulations to micromanage the look, location, and the food of new carts. It wanted them to be not just clean, but also “beautiful” via a uniform brand, “Toronto à la cart” (perhaps they could not resist the pun). The result? Rather than an explosion of interesting and unexpected street food in all kinds of locations across the city, only eight vendors made it through. Such a small number hardly had any impact.

In what was perhaps the low point of his mayoralty, Miller did end up with a very messy city during the garbage strike in the summer of 2009. The ideal of “messy urbanism” does not mean there should be trash on the streets, of course. No one finds that appealing (unless they’re trying to shoot that gritty urban movie). So what are the limits of this ideal? The tensions inherent in the idea of messy urbanism come to the fore in the issue of what is on the city’s walls — posters and graffiti. Many people consider them no more than visual pollution, but they also have fierce defenders.

Jonathan Goldsbie has long been active with the Toronto Public Space Committee’s campaign in defense of the right to poster in Toronto [editor’s note: Goldsbie also contributes to the magazine and to



the Spacing Toronto blog. He argues that “posters are a sign of a healthy, vital public space...messy isn’t a bad thing; the public realm should be a cacophony of voices. A pole full of posters indicates a community full of activity and ideas.”

In some ways, posters and graffiti are the inevitable results of Toronto’s own cultural aspirations. Under Miller, Toronto enthusiastically embraced Richard Florida’s “creative cities” mantra, introducing highly managed public art events such as Luminato and Nuit Blanche. But if you encourage creative people to live in your city, that creativity will burst forth in unexpected, uncontrollable, and messy ways. Up-and-coming musicians will plaster the city with posters advertising their gigs; visual artists will treat blank walls as canvases ready for their work.

Corporations recognize the value of the sense of urban vibrancy created by this activity, and try to capture it by covering downtown construction hoardings with expensive posters for their own products. Like the ugly, lazy scrawls of graffiti tags that merely advertise a name without demonstrating the talent to justify it, such abuse of posterage leaves a sour taste in everyone’s mouth and can trigger a backlash towards sanitizing everything.

What is needed, really, is a creative tension. The instinct for order and beauty has its place; the problem comes when it is dominant. It needs to be constantly challenged and questioned by the push for vibrant messiness.

It’s a tension that goes back, perhaps, to the very beginning of city life. Civic leaders have always sought to impose grand order in their cities, triumphant buildings and boulevards such as the Forums of Roman cities that project glory and wealth. But for most of history, these grand projects were merely islands of order amidst the uncontrollable, largely self-regulating chaos of city streets. Messiness needed no champion, because it was inevitable.

By the 19th century, however, the development of industry and bureaucracy meant that the forces of order could begin to impose themselves more systematically on city life. Entire North American cities were planned and built on grids, and in Paris Baron Haussmann cut through the maze of the medieval city with new grand boulevards.

Along with orderly streets came orderly street life. Detailed laws were developed to regulate and closely manage citizens’ behaviour in public, and

police forces were created to enforce them.

We tend to become conscious of things when we start to lose them, and a few people noticed this loss of messiness even in the 19th century. In her book *The Walkable City*, Montréal writer Mary Soderstrom cites a Parisian, Léonce Reynaud, who realized the value of the older, messy layers of Paris as they were being lost to Haussmann’s projects: “(the city) guards invaluable evidence of the phases through which it has passed....The plan, so complicated that one can find no law in it and which at first glance appears to have been drawn by chance, in fact has innumerable causes each with its own value, and which have been worked on by time.”

But for most of the 20th century, it was the ideals of order and efficiency that dominated thinking about cities, and the result was bigger roads, sanitized suburbs, and failed megaprojects that destroyed the complex ecology of cities even as they tried to revive them.

No one would want to go back to the entirely messy city of the past, of course. There are reasons people reacted against crowded, dirty, unhealthy medieval cities (they look much nicer now that modern regulation has cleaned up their remnants

for tourists). But we do need to build a stronger tension between the forces of clean and beautiful that dominated the last century, and those of messy and vibrant that are needed to make urbanism thrive in the new century. For that to happen, there has to be a movement of people who can articulate the perhaps counterintuitive idea that being messy can be good for a city. The 20th century saw the pendulum swing from the old messy city to the overly ordered city. Perhaps the new century will be the one where we find the right balance.

People of many different points of view can step into this role. The ideal of messy urbanism does not fall neatly into ideological categories of “left” or “right.” It clashes with the right’s emphasis on order, and the left’s love of regulation. But it evokes the right’s ideals of freedom and individual choice, and the left’s ideal of self-organizing grassroots movements.

We are now reaching the end of David Miller’s “clean and beautiful” years. It’s an opportunity to think again about what kind of city we want. So far, none of the contenders to replace him have shown much understanding, let alone sympathy, for the idea of messy urbanism. Yet it is bubbling up in issues all over the city, from ideas about sharing streets, to a desire by communities to have a say in managing their own parks, to calls for more complicated but more democratic ways of voting. Perhaps, by its nature, messy urbanism is something that emerges from below rather than from the mouths of politicians.

In Toronto, the orderly side is built-in, in our neat grid of streets, and in the ethos of cleanliness and control inherited from our Protestant past. To balance it out, a necessary and appropriately chaotic mix of voices is emerging to stand up for the messy side of the equation. That side, too, can build on roots in Toronto, such as the work of Jane Jacobs. We need these other voices to speak up and to take action, to provide that balance by articulating and demonstrating the joy of messy urbanism. †

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Yonge’s inside-out urbanism

On most healthy retail strips, the stores, sidewalks, and open spaces tend to be tidy and well trafficked, while the rear service alleys are often trash-strewn and neglected. The stretch of Yonge between College and Bloor turns this familiar urban configuration inside out: street life and public realm investment has accrued to the off-stage zones, while Yonge itself continues its decades-long deterioration, neglected by pedestrians and planners alike.

During a 2010 Jane’s Walk, Toronto-Centre candidate Ken Chan and campaign volunteer Michael Went led a tour that started at Yonge and Bloor, wound down the converted parking lots just east of Yonge, crossed over at Wood, and worked back up the rapidly urbanizing laneways between Yonge and Bay.

“I walk through the back alleys a lot,” said Chan. He’s not alone, and it is this unique traffic pattern that has produced the curious inversion.

Like many urban phenomena, this one begins as an unintended consequence of the Yonge subway cut-and-cover construction that left an almost uninterrupted string of parking lots between Charles and Wood, several of which have been pressed into service as open-air party zones during past Pride Week celebrations.

In the last decade or so, area councillor Kyle Rae has succeeded in getting several of these lots converted into parkettes, with parking directed to a multi-level Green P garage between Charles and Hayden. Rae has also taken care to ensure that adjacent developments — such as the recently built Children’s Aid Society headquarters — keep their eyes on these well-maintained open spaces. Buddies in Bad Times, on Maitland a few steps east of Yonge, anchors the south end of this linear park.

The west side lane network — which begins as a classic alley next to the Ontario Coroner’s Court and eventually turns into St. Nicholas Street — has long sustained a certain amount of commercial activity, including a tech equipment company, a Spanish restaurant, a bondage shop, a gym, and, in years past, gay dance clubs that opened onto both St. Nicholas Lane and St. Joseph Street.



Over time, these lanes have acquired some landscaping (pavers, planters), and formal municipal names thanks to pressure from local condo owners. Thus dressed and addressed, they’ve attracted development, including Five, a controversial tower whose pedestal wipes out a couple of older brick warehouses but will incorporate heritage buildings on Yonge and St. Thomas.

A bit further south, the last phase of the Opera Place project — a stepped, 318-unit condo on the empty block just north of the Metro Central YMCA — will be designed to front onto St. Luke’s Lane, the increasingly urban alley that was originally built to provide service vehicle access to the backs of the shops on Yonge.

The evolution of alleys into mews is an arguably healthy phenomenon, one that improves pedestrian circulation and creates new public spaces. At the same time, large footprint development can just as easily kill or erase alleys, as has been the case with 1 Bloor, which eradicated the L-shaped Roy Square, with its quirky stores and ethnic restaurants. Yonge Street’s lively backstage zone shows why the City should be doing all it can to protect and urbanize downtown alleys instead of parceling them off to land hungry builders. †

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