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Lessons From California

What I've learned about Toronto is that there seems to be a shared perception of an economic manifest destiny that is propelling you towards a massive change, and that at this moment you perceive that you are at a very important crossroads.

There is one road that is easy, smooth, broad and clearly marked — all the lines and signs are in place. It is the road to decentralization of the workplace, commerce and dwelling, and the privatization of transportation. It's the road that takes the minimum amount of public intervention, has the minimal need for political consensus and requires the least obligation that you all agree with one another.

In the short term, this is probably the road to maximum private gain, in terms of profit, privacy, mobility and luxury. But if you travel down that road all the way to the very end, you'll discover that you're in California.

What California has been through in the last 25 years, you are now heading into. If you want to see what the broad, easy road is like, come pay a visit. I'll take you to Irvine, Sun City and the suburbs of Sacramento. I don't think many people from Toronto would like these places. I don't think you would like what they do to the landscape, or to very young people, very old people, or women. I don't think you'd like what these places do to the environment, to resources, or to agriculture.

If you visit, and you can get through the traffic and see through the smog, you'll see where the easy, smooth road collapses — in alienation and in lost culture — and where it undergoes a complete physical breakdown.

Most cities in North America are subject to the same pressures. Toronto, because of its extraordinary urban structure, because of its streets and because of very fortuitous and probably far-sighted public policy of the past, is in a unique position to resist the pressures of decentralization and privatization.

If Toronto is to accommodate two million new people in the next 25 years, and do so without the collapse that we have experienced in California (which grew by 700,000 people in 1989), Toronto needs to take the difficult road. It needs to think big thoughts and to make big moves. It needs to do it in a way in which only three cities, that I know of, have in recent times. It's the way that Paris has launched its *grands projets*; it's the way that Barcelona, with incredible grace, has undertaken

improvements to its public spaces, and it's the way that Berlin has strengthened its residential fabric.

What you must do is create subtle, supple, small-scale instruments and interventions, a new generation of urban renewal that is a scalpel and not an axe. You must make ways not of assembling large-scale aggregations of land but the small sites, slightly larger than a single parcel, that the main streets competition typologies require. You must codify building type and structure in a way that makes private investment in private property the building block of a revitalized public world.

You are in a position to discard the errors of land use planning and zoning law and the bad, bad urbanism that came in the box with Modern architecture. You are in a position to show that it is possible to make a reasonable accommodation to the automobile without completely abandoning urban life. In fact, you are in a very powerful and enviable position, one that can provide a venue for the doing of great things.

Joe Berridge: *[Architects] have to understand that what they are doing operates within a public context. At the same time that regulations have created this knot of impossibility, there's been an extraordinary internalization on the part of the architectural profession to not come out and engage. Architecture is not purely an art; it is a social art and it is a public art.*

Nicholas Roquet: *Comments that regulation is the issue and architecture is not avoid one of the basic premises of the competition,*

which is to consolidate Toronto's main streets as the city's basic and essential public space. The conditions that spurred this regulation are still present and there is still no consensus on how to build main streets, on their form and on their pattern of use. You have shown the necessity for deregulation but you have not shown what will replace it. We may just keep calling forth a similar malaise and making the same mistakes.

These comments are edited from a transcript of a public meeting held last October to discuss the Housing on Main Streets initiative.