



REINVENTING THE HISTORIC TOWN CENTRE

Martin Chow

Precedent and Initiative in Architectural Design

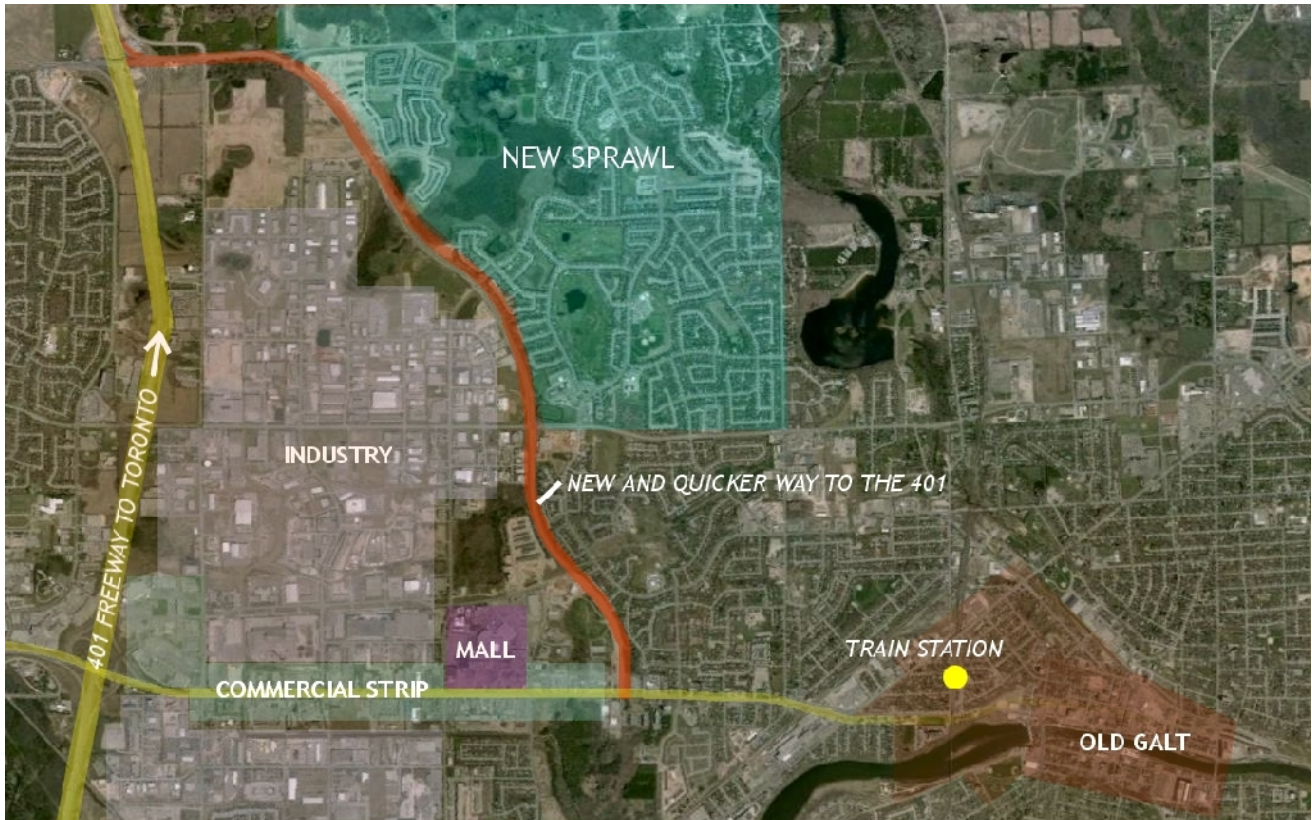
Statement:

“The works of the past always influence us, whether or not we care to admit it, or to structure an understanding of how that influence occurs. The past is not just that which we know, it is that which we use, in a variety of ways, in the making of new work.... The typology argument today asserts that despite the diversity of our culture there are still roots of this kind which allow us to speak of the idea of a library, a museum, a city hall or a house. The continuity of these ideas of type, such as they are, and the esteemed examples which have established their identity and assured their continued cultural resonance, constitute an established line of inquiry in which new work may be effectively grounded.”

The Harvard Architectural Review. Volume 5. Precedent and Invention. Between History and Tradition:
Notes Toward a Theory of Precedent.

John E. Hancock.

In this period of economic growth, Canadian settlements along the Detroit-Quebec-City corridor have been experiencing rapid expansion of infrastructure and industry, leading to the dominance of an ever-increasing exurban population. The stretch of Ontario’s highway 401 between Toronto and Detroit contains the country’s largest concentration of manufacturing and industry. Linking numerous communities together into a continuous industrial belt, the 401 region offers inexpensive land for business development and residential subdivisions within one hour of Toronto. With the efficiency of modern-day industrial practices and business management, the advent of the freeway renders obsolete the traditional structure of many towns throughout what used to be the countryside, where commerce and industry were centered around train stations - a single point on a map. The closer people were located relative to that point, the quicker access they have to other towns and destinations. Hence sprawl that used to be naturally limited by traditional town planning became common place with the arrival of the automobile.



The 401 expressway offers a continuous line for access to Toronto from an infinite number of points, meaning that new on-ramps can always be added to alleviate local congestion and to accommodate further sprawl. Efficiency is now measured by low rents and proximity to the highway, such that the traditional town cores hold little advantage over the endless supply of cheaper land that is far away from its center and closer to the mega-region at large.

As a result of the dwindling status of the historic town centres, such places are frequently the setting of public art installations or community festivities paid for by various governing bodies in an attempt to keep the urban core relevant and a destination for unsuspecting tourists.^[1] However, such investments are chronic money losers; instead what is truly needed is a fundamental shift in the economic role of the town core. This project attempts to reinvent the core such that it can feasibly compete with the strip mall and industrial park, no longer as a center for commerce but as a center for lifestyle.

Amalgamated in 1973 into what is now known as the City of Cambridge, the well-established towns of Preston, Hespeler and Galt were once distinct entities each with a historic core area; however, managing the three towns as one caused the farmland in between to quickly fill up with industrial sprawl and big box stores. With a business and civic culture based increasingly on quick and convenient access to and from Toronto, and the demographic that it has attracted as a result, Cambridge has become home to one of the least permanent population base in the country with an average duration of residency of just over three years. As a result, the transformation of Cambridge's identity as a bedroom community relative to Toronto has led to much growth towards the highway or out onto farmland, with the sprouting of new commercial nodes throughout the

suburbs at the expense of an increasingly neglected core area. Old Galt continues to function, with three major banks and a post office located within the six-block core, as well as a small number of retailers, discount grocery stores, apartment rental agencies and a food bank. Despite its status as a town center, the density of Galt is quite low, at roughly 7 people per acre, compared to a suburban minimum of 12 people per acre.^[2] Vast tracks of surface parking and brown field surround much of the key 6 blocks making up downtown Galt, and many structures are uninhabited or have become uninhabitable due to neglect. It remains relevant to the rest of Cambridge due to the location of its bus terminal on Ainslie Street as the southernmost hub of a new regional transportation network. High school students frequent the station, to gain access to the northern half of the city, where commercial sprawl offers large shopping malls and cinemas. After hours, the bus terminal becomes deserted and notorious for criminal activity, due to its large and isolated location. The inability of Old Galt to compete with the newer commercial districts in the city has prompted city officials to offer contaminated sites grants and waivers of all development charges for building activity in the area, with limited success.^[3]

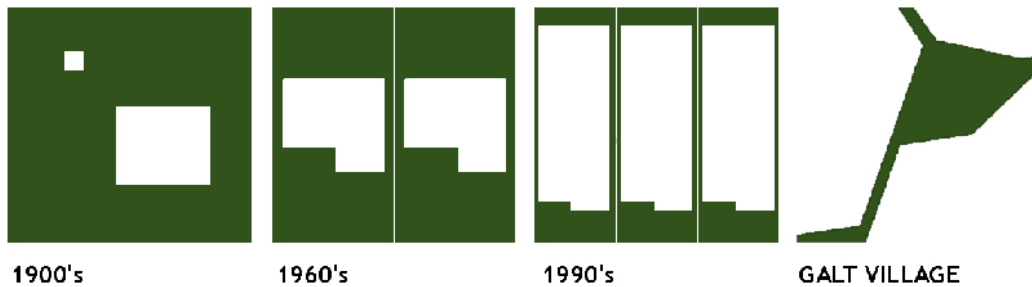
The redevelopment of the blocks surrounding the terminal is vital to restoring nightlife to downtown and will significantly increase ridership levels on the transit system. A name is applied to this development - Galt South Village - only for clarity's sake. Otherwise, no branding at all would have been ideal as the intent of the project is not arrival of a new neighbourhood, but rather an improvement of the existing one.

This core revitalization project aims to reverse the cycle of neglect in three phases:

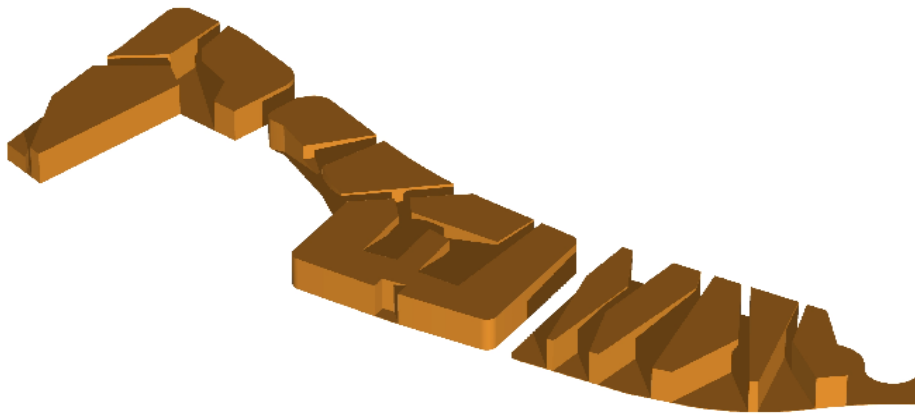
- 1- The provision of low-income and subsidized housing to residents. Such residents usually do not have the luxury of a private vehicle and will rely on local transit. The increase in a local resident population more likely to frequent grocery stores and amenities within walking distance, helps to support ailing businesses in the core area, and reduces crime due to the added density.
- 2- With the introduction of affordable family homes following a reduction in after-hours criminal activity, the addition of retail outlets, a supermarket, and amenities to service the larger population and to make the area more attractive for further development near the bus terminal.
- 3- The development of higher-end market housing, as well as amenities and a park that will serve both as a gateway into the town centre and as a catalyst for further residential demand within the core area.

With 1850 jobs remaining in the downtown Galt, and a population of 2150,4 the economy is kept afloat in part by the city of Cambridge's business improvement plan for the core area. The redevelopment of Galt South will increase the neighbourhood population by 50% and will provide up to 400 jobs in its retail and amenity areas, with 80 jobs located in a new neighbourhood supermarket. The retail space will not likely fill up until the latter stages of phase 2, due to fact that phase 1, being low-income housing, does not bring in the type of demographic required for the success of new stores. As the neighbourhood evolves into a healthier, more mixed-income environment, the attractiveness of locating restaurants and retail in the vicinity of the Ainslie bus terminal will draw business and activity to the hub.

Massing



The development recognizes the inability of the traditional suburban town planning to cope with the demands of a denser, more sustainable approach to planning. Over the course of the 20th century, lot sizes have been subdivided to the point where all that remains of the “yard” is a meaningless strip of space between the property line and the building footprint. The approach used in developing Galt South Village takes the city blocks, extrudes the area minus the sidewalk offset to a height of four to five stories, and then subtracts purposeful spaces - courtyards plazas, lanes and view cones - from the resulting volume. It is an approach that combines the ideals of density and livability into a rational formula.



Liveability

The project attempts to provide an environment of primarily low-income housing that is safe and vibrant at the same time, avoiding common antisocial mistakes from numerous housing projects. It can be observed that all successful low-income neighbourhoods tend to compensate for its poverty with a form of lively disorder. The obvious strategy in this case is mixed-use planning, such that the potential for crime due to the concentration of a certain demographic will be negated by activity on the ground floor retail and plazas, which brings about a more diverse pedestrian traffic through the area. The design of the neighbourhood encourages social interaction, placing cafe-type plazas where human traffic will naturally occur, and the conversion of the Ainslie bus terminal into something of an open market place. Details such as faux balconies open up an otherwise small apartment to the plaza and street-scape while requiring no extra structural cost, thus keeping the units affordable.



Illustration 1: Hundertwasser Haus, Vienna

The current boundary between the Galt core area and the southern suburbs consist of several blocks of rotting structures and decaying brownfield. The end goal of this project is to replace the eyesore with a greener and more defined edge to the downtown core. It focuses much of the density and retail to the northern blocks surrounding the bus station, such that, combined with the adjacent core area blocks, it will remain a lively place during all hours of the day. The southernmost block offers parkland and partially-subterranean amenity space, which is subsidized by the construction of higher-end apartments above. The resulting environment echoes many European cityscapes where the forested park acts as a serene buffer and boundary between the city and countryside. Offering a more stately entrance into Galt from the south via Ainslie Street, the development aims to restore a sense of destination to the town center, as well as a healthier identity for Cambridge at large.



Illustration 2: Hyde park, London



Illustration 3: A transit-oriented town core in Strasbourg, France

Endnotes

^[1]http://www.city.cambridge.on.ca/planningdoc/Monitoring_Report_2005.pdf

^[2]<http://geodepot.statcan.ca/GeoSearch2006/GeoSearch2006.jsp?minx=7134225.40490496&miny=868379.47>

^[3]<http://www.city.cambridge.on.ca/relatedDocs/Galt%20Core%20&%20BIA%20Area%20Map.pdf>

Other Sources

[_2398&maxx=7176746.41330833&maxy=894261.82313358&LastImage=http://geodepot.statcan.ca/Diss/Output/GeoSearch2006_GEODEPOTFARM53344326821.gif&resolution=H&lang=E&switchTab=0](http://geodepot.statcan.ca/Diss/Output/GeoSearch2006_GEODEPOTFARM53344326821.gif&resolution=H&lang=E&switchTab=0)

Images

^[1]http://www.artchive.com/artchive/h/hundertwasser/hundertwasser_house.jpg

^[2]http://www.e-architect.co.uk/london/jpgs/one_hyde_park_view_candyandcandy_020807_2.jpg

^[3]http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3b/Tramway_Strasbourg_FRA_001.jpg

All others created by the author