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Term: Winter 2019

Past & Present: A Cartographic Representation of Toronto's Nathan Phillips Square
The map that accompanies this assignment is interactive. Please follow the link below to access the map. [NPS and the Ward - Google My Maps](#)

Our cartographic interpretation of Nathan Phillips Square is heavily based on the history of the land that it was built upon. The key question we asked ourselves while creating our original map was “why did the Ward get demolished?” The Ward, one of Toronto's first immigrant neighbourhoods, often dubbed a “slum,” was seen as a place that needed saving amidst a growing world city. We use a current version of a map of Nathan Phillips Square with an overlay of a map of the Ward to demonstrate the role of land use and its relation to urban renewal. To make sense of the area, we highlight key immigrant neighbourhoods, businesses, streets, and landmarks that no longer exist to compare to what exists now. This cartographic representation seeks to demonstrate that the Ward was demolished under the guise of urban renewal to intentionally erase a “dark spot” of the metropolitan area's history as a slum and immigrant enclave. In effect, modern Toronto begins in the Ward, yet it is a forgotten piece of crucial history.

The Role of Land in the Ward

In walking the perimeter of Nathan Phillips Square, there is no evidence of what existed prior to the building of this inorganic, concrete civic plaza. As our map shows, the Ward was bounded by College, University, Yonge, and Queen, however, its influence extends much further. This paper will firstly focus on the role of land in the area of the Ward in the nineteenth and early twentieth century as this is essential to understand the fabric of the stories that occupied the land that Nathan Phillips Square was built upon. Our ‘observations’ of the (now demolished) Ward were done through an archival analysis of various fire insurance plans from the City of Toronto, the city directories, as well as through short-essays and newspaper articles written about the Ward, its businesses, culture, and history. In observing this historical environment, it was found that the Ward was largely comprised of a series of culturally distinct, yet relatively impoverished neighbourhoods. Certain scholars attribute this to the fact that the Ward's Church of the Holy Trinity (built in 1847) was an institution whose mission was to serve Toronto's poorest and therefore, the population that built up around it became home to a complex urban, largely immigrant population (Lorinc, 2015). As the map demonstrates, the Ward came to be known for its thriving immigrant enclaves, including Irish and African American and later, Italian, Chinese and Jewish. While delving into the rich settlement narratives of various individuals from the Ward is

outside the scope of this paper, it is evident from the map that there existed a complex, urban neighbourhood, characterized by its diversity of culture, religion, cuisine, sexuality, business, race, heritage and poverty as well as the presence of well-intentioned outside institutions such as the Church of the Holy Trinity that claimed to act in the interests of the locals. The role of the land has immense meaning for modern Toronto. Within the Ward were Toronto's first 'gay bars,' Chinese restaurants, and laundries, the first immigrant clusters and the beginnings of a legacy of multiculturalism that defines Toronto.

Urban Renewal and the Importance of Land Use

Nathan Phillips Square was, in essence, an urban renewal project to supposedly make "better use" of a pivotal area in a growing city. As the map demonstrates, The Ward was a giant 'slum' that was located beside Toronto's most important civic buildings, namely (old) city hall, Osgoode Hall courthouse, the Ontario Legislature, and the armouries. Not only that, but the city centre was gradually expanded north of Queen, changing the cityscape as it made its way uptown. Understandably, the blighted conditions of Toronto's first immigrant enclave were seen by concerned residents as nothing but a plague for a city undergoing a massive wave of change. While Torontonians were initially intrigued and even supportive of immigrants from diverse backgrounds mingling together within the neighbourhood, tenement houses, commonplace in the Ward at that time, were widely regarded as "evils" and nativist sentiments against the growing foreign population grew into a critical concern by the 1920s (Lorinc, 2015). Combined with ever-increasing fears against the "ghettoization" of the city seen in New York, Toronto expropriated, demolished, and replaced the Ward with large-scale projects that made "more efficient" use of the land and location, such as Nathan Phillips Square, Toronto General Hospital, and the Hospital for Sick Children. The reasoning behind the erasure of an entire neighbourhood was supposedly urban renewal and prioritizing land uses, but the seemingly racist undertones and the sinister intentions to deliberately erase all traces of what once used to be Toronto's most diverse neighbourhood through redevelopment behind each major project is hard to ignore. An observation of the map reveals just how outlandishly large these projects were compared to the area's streetscape -- was the death of the Ward necessary for sake of Toronto's greater good, or were these projects located there for the explicit purpose of erasing what used to be there? One can only wonder whether these urban renewal projects were really needed to beautify the city.

Nathan Phillips Square in 2019

Besides a handful of row houses on Dundas, Gerrard, and Elm streets, as well as the Church of the Holy Trinity, all physical evidence of what used to be the Ward has been purposefully erased from the area's memory. Today, Nathan Phillips Square is a public space that combines civic recreation and municipal governance. The square is

used for several civic events according to each season's weather conditions. Its main attraction is the skating rink and reflective water fountain that converts each season to engage interactions between patrons and the public space. Nathan Phillips Square was an urban renewal project designed to be an interactive space for municipal recreation, however, we have observed that there is little to no engagement with the space nor a sense of community or place of belonging among patrons. This is not aided by the brutalist design of the square, which is bland, modernized, and uninviting. The physical traces of the Ward have been systematically evacuated, yet the Ward's legacy remains a crucial part of Toronto's diversity.

Concluding Remarks and Further Questions

Throughout this assignment, we have grappled with questions about civic participation and space, community, interculturality, heritage and renewal, equity, and political exclusion, those of which help evolve our research question. While at this point, we cannot answer the ulterior motives on why the Ward was demolished, we are starting to understand that it goes much further than simply “urban renewal” and “efficient” land use.

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