# Contested Ground: The Dynamics of Peri-Urban Growth in the Toronto Region[*]

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## Introduction: Setting the Stage

It is not surprising that the urban margin or peri-urban fringe, the zone of most rapid growth and change, is the least well understood. Data sources are sporadic, often disconnected and by definition out-of-date. The means and structures of governance, systems of infrastructure provision and regulatory policies invariably lag behind the pace, scale and diversity of urban expansion. This is especially the case in large and rapidly growing urban regions such as Toronto. A parallel lag is evident in our images of what the region is like, how it is changing, and who if anyone is in charge.

The peri-urban zone is also contested ground. It is the interface, the transitional setting, in which processes of urban growth and development intersect with the pressures for rural preservation. It is, for example, the location at which the varied demands of urban dwellers for new housing and living space, of builders, investors and property-owners for land and speculative profits, of employers for more efficient production space, and of almost everyone for accessibility to recreation and breathing space, come into conflict with the desires of rural residents,

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farmers, conservationists, exurbanites and various others for the preservation of a certain environment, style of life and bucolic rural landscape.

## Objectives

This paper offers an overview and discussion of recent trends and tensions in the periphery of the Toronto urban region. The periphery in this instance includes the outer suburban margin, the rural and exurban fringe and the surrounding recreational and retirement hinterland. This extensive area, in previous lexicons often called the urban field, represents the living space of urban residents. That space has expanded dramatically in geographical scale in recent decades, and it has become much more diverse, complex and eclectic – in effect, a thoroughly postmodern landscape. While the trends observed in the Toronto region, and the issues and conflicts they generate, are for the most part similar to those recorded elsewhere, in other regards they are played out on a landscape, and within a set of political structures, that reflects a unique combination of local conditions and global forces.

First, we set the stage with a brief description of the changing character and geography of growth in the region, and then explore the contrasting lens through which this growth and the tensions that it produces can be interpreted. We then examine the underlying dynamics of urban expansion, contrasting the view from the urban core and the view looking in from the rural, agricultural and recreational fringe. The final section outlines some of the recent policy responses, notably smart growth proposals, and the likely future trajectories of urban growth and form in the region.

## Alternative Perspectives: One Region, Two Approaches, Many Views.

There are many ways to approach the study of peri-urban growth, but two commonly chosen and *obviously contrasting* perspectives are based on where the observer is grounded. These perspectives, in turn, tend to both reflect and generate different political agendas. The first perspective is urban-based, viewing the growth of the region from the urbanised core outward to the rural periphery. From this perspective the processes of primary interest are those driven by the urban land market rather than the rural land market. Local land prices are defined by the demands of metropolitan-area residents for living and production space, and of course, for recreation. The rural fringe, in this view, constitutes a passive set of resources to be used, consumed and managed for urban purposes. The emphasis in this discourse is typically on issues of urban form and commuting and the management of regional growth to serve city needs.

The alternative perspective starts from the periphery and looks inward at the expanding urban margin, viewing that expansion either as a threat or an opportunity. It is a view firmly rooted in the rural landscape – as both myth and reality – and in the needs of the agricultural, exurban and recreational activities that take

place on that landscape. The emphasis in this case is on how these populations and activities respond to and are shaped by urban expansion, and on the means available to channel or resist those inroads. Both views, representing only the extremes of a continuum of perspectives and political priorities, are valid; the peri-urban periphery is indeed contested ground. In this paper, as a mirror on the larger debate, we play one set of views off against the other.

## Toronto: A Region in the Making

The Toronto region, variously defined, is the largest urban area in Canada and one of the fastest growing and most diverse settings on the continent. Because of these characteristics, defining the urban region, and thus the appropriate scale of analysis, poses the first challenge for the researcher. There is not one 'best' definition; rather, several definitions and spatial scales are relevant. The standard definition is the census metropolitan area (CMA), which had a population of 4.8 million in 2001 and covered 5000 km². This delimitation, however, is severely underbounded given the continued dispersion of growth and the increase in urban-initiated activity in the rural and recreational fringe. It is also based entirely on urban-centred criteria: for example, it measures the extent of the urban labour market using journey to work data rather than the changing attributes of the fringe. Others have used a somewhat larger region, the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), which incorporates the City of Toronto and the four surrounding regional government jurisdictions – Halton, Peel, York and Durham. The GTA had a population of 5.1 million in 2001 and an area of over 7000 km² (Figure 1). This region too is now geographically under-bounded as a unit of analysis and growth management.

In an attempt to capture the full extent of urban dispersion, the provincial government has recently proposed the concept of the Central Ontario region as a strategic planning framework (COSGP 2003). This region stretches from east of Oshawa north to the recreational districts of Haliburton and Georgian Bay (although it excludes Muskoka), and west to include Hamilton and Niagara Falls. This region covers over 37,000 km², and had a population of 7.5 million in 2001. For many purposes, this region may be too big; for others it may be too small. In this paper, we are compelled to use a floating definition depending on the source of information used and the issues being addressed.

### The Urban Dynamics

In addition to its immense size – in population, jobs and territory – perhaps the defining elements of Toronto's recent development are the region's high rate of growth, increasing ethno-cultural diversity, and a poly-nucleated (as well as polymorphous) built form (GTSB 2000). The high rate of growth underlies almost all of the parameters of change, and the policy issues, outlined below. The GTA region had a population of 2.1 million in 1961; four decades later the population was 5.1 million (Table 1). It continues to add between 80,000 and 100,000 persons
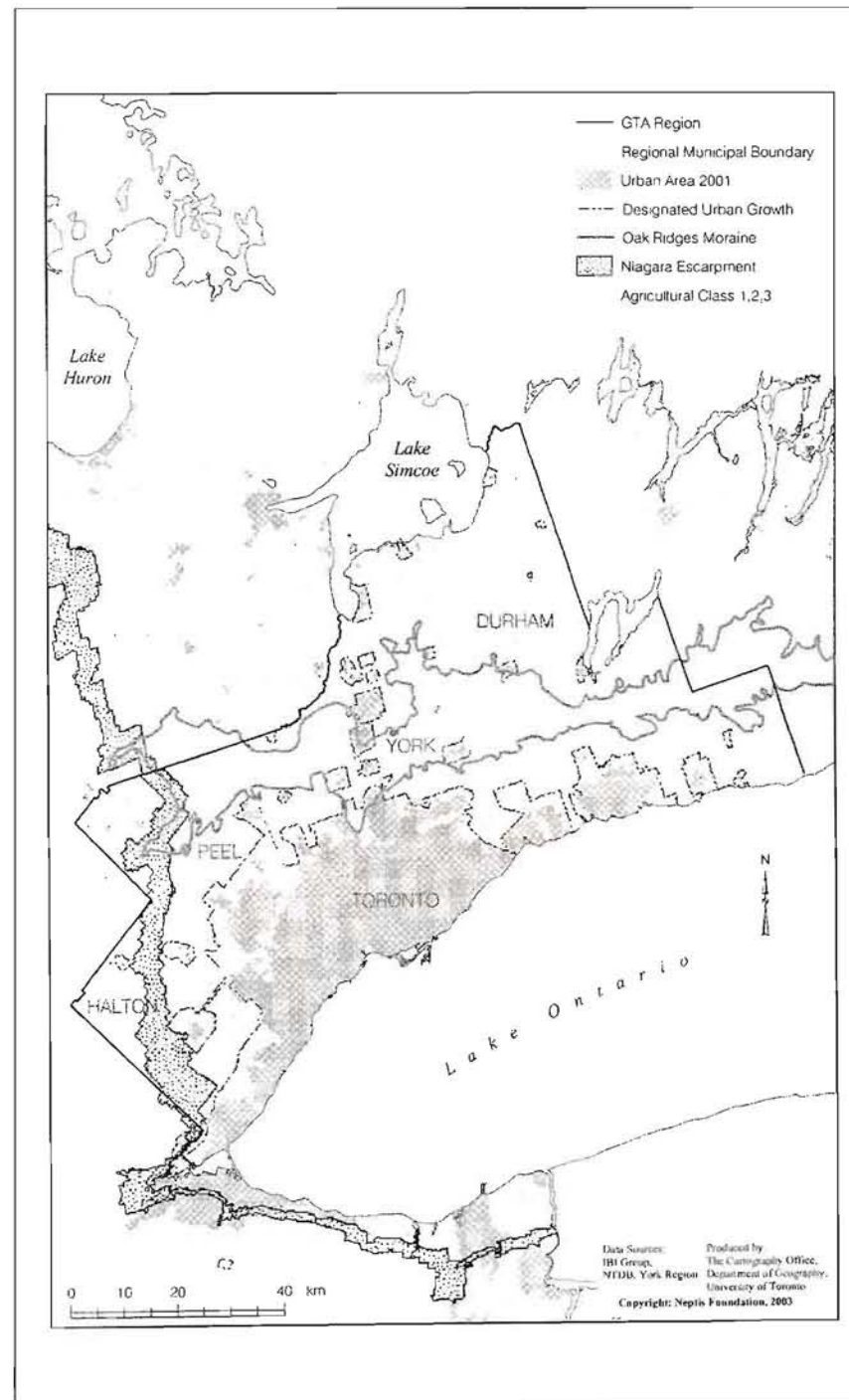
**FIGURE 1 Greater Toronto Area**

**TABLE 1 Population Growth and Suburbanization, Greater Toronto Area (GTA), 1961-2001.**

| | GTA Population by Region (000s) and Region as % of GTA Population | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Metro[1] | | Peel | | York | | Durham | | Halton | | % of four Suburban[2] | GTA |
| Year | # | % | # | % | # | % | # | % | # | % | % | # |
| 1961 | 1,620 | 76.9 | 110 | 5.3 | 110 | 5.3 | 150 | 7.2 | 110 | 5.3 | 23.1 | 2,110 |
| 1971 | 2,090 | 71.6 | 260 | 8.9 | 170 | 5.8 | 210 | 7.2 | 190 | 6.5 | 28.4 | 2,920 |
| 1981 | 2,140 | 62.6 | 490 | 14.3 | 260 | 7.5 | 280 | 8.2 | 250 | 7.3 | 37.3 | 3,420 |
| 1991 | 2,280 | 53.8 | 730 | 17.3 | 500 | 11.8 | 410 | 9.7 | 310 | 7.3 | 46.1 | 4,240 |
| 1996 | 2,385 | 51.5 | 852 | 18.4 | 593 | 12.8 | 459 | 9.9 | 340 | 7.4 | 48.5 | 4,629 |
| 2001 | 2,481 | 48.8 | 989 | 19.5 | 729 | 14.4 | 507 | 10.0 | 375 | 7.4 | 51.2 | 5,082 |

| | | Population by Region and Municipality | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Region | Municipality | Code | Pop. 2001 | Pop. 1996 | % Change |
| Durham | Whitby | 5323518009 | 87,413 | 73,794 | 18.5 |
| | Oshawa | 5323518013 | 139,051 | 134,364 | 3.5 |
| | Clarington | 5323518017 | 69,834 | 60,615 | 15.2 |
| | Pickering | 5353518001 | 87,139 | 78,989 | 10.3 |
| | Ajax | 5353518005 | 73,753 | 64,430 | 14.5 |
| | Uxbridge | 5353518029 | 17,377 | 15,882 | 9.4 |
| | Brock | 3518039 | 12,110 | 11,705 | 3.5 |
| | Scugog | 3518020 | 20,173 | 18,837 | 7.1 |
| | Mississaugas of Scogog Island | 3518022 | 51 | -- | -- |
| | | Total: | 506,901 | 458,616 | 10.5 |
| York | Vaughan | 5353519028 | 182,022 | 132,549 | 37.3 |
| | Markham | 5353519036 | 208,615 | 173,383 | 20.3 |
| | Richmond Hill | 5353519038 | 132,030 | 101,725 | 29.8 |
| | Whitchurch-Stouffville | 5353519044 | 22,008 | 19,835 | 11.0 |
| | Aurora | 5353519046 | 40,167 | 34,857 | 15.2 |
| | Newmarket | 5353519048 | 65,788 | 57,125 | 15.2 |
| | King | 5353519049 | 18,533 | 18,223 | 1.7 |
| | East Gwillimbury | 5353519054 | 20,555 | 19,770 | 4.0 |
| | Georgia | 5353519070 | 39,263 | 34,777 | 12.9 |
| | Chippewas of Georgia Island First Nation | 5353519076 | 273 | 201 | 35.8 |
| | | Total: | 729,254 | 592,445 | 23.1 |
| Toronto | Toronto | 5353520005 | 2,481,494 | 2,385,421 | 4.0 |
| | | Total: | 2,481,494 | 2,385,421 | 4.0 |
| Peel | Mississauga | 5353521005 | 612,925 | 544,382 | 12.6 |
| | Brampton | 5353521010 | 325,428 | 268,251 | 21.3 |
| | Caledon | 5353521024 | 50,595 | 39,893 | 26.8 |
| | | Total: | 988,948 | 852,526 | 16.0 |
| Halton | Oakvill | 5353524001 | 144,738 | 128,405 | 12.7 |
| | Milton | 5353524009 | 31,471 | 32,104 | -2.0 |
| | Halton | 5353524015 | 48,184 | 42,390 | 13.7 |
| | Burlington | 5373524002 | 150,836 | 136,976 | 10.1 |
| | | Total: | 375,229 | 339,875 | 10.4 |

Note:    1. Metro became the new City of Toronto after amalgamation, January 1998.

2. The four Suburban areas are Peel, York, Durham and Halton.

Source:    Census Canada, various years.

annually, which is the equivalent of adding a new city of Peterborough every year or a new Windsor, Halifax or Victoria every five years. Current estimates are that the population is expected to increase by over two million in the next 30 years, the majority of this growth attributable to immigration.

Accommodating such a large population growth, along with the jobs, infrastructure, institutions, services and play spaces that are required, invariably necessitates the consumption of huge tracts of rural land on the urban fringe. Although Metro Toronto has been relatively successful in encouraging infill, intensification and redevelopment of older urban sites (brownfields), over 75 % of new growth still takes place in rural (greenfield) locations.

Increases in real disposable income have further augmented the demands for additional housing and living space, for all forms of private consumption (e.g. golf courses, second homes), and for specialised public services. Rising incomes have also enhanced the search for environmental amenities. Employment growth has followed suit, consuming even more land per capita on the periphery than the residential sector. The basis for intense conflicts is thus in place. The urbanised area in tandem expanded at a rate roughly 30 % faster than population.

The sources and composition of that growth have also changed. Fertility rates have declined sharply, and domestic migration rates have slowed as the population begins to age. Indeed, the Toronto CMA has had a net migration loss in population exchanges with the rest of the country since the early 1980s, although much of that out-migration goes to the adjacent rural hinterland. The engine of growth and social change is now immigration. Between 40 and 50 % of all immigrants to Canada come to the Toronto region, and most stay on. Over 70 % of recent population growth in the region is attributable to immigration; and most of that flow is from non-European source countries, notably in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Increasingly, those migrants land in the suburbs, both the old and new suburbs, rather than the central city. The rate at which the suburbs of Toronto, and increasingly the exurban fringe, are being transformed in social and ethno-cultural terms, is historically unprecedented (Bourne et al 2000). In most of the newer suburbs, the foreign-born population now exceeds 35 %, and in some neighbourhoods over 50 %. Indices of ethno-cultural diversity have increased accordingly – with particularly large concentrations from Hong Kong, China, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – and are now higher in many of the new suburbs than in the central city. Unlike the older suburbs, however, most of this new population is middle-class and none lives in social housing. Although the proportion of new immigrants tends to decline as one moves outward into the exurban fringe, the percentage rates of increase in this zone are among the highest in the region. The face and culture of the urban fringe are being dramatically altered in less than a generation.

## Governance

The conflicts involved in accommodating such rapid growth, the continued dispersion of population and jobs, and increasing ethno-cultural diversity are made more obvious by the absence of a government entity responsible for the entire region

(GTA Task Force 1996). Historically, the Toronto region is considered one of the classic, and most successful, examples of the metropolitan form of government; but this governmental structure no longer exists. The former Metro (amalgamated with its local governments in 1999) was able to shape the growth and character of the suburban margin through direct planning controls, coordinated infrastructure provision, regional revenue sharing among richer and poorer municipalities and the suburbanisation of social housing. There currently exists no sequel to Metro that can co-ordinate and shape the growth of contemporary suburbs and the fringe in general.

The GTA region continues to be politically fragmented, administered by five separate senior governments – the City and four two-tier regional governments in the suburban area surrounding the city, and 24 local governments.[1] As a single political reality, however, the GTA does not exist. It is a concept – a label – of convenience, not of governance. Nor are there regional service agencies that span the region. Outside of the GTA, in the adjacent rural and recreational hinterland, there is a mixed bag of local municipalities and small regional governments – townships, towns, cities and counties. Recent provincial governments have shown little interest in getting involved in the development of the region other than on single-issue basis, although the newly elected Liberal government may be more pro-active. The reality, at present, is that no one is managing the entire region.

The high degree of political and institutional fragmentation in the region can be viewed as the optimal structure of governance by some advocates of local autonomy. Yet it also adds uncertainty, which in turn encourages local governments to maximise local revenues while minimising the intrusion of unwanted uses and activities. On the one hand, it does allow for greater local control and perhaps a richer diversity in the built environment, but at the same time it also encourages inter-municipal competition for public resources and private investment. A fragmented and uneven landscape also, on balance, facilitates decentralisation and encourages suburban sprawl and makes the formulation of strategic regional plans, and the development of a regional sense of place and citizenship, markedly more difficult.

## Landscapes of Difference

The combined result of these forces is a peri-urban zone that is not only geographically vast and rapidly changing, but one displaying landscapes that are fluid and highly varied, if not eclectic. These are landscapes that are the locus of both consumption and production activities, of both resource-seeking and growth-resisting policies, and of contrasting settlement forms. Widespread decentralisation at the regional scale is accompanied by a localised clustering of homogeneous

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1.   In confusing fashion, the City of Toronto is both a local and regional government – i.e. it is one-tier.

uses, often as a re-concentration around older urban nodes. As part of this decentralisation process, the urban housing market has expanded to include communities lying well outside the CMA and to include a wide range of housing for recreation, retirement and investment. The mix of land uses and urban functions in the periphery has increased, especially for estate housing, transportation and storage, and recreation and other forms of consumption (e.g. golf courses).

Along with these transformations, the built environment has also become more varied, incorporating a fascinating mix of styles, densities and forms. The fringe has seen an increase in net residential densities within new subdivisions since the early 1990s, reflecting higher land prices and tighter controls on land subdivision and servicing, and rationalised as following the principles of the most recent planning philosophy. Yet despite higher net densities, gross densities remain low (Blais 2000; Filion 2003). A stubborn if unintentional reliance on old ways of building up urban form means that most new subdivisions are still not amenable to the provision of viable frequent public transit service, nor to other non-automobile forms of travel. Moreover, and in contrast, the densities of employment lands and industrial and related transportation uses have declined as the needs of production have shifted from multi-story to single-story construction and from rail to truck transportation. The result: a dramatic increase in suburban employment growth, increased suburb-to-suburb traffic, severe road congestion and thicker air pollution. Certainly across the five regions that make up the GTA, we seem to be rapidly paving the fringe.

In parallel, increased social diversity and the intense competition among builders for market share have resulted in a melange of architectural styles and built forms on the fringe. The region now boasts examples of almost every kind of new living spaces: from single-houses and townhouses to multi-family condos. Entire residential subdivisions are designed for retirement as adult life-style communities; others are tied to recreational pursuits (e.g. golf, skiing, boating); and some are directed to specific ethnic or religious groups. Some are gated, physically or by selective membership or price level. Some are designed to look like an Austrian village, others imitate Italian or British designs, and still others attempt to reproduce the character and feel of small 19th century Ontario towns. All of this landscape diversity is facilitated by increased incomes, social diversity, intense sub-market competition and the search for something that is not otherwise available locally. To the extent that these developments are driven by consumer preferences, they can be seen as positive trends; if not, they suggest a collective absence of both direction and a dominant style in the urban fringe. They may also lead to a landscape that is increasingly unequal with respect to access to affordable housing, the quality of living environments, the level of public services and the availability of green space.

*The Rural Perspective*

Embedded in the dynamic and rapidly evolving peri-urban landscapes is a confusing and contested set of ruralities from which urban expansion is largely viewed as an invasive process, as in the 'invaded countryside' discussed by Walker (1987). This view reflects the domination of the academic discourse on the peri-urban by rural geographers and other students of rural change in which it is seen less as a contested zone than one in which rural environments are increasingly subservient to urban agendas. The fringe is the countryside -- or in the terminology of Bryant et al (1982), the 'city's countryside' – and the future of this countryside is always threatened by the growth of the city.

Research on Toronto's urban fringe has ranged across a variety of issues but has been remarkably consistent in pursuing themes of urban-induced rural change and decline. This perspective has been supported by a public discourse that sees the city's countryside as a battle zone in which rearguard actions have to be fought over farmland, greenspace and rural heritage. But paralleling the defence against urban invasion are contested countryside perspectives that reflect changes to the rurality of the Toronto region. At its heart this a contest between the productionist agendas of the old rural society and the conservationist and preservationist agendas of exurbanites, a contest which translates into a general lack of agreement on what the rural should look like and how it should fit into the regional framework for growth and development.

The peri-urban zone is without doubt a landscape of conflicting and competing meanings. Meinig (1979) wrote that different people viewing the same landscape 'will see many of the same elements – houses, roads, trees, hills' – but will interpret this view in many different ways each according to his or her own ideologies. In the case of Toronto's peri-urban landscape, the same view may represent two hundred years of pioneer settlement, productive soil supporting a locally-regulated food supply, room to move (run, bike, ski, hike), unspoiled nature, an escape from the noise and congestion of the city (whether brief or permanent), or future profits from urban growth and development. The peri-urban landscape is perhaps unique in that the ways of seeing the same spaces are deeply divergent, and, in the current absence of explicit provincial government policy, are constantly under pressure to accommodate a whole range of rural-seeking yet urban-serving uses. As a result, urban ways of life and rural ways of life – those rational behaviours through which metropolitan systems have traditionally been modeled – are being blurred. Nowhere more than the peri-urban zone is it so obvious that the definitions of 'urban' and 'rural' are splintering.

Leo Marx contrasted the country and the city as 'two worlds, one identified with rural peace and simplicity, the other with urban power and sophistication' (1964: 18-9). Raymond Williams (1973) wrote of the 'country versus the city' as one of the deep paradoxes of Western culture. He demonstrated how material landscapes are expressions of dominant cultural values, circulating within broader societal discourses, alongside words and images. In the Toronto region, there is a planned urban boundary that represents the limit of hard infrastructure, especially lake-based piped water and wastewater treatment. Inside this boundary, the city

accommodates the dwellings, workplaces, stores and entertainment venues of its population in a way that is recognised as 'urban.' On the other side of the line, the countryside is still in productive use for farming, along with some sand and gravel extraction, but these compete for tourism and recreation uses, and for residential uses, underlain by the pressure of speculative capital anticipating future urban growth. This landscape of uses jostling for space is not rural, in the traditional 'pastoral' sense, nor is it urban.

There is a constant negotiation of cultural values in a planning system that reviews its community plans every five years and openly debates every proposal for new growth in a public forum. When the debate concerns the expansion of the urban boundary, the forces opposing change are vociferous, and more often than not consist of individuals and interest groups from both within the city and from the peri-urban area. To oppose urban expansion is, however, more often than not to fight a losing battle in a political environment where rapid urban expansion has historically gone hand-in-hand with robust economic growth.

The voices raised in defence of the countryside and the arguments for its centrality to good regional planning nevertheless seem to be growing stronger. This is encapsulated in the 1992 report, *Vision for the Countryside*, produced by Countryside Working Group of the now-defunct Office for the Greater Toronto Area. It set out a vision to 'ensure a more balanced relationship between rural and urban areas in the GTA' and 'the preservation of the countryside, particularly agriculture and greenlands.' This report was updated seven years later by the Rural GTA Working Group, established by the Greater Toronto Area Co-ordinating Committee (GTACC 1999) which reviewed the extent to which the recom-mendations of the 1992 report had been incorporated into municipal policies and made detailed recommendations for balancing growth with the 'preservation of greenlands, farmlands and other natural and cultural features.' Hard on its heels came the *GTA Countryside Strategy* produced by the Greater Toronto Services Board to 'guide the co-ordination and implementation of regional and local plans towards the common goal of preserving a permanent, vital countryside in the GTA' (GTSB 2001). There has been a flurry of other reports and studies focussing on agriculture and greenlands (Fraser 2003; Walton 2003), and to cap off all this policy interest in the rural GTA, the report of the Smart Growth Panel for Central Ontario (2003) repeats the mantras of protecting prime farmland, natural areas and rural communities.

Why all this interest in the countryside? Much of it, of course, is driven by an urban growth management philosophy in which the countryside is viewed only a means of achieving a more sustainable urban form. But in many of the reports, there is a real sense of the value of the countryside in its own right and a determination to protect it from urban invasion. This focuses on several dominant themes: the paving over of prime farmland and greenspace, the residential exurbanisation of rural landscapes, the social transformation of rural communities, and the obliteration of rural heritage.

*The Farmland Issue*

Since the late 1960s, successive studies have tracked a continuous process of conversion of farmland to non-farm uses. Recent data reveal continued losses of prime farmland in the GTA amounting to over 117,000 ha between 1986 and 2001 (Walton 2003). Public concern over the process mounted during the 1970s, spawning a farmland preservation movement that was able to influence policy to the point that the Provincial government introduced the Foodland Guidelines in 1978 requiring all municipalities to identify and protect prime agricultural land. Although the policy framework has changed over the years, the designation of agricultural land is well-entrenched in municipal plans and on the face of it appears to be the principal tool for protecting the rural landscape in the urban fringe.

The reality is quite different. Most of the designated agricultural land has long been owned by non-agricultural interests and is farmed under largely insecure rental arrangements (Bunce 1985; Walton 2003). Some municipalities pay lip service to farmland preservation but in fact use it mainly as a device for managing urban growth (Bunce 1991). Faced with declining farm incomes, farmers have generally been willing participants in the rural land market. Yet many also cling to their way of life and adapt their enterprises to urban pressures and opportunities; and so, peri-urban agriculture survives in fragmented patches competing with an ever-moving urban boundary as well as with other valuations of rural land. The preservation of farmland is increasingly tangled in a web of conflicting objectives reflective of the diverse images and often divergent agendas for the city's countryside.

*Greenspaces and Greenbelts*

Greenspace has played a role as powerful as farmland as a defining element of rurality in the peri-urban landscape. The conceptualisation of the urban fringe as greenspace goes back to the first major plans for Toronto. A plethora of grand schemes for greenbelts and parkways were proposed in the early decades of the last century; the 1943 City of Toronto Plan incorporated a plan for a 'peripheral driveway' linking Oshawa to Hamilton which would effectively create what was called a 'rural green belt' – which heralded a policy perspective that was to persist in regional plans for years to come (Lemon 1985). For the most part, this was driven by urban-centred notions of good planning rather than by the desire to protect the countryside.

Toronto never did get a greenbelt despite successive proposals in regional plans, as the provincial government began to retreat from its commitment to strategic regional planning in the 1970s. Subsequently the region saw the introduction of the Niagara Escarpment Plan in 1985 followed by a flurry of greenlands strategy papers, which together set the stage for legislation to protect the Oak Ridges Moraine (ORM). Together the Escarpment and the Moraine form a *de facto* greenbelt around the GTA, serving not so much as urban separators as classical greenbelts are intended to do, but more as physical defenders of rural landscape

in the metropolitan region, and icons of the city's countryside. Map after map now marks the Niagara Escarpment and the ORM as a green arc stretching from Niagara Falls to Northumberland County, seemingly enshrining it as the GTA's real and permanent peri-urban rural boundary – and implying (perhaps inadvertently) that lands between it and the city are fair game for urban expansion.

In theory and also in public and policy-making minds, agriculture and greenspace are often seen as benignly co-existing land uses, which together make up the open space character of the countryside (Kanter 1990). In reality, they are often competing land uses in which the practices of modern agriculture conflict with ecological conservation. Greenspace and farmland have nevertheless long been seen as common bastions of rurality, supporting open space and landscape amenity as well as natural and cultural heritage. This is one of the great contradictions of the city's countryside: the appropriation of farmscapes by an amenity agenda.

## Exurbanites and the Amenitisation of Rural Landscapes

A large part of the amenity agenda is influenced by the growing exurbanite population of the GTA region. The spread of low-density, scattered residential growth (country homes) and of large lot rural subdivisions over the past half-century is well-documented (Bryant et al. 1982; Punter 1974; Bunce and Walker 1992). These have had a dramatically transformative effect on rural areas and in many respects increasingly define the character of the peri-urban rural landscape. Not only do they represent a social 'invasion' of the countryside; more significantly, they involve the social construction (and re-construction) of space around amenity values and uses, both on private property and in the rural landscape in general (Cadieux 2001).

Much of the 'rural perspective' on peri-urban areas can thus be understood as an exurban perspective mediated through a process of rural gentrification – the construction of residential landscapes which satisfy the landowning and status aspirations of an urban middle-class – and articulated through opposition to any urbanisation pressures that would disturb the rural idyll. Consequently, exurbanites are often the most vocal supporters of greenspace and farmland for their 'pure' landscape value. At the same time, they bring new wealth to rural communities, offering prospects of economic diversification and revitalisation. Much of this taps into strong support for commercialised versions of rural heritage conservation in which small towns become fabricated into versions of old rural Ontario – 'where you will find that the atmosphere of early Canadian traditions and architecture still prevails'. And yet it also involves support for the more extensive types of recreational land uses, such as golf courses, which conform to exurbanite lifestyles.

Much of Toronto's countryside, then, increasingly matches the expectations of the countryside ideal (Bunce 1994) – of landscapes of pleasant farmland, greenspaces and rural heritage. The questions that remain are how far away from the city does this countryside extend and how diverse are the values that support it?

## Pushing the Limits: the Transformation of Cottage Country

This overview of peri-urban growth is not complete without considering how the limits of the Toronto metropolitan region are now being pushed into central Ontario cottage country. Here, within about a three-hour drive of the GTA, in what has traditionally been considered the leisure areas of the 'city's countryside' (see for example Bryant et al 1982; Bunce 1994), the dynamics of peri-urban change are brought into sharp focus as GTA homebuilders are platting lakeside subdivisions, often made up of large exurban-style lots. Condominium townhouses and even towers have been built on waterfront properties, usually in or adjacent to established centres. For instance, the lakeside resort town of Wasaga Beach was recorded in the 2001 Census as one of the fastest-growing municipalities in Ontario, at 42.8 % (Avery 2002). This growth is not limited to traditionally summer amenity areas – witness the burst of construction in the town of Collingwood, spurred on by the rebuilding of the Blue Mountain ski resort.

This new cottage-country growth is scattered, to be sure, and often located in relatively hidden pockets, but it coincides with the closely related and very widespread processes of upgrading and replacement of lakeside summer homes taking place across central Ontario. Similar to what Halseth (1998) has documented elsewhere in Canada, so-called 'summer villages' of unwinterised second homes are being converted to larger and much more lavish year-round dwellings, if not altogether replaced. Conflict and fierce debate almost invariably accompany these changes, as more compellingly indicated by the concerted action now being taken by local municipalities and in particular by ratepayers' associations to deal with what they describe as urban or suburban growth pressures. For instance, Kahshe Lake, one of the largest lakes in the Muskoka District, is now developing a Lake Plan, in spite of the fact that there is no such municipal entity – perhaps an example of how these changes may precipitate challenges to planning orthodoxy in peri-urban areas.

Why is this growth taking place? Demographics certainly play a key role, as the leading edge of the greying Baby Boomer cohort at or nearing retirement age reconsiders its housing options. Dahms (1996) has shown that there is an exodus of older homeowners from the GTA into the Georgian Bay area, citing Census data to support his contention that amenity environments attract ageing metropolitan-area residents (at least those who have the financial means). Yet this phenomenon may not, however, be limited to the ageing population. Preliminary results of research now underway (Luka in progress) suggest that many users of cottage country in fact practice multiple residency, with at least one foot still in the GTA – in other words, they consider their lakeside dwelling part of their network of housing options within the expanded metropolitan region. This confirms that major urban centres such as Toronto now serve as nodes of residential mobility across vast regions (Daris 2002; McHugh et al 1995; Pinson and Thomann 2001). Thus, while planning and policy analysts have tended to see cottage country as a way in which city dwellers temporarily 'escape' from urban life, it is arguable from a housing market perspective that we are now witnessing a convergence of exurban growth and the long-established settlement patterns of 'cottaging'.

The time has come, then, to push the conceptual limits by which we define the Toronto metropolitan region. While we know many characteristics of the central Ontario cottage phenomenon from work done in the past – notably Wolfe (1951) and Hodge (1974) – the focus was typically on cottage country as a holiday landscape, and not as the metropolitan extension that it has now become, in functional terms if not necessarily in the minds of its users. In fact, much of the work to date has missed the point: cottage country growth in central Ontario is in large part a peri-urban echo or shadow effect of the GTA's urban growth. Does this peri-urban system of the GTA in fact have any outward limits?

The transformation of cottage country also reveals key shortcomings in the conventional pitting of 'urban' versus 'rural' perspectives, within which we have deliberately presented this discussion. When 'urban' growth is this scattered across 'rural' territories, how useful is this conceptual dichotomy? The answers to these and other questions raised may principally be revealed in the collective imagination and individual experiences of the population – the 'sense of region' as perceived by residents, to which Lynch (1976), Bourne (2001), and others have referred.

## Managing the Region

The complex fashion in which the Toronto region is expanding not only represents a challenge to conventional images and theories of what is urban and what is rural, but also for planning and public policy. The distinguishing features of the region include its rapid growth and decentralised form, and its diverse, if not eclectic, social and built environments, all of which are played out on a fragmented political landscape in which many and varied interest groups compete for space and access to amenities. The tensions involved in articulating a vision for this huge region are intense and the contradictions in establishing both public policies and political priorities are manifest.

One of the obvious sources of contradiction in attempts to reconcile the demands for urban expansion and the desire for countryside preservation is that strategic regional planning in the region is generally weak while local regulation is strong. Despite the urging of the GTA Task Force (1996), there is still in effect no regional government and no region-wide service agencies. One of the few such agencies, the Greater Toronto Services Board (GTSB) -- which had responsibility only for regional commuter trains (but hoped for more) -- was closed by the provincial government in 2001. Otherwise, regional services are provided, and development regulated, by individual ministries of the provincial government, but often with little coordination. This situation may change under the new provincial Liberal government, and in response to repeated crises (e.g. over water, waste

disposal, environmental protection, traffic), but only time will tell.[2]

At the local level, in contrast, the regulation of urban expansion is relatively tight. Urban growth boundaries, however porous, exist around most urban nodes in the fringe, agricultural and conservation lands are protected, at least in policy statements, and zoning, building and subdivision regulations are highly detailed and intensely politicised, and thus are very costly to change.

One of the most recent attempts to outline a comprehensive strategy for the entire central Ontario urban region is the model for urban sustainability outlined the province's smart growth report (COSGP 2003). Its specific objectives include the creation of compact, land-efficient development that is cheaper to service than low-density development, with priority areas established for public infrastructure funding, and rural land preservation policies that will ensure that, in theory, farmland will continue to be farmed and open space will remain undeveloped.

While paying lip service to the principles of smart growth and environmental sustainability, the report also assumes the need to increase economic efficiency and productivity in the face of increasing global competition. Toronto is widely assumed to be a world city, at least one of the second-order world cities, all of which share a number of social and functional attributes (Sassen 1996, 1998; Beaverstock and Taylor 1999; Hall 1999; Scott 2001; O'Connor 2003). In the Toronto case these attributes include deepening social polarisation, high levels of immigration, and an economy that is increasing interdependent with cities and regions outside the country (Gertler 2000). In this sense the growth of world city regions becomes less dependent on what happens in the city's traditional hinterland (Simmons and Bourne 2003).

The globalisation and world city paradigms, however, while contributing to our understanding of global integration and the underlying determinants of growth in regions such as Toronto, contribute little to our understanding of changes in urban form or the expansion of the peri-urban fringe. The nature of the fringe is largely a product of the regional mix of market dynamics, individual preferences, public policies and institutional behaviour.

The sheer size and diversity of the central Ontario planning region and the dominance of the Toronto urbanised core represent other problematic aspects of the smart growth initiative. For example, the relative lack of support for infrastructure in areas designated as non-priority, and the designation of regional growth centres as priorities for investment, will increase the burden on rural municipalities to fund their own infrastructure. And, while the creation of economic opportunities in non-urban regions is encouraged, there is no explicit support for the agricultural operations that are the front-line deterrent to losing precious farmland. Land preservation policies are viewed at best with skepticism by farmers and at worst with outright hostility because of the inflexibility they represent for future land use decisions.

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2.   The Provincial government announced on December 16, 2003 a temporary freeze on development in the sensitive greenlands areas of the Niagara fruit-belt, the Niagara Escarpment, and the Oak Ridges Moraine in the form of The Greenbelt Protection Act.

The proposed smart growth strategy, then, is mostly wishful thinking. It offers few examples of the most appropriate planning instruments, and identifies only limited sources for the vast capital sums necessary for achieving its goals. Moreover, it offers little for the enhanced security of rural-agricultural areas. Indeed, smart growth appears to some – notably rural-based – observers, as an urban-based global construct, self-serving in terms of its emphasis on new urbanism, and void of any attempt to reduce the conflicts between urban and rural places in the region. In other words, the future of the Toronto peri-urban region promises to be more of the same, but on an even larger geographical canvas.

## Conclusions

This paper has had two broad objectives: to describe the dynamics of growth and change in the peri-urban zones of the Toronto urban region, and to explore the contrasting perspectives on the tensions and challenges that flow from these dynamics. The contrasts highlighted are the differences – in approach, in the underlying assumptions of process, in images of landscape change and meaning, and in the resulting policy priorities – between urban-centred and rural-centred views of the fringe. We have juxtaposed these views not only to simulate debate but also to illustrate that the boundaries between urban and rural are increasingly blurred.

In almost every regard, the landscapes of Toronto's peri-urban areas are more complex, more chaotic, more diverse and more strongly rooted in imagined lifestyles than is the conventional view. The region, moreover, is spatially fluid with boundaries that seem to be ever shifting outwards. This combination of size and complexity, underpinned as it is by the persistent contest between the 'urban' and the 'rural' perspectives, makes for a region which may no longer lend itself to systematic representation or to conventional regional planning approaches.

The urban-rural fringe is neither urban nor rural; rather, it is both. As stated at the outset, the peri-urban zone is indeed contested ground, in terms of land use and function, in public policy and planning practice, and in terms of the images, meanings and values attached to place and landscape. Pragmatically, given the uneven competition between urban and rural uses, the urban will increasingly dominate the fringe, but in so doing the rural will transform the urban.

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