
ESSAYS FROM THE NEW AMBITIOUS CITY

RECLAIMING HAMILTON



EDITED BY

PAUL WEINBERG

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Introduction: A City Reinvents Itself

Paul Weinberg

S ometime in the past ten years or more Hamilton discovered it had become “cool.” What that means is of course open to interpretation. Once derided as retro for its so-called lunch-bucket industrial demeanour, Hamilton is now viewed both as a cutting-edge and a less stressful place to live. But what does this mean for the city and those who have long been fighting for it and writing about it?

New restaurants, art galleries, bookstores and independent coffee shops are popping up, along with two repertory movie theatres – the new Playhouse Cinema and reopened Westdale – to boot. The Super-crawl music and arts festival planted itself firmly in the downtown core in 2009 and has reappeared every fall with its closed streets and open music stages plus stalls selling a multitude of arts and crafts. Further to the east, there is the conversion of the Cotton Factory, an old and gargantuan factory complex, into a creative hub of small businesses and creative activity. It is part of a larger trend to preserve and repurpose the aging and empty industrial structures that dot the city.

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A major development has been the influx of former Torontonians (such as myself) who have bought homes at prices unimaginable in an overpriced GTA housing market. They are either retirees or people still working, commuting daily by car, bus or train to Toronto and back, making ties to their new urban environment rather tenuous at times. Of course, the inevitable attention from real estate investors has led to higher prices for homes and climbing apartment rents. Hamilton is becoming less affordable for people of modest incomes, in contrast to what the city was like just a decade ago.

As early as 2005, when retired management consultant Graham Crawford returned to his hometown, he detected a new “vibrancy” in downtown Hamilton, centred around James Street North. The street had been a largely Portuguese strip with shops operating during the day, selling distinct ethnic foods like salted cod, before shutting down for the evening. An Art Crawl was starting to happen on the second Friday of every month. New art galleries had sprung up, but the restaurants – including the street’s first coffee shop, the Mulberry, along with the building’s upstairs consulting offices – had not yet opened their doors. It was the hospitality shown by Dave Kuruc, who was already operating the Mixed Media arts supply shop at the corner of James North and Cannon, which galvanized Crawford to start his own outlet, HIStory + HERitage, devoted to the life and history of the city.

Bounce forward to 2020 and the original galleries on James Street North have closed and moved elsewhere in the downtown as commercial rents have shot up in the inevitable transformation of a destination street in a capitalistic market. Real estate investors are buying up buildings that, in a little over fifteen years, have gone up in price from \$180,000 to \$800,000, according to one owner of a building on the street.

One of the early adopters of James North, Dave Kuruc, has now sold his building and relocated his arts supply business to Westdale,

where he and his family live. He has combined his existing business with a new bookstore, King W. Books, in a commercial space once occupied by another bookseller, Bryan Prince. If you ask him about the revitalization of Hamilton, he'll tell you flatly that it's over. Graham Crawford has also sold his three-storey building on James North.

Furthermore, the Artword Artbar on Colbourne Street, a hub for jazz in the city for about a decade, has closed after the owning couple decided it was time to retire and sold their property just off James North to an architectural firm. They still remain active in the cultural scene, holding events in different locations. Meanwhile, other changes are in store for James North with new condos and offices being planned in refurbished buildings and assuredly even more sophisticated eating places.

Such things happen all the time in a vital urban centre like Hamilton and we can expect more to occur. What is certain is that a revival is continuing in Hamilton unabated and involves more than just the fate of James North or the similarly gentrified Locke Street further west. On other streets like Barton and Ottawa Street North, in other small but growing pockets like Cannon/Kensington and King East near Tim Hortons Field and even on Kenilworth there are credible signs that the reclaiming of Hamilton is ongoing and is not neighbourhood specific.

I agree with Graham Crawford that some of the words and phrases used to describe a revival in Hamilton – now taken up primarily by the city's economic development department and the real estate industry – are frankly over the top. The one he "hates" the most is *the new Brooklyn*. It is arguable that Hamilton's American rust boom-bust parallel is more likely to be Pittsburgh, which also had a thriving steel industry.

Revitalization is also problematic because there is an implication that before the 2000s there was nothing of value in Hamilton. This discards the sense of solidarity among steelworkers in the 1946 Stelco strike, the preservation of natural areas and parks by Thomas McQuesten and Thomas Beckett, and the majestic heritage buildings

downtown, which were foolishly torn down for urban renewal on what is now the Jackson Square mall starting in the early 1970s. James North in the 1920s was a lively Italian strip where people were out and about, according to Crawford.

Crawford is a Hamilton booster par excellence but he is also realistic about his city's shortcomings, especially with the majority of elected politicians and the bureaucracy down at city hall whom he sees as isolated in their own bubble, separate from the rest of local citizens. So, to start talking about "an urban renaissance" there is enough to make him protest. Name the issue and this local activist will speak at length on the persistence of one-way streets, the failure of city council to inform the public or the stewards of sensitive natural areas about a massive four-year sewage spill in the billions of litres into Chedoke Creek and Cootes Paradise, the intolerance of the police towards LGBTQA+ people, the hateful characters parading in front of city hall on Saturday mornings and the general secretive atmosphere and top-down attitudes at city hall, among other festering matters at hand.

Perhaps the most suitable label for the city is *city of waterfalls*, another marketing term that has emerged. The Niagara Escarpment – with a hundred different waterfalls, hiking trails and a wooded forest – runs right through Hamilton. This is something that nature-challenged Torontonians lack and so they come here in droves to experience it.

The term *Ambitious City* has also returned to Hamilton. It was originally a mocking pejorative by a Toronto newspaper in the nineteenth century directed against Hamilton, which then decided to own the name in an ongoing competition between the two rival cities.

Reclaiming is the word we prefer to use in this anthology because it accurately portrays a bottom-up approach by a smaller number of artists, creative people, urbanists and activists in conjunction with like-minded citizens to make Hamilton a more livable place. When that effort began is open to debate. One possibility is that the original inspiration came from the environmentalists who opposed the building of the Red Hill

expressway. And while that campaign failed, it helped spawn organizations like Environment Hamilton and other kinds of activism that have achieved greater success later on.

In the early 2000s, grassroots pressure coupled with help from the province led to the restoration and opening of the heritage building at the Lister Block on James Street North in 2012, for instance. “When [owner] LiUNA decided to renovate the Lister rather than tear it down, that was a tipping point about how the developer-backed politicians/elite saw downtown,” says political scientist Peter Graefe.

McMaster University geographer Richard Harris suggests that a city’s renaissance, which he agrees is a vague term, can happen without the encouragement or awareness of the city government.

In the case of Hamilton, the city was offering various incentives for developers but it was not until the early 2000s that this started to bear fruit, he observes. Harris emphasizes that what is happening now is not purely a real estate phenomenon, although it can appear that way. “Maybe to put it another way. The real estate thing could not happen or would not be happening unless there was more to it than that.”

Harris is also somewhat cautious about the rebranding of Hamilton. “I think you could say, certainly, there is a revitalization, and you could say it is a renaissance, but it certainly implies rather more than what has happened so far. But obviously change has been happening.”

Meanwhile, the promised funding of an east-west light rail transit system in the lower city where the population has dropped is cited as key to revitalization for Hamilton. But the late 2019 decision by the provincial Progressive Conservative government in Ontario to halt its \$1 billion financial support cast a shadow on the revival. The concern is that developers will start rethinking their plans along the path where the new line was slated to follow. At publication time, this issue is still in flux.

Decades ago, Hamilton’s economic development department sold Hamilton as a “great place” primarily for those living in the new suburbs.

Today the new focus is on a “quality of life” in the hipper and revived lower city where young people and small entrepreneurs will want to congregate.

“I don’t know how much city branding works, although I am sure there is an academic literature trying to address that question. Certainly, cities believe that it does because they all invest money in doing it. But maybe they are running hard just to stay in the same place,” says Peter Graefe. He also speculates that what is happening specifically in Hamilton’s lower city stems from the establishment of a greenbelt and the Places to Grow policy under a previous Liberal government that emphasized higher density growth in established urban areas. “Hamilton faced a new set of incentives to develop downtown holdings as opposed to simply building out the suburbs to the city limits.”

What is ultimately exciting about Hamilton is the current level of political activism, reflected in an active social media and the existence of organizations like Environment Hamilton, the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, the Hamilton Centre for Civic Inclusion and the various tenant rights groups. There is less deference towards authority and whatever city hall or our various elites dish out. With this in mind we asked a few prominent Hamilton non-fiction writers to make a contribution to this collection.

- Newspaper columnist Margaret Shkimba looks at how geography and history inform and explain Hamilton’s political and social landscape.
- Anthropologist Kevin MacKay reveals what happened after he and his colleagues bought a building on King William Street during the difficult economic times experienced by the downtown and sought to turn it into a model for ethical development.
- Raise the Hammer editor Ryan McGreal provides a blow-by-blow account of the LRT project that has polarized the city’s population.

- Independent journalist Joey Coleman, a man quite conscious and unapologetic about his modest socio-economic roots, shares his experience covering the volatile and sometimes nasty display of politics down in Hamilton City Hall.
- McMaster professor Sarah Wayland investigates how Hamilton has always been a receiving point for waves of immigration, back to the beginning of colonialism.
- Community historian Shawn Selway reports on the current rush of investors for a piece of Hamilton real estate downtown and its impact on tenants and small merchants.
- Urban planner Rob Fiedler explores how divisions between an older denser inner city and the spread-out suburbs within an urban setting like Hamilton are not always clear cut.
- Novelist Matthew Bin shares how the Tiger-Cats have been a key part of Hamilton's industrial and working-class civic culture.
- Freelance writer Paul Weinberg parses the decades-old debate surrounding the construction of the Red Hill Valley expressway and the introduction of one-way streets to get a full picture of Hamilton's unique car culture.
- Culture journalist Seema Narula looks critically at the lack of diversity in Hamilton's much acclaimed arts boom.
- Freelance editor Kerry Le Clair writes of her efforts to broaden the possibility of public art in Hamilton and to raise the awareness of the city's unappreciated Indigenous past with a mural project.
- Freelance writer Jessica Rose explores the personalities behind the projects, ranging from environmental to cultural, that make Hamilton a more human environment.
- McMaster university professors Nancy Bouchier and Ken Cruikshank celebrate the history of a working-class community, Brightside, which once thrived in the shadow of a larger Stelco operation close to the harbour.

Reclaiming Hamilton covers a broad range of subjects including culture in all of its aspects. This book also examines a more confident and transformative urban centre in the twenty-first century, which explains the return of the Ambitious City moniker. Yes, there is still tension between the Old Hamilton and the New Hamilton – whatever those categories mean. The city remains a work in progress.

Contributor Biographies

Matthew Bin is an author and IT consultant, born and raised in Hamilton and currently residing in Oakville with his wife and beagles. He has published non-fiction books and articles on Canadian military history, international soccer and business, as well as military, horror and science fiction novels. In his spare time he is a licensed marriage officiant, artisanal pasta maker, and bassist and backup shouter in a punk rock band.

Nancy B. Bouchier, professor of history at McMaster, explores issues of locality, gender, social class and the environment in the history of sport and physical activity. She is author of *For Love of the Game: Amateur Sport in Small Town Ontario 1838–1895*.

Ken Cruikshank, professor of history and former dean of Humanities at McMaster, works on the history of business and of the administrative state in Canada and the United States, particularly between the 1880s and World War II. He is the author of *Close Ties: Railways, Government and the Board of Railway Commissioners, 1851–1933*.

As long-time research collaborators, Ken and Nancy have focused on the state, the environment and recreation in the history of Hamilton Harbour. In 2016 UBC Press published their *The People and the Bay: A Social and Environmental History of Hamilton Harbour*, which

won the Canadian Historical Association's 2017 Clio Prize for Ontario regional history.

I'm **Joey Coleman**, a Hamiltonian who works as an independent crowdfunded journalist, is engaged with open data, involved in my neighbourhood association, a pinball player, and am blamed by City Hall for increasing civic engagement with my work over at www.thepublicrecord.ca.

Kerry Le Clair is a Hamilton-based editor, community organizer and activist with a background in human rights, Indigenous solidarity and environmental racism work. She loves Hamilton for what it is and what it could be, and as such, continues to celebrate and castigate the city as needed.

Robert S. Fiedler completed a Ph.D. at York University where his research focused on suburban change and the politics and planning of postwar suburbanization in Toronto. He is originally from Vancouver and moved to Hamilton in 2011 after living in Toronto for five years. He lives in the North End with his spouse and children.

Kevin MacKay is a writer, community organizer, union activist and social science professor. He has lived in Hamilton for over thirty years and for the past fifteen years he has acted as Executive Director of the Sky Dragon Community Development Co-operative. In 2017 Kevin published *Radical Transformation: Oligarchy, Collapse, and the Crisis of Civilization*, with *Between the Lines*. He is currently working on a second book, *A New Ecological Politics*, with Oregon State University Press.

Ryan McGreal is the editor of *Raise the Hammer* (raisethehammer.org), a website focused on civic affairs in Hamilton, Ontario. He is a founding volunteer with Hamilton Light Rail (hamiltonlightrail.ca),

a citizen group dedicated to bringing light rail transit to Hamilton. His writing has been published in the *Hamilton Spectator*, *Hamilton Magazine*, *The Walrus*, *HuffPost* and *Behind the Numbers*.

Seema Narula is a high school teacher, writer and sometimes DJ. She started her blog *This Must Be The Place* in 2011, where she documented her exploration of the city uncovering old gems and new places.

In 2016 she was nominated for the Hamilton Arts Award as an emerging artist in the category of writer. She has written for publications such as *The Guardian*, the *Hamilton Spectator* and *Tourism Hamilton*.

After writing this chapter, Seema has since become a member of the Coalition of Black and Racialized Artists (COBRA).

You can sometimes catch Seema DJing dance parties around the city or traipsing around various haunts with her kids in tow.

A graduate of Carleton University's School of Journalism, **Jessica Rose** is a writer, editor and book reviewer whose work has appeared in publications across Canada. She is a founding editor at *The Inlet*, the book reviews editor at *THIS*, a senior editor at the *Hamilton Review of Books* and was a long-time writer for *Hamilton Magazine*. She is the marketing manager at gritLIT: Hamilton's Readers and Writers Festival, sits on the Hamilton Arts Council's Literary Arts Committee and is a board member at the Adult Basic Education Association. She has nearly fifteen years of experience writing and editing publications for children.

Shawn Selway has a BA in Religion from McMaster and an Industrial Mechanic license from the Province of Ontario via the Steel Company of Canada basic works in Hamilton, Ontario. He is a moderate technological determinist broadly interested in questions of material culture and the attendant paradoxes. Accordingly, he finds himself writing about municipal planning issues for the local civic affairs blog, and

about superseded industrial equipment for the clients of his consultancy in the conservation of historic machinery. He is the author of *Nobody Here Will Harm You*, a book about mass medical evacuation from the Eastern Arctic during the second half of the twentieth century.

Margaret Shkimba is a writer and contributing columnist to the *Hamilton Spectator*. A mother and grandmother, she lives in Hamilton with her partner, Ray, and her two hound dogs, Bonnie and Clyde.

Sarah Wayland is senior project manager for the Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council. From 2013 to 2018, she was the creator and leader of Global Hamilton, the City of Hamilton's immigrant attraction and retention initiative. A dual US-Canadian citizen, she earned her Ph.D. in political science from the University of Maryland. She has worked as an independent researcher focusing on various social issues, especially immigration-related, and her clients have included foundations, non-governmental organizations, and all levels of government. From 2005 to 2014, she served on the board of Hamilton's largest settlement agency, including as secretary and president.

Paul Weinberg is a veteran journalist and freelance writer whose work has appeared in a wide range of newspapers, magazines and websites including the *Globe and Mail*, the *Monitor* (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives), *Canada's History*, *rabble.ca*, *Inter Press Service*, *NOW*, *Eye* magazine, *Metropolis*, *LobeLog* and *Quest*. He is also working on a forthcoming book on the anti-poverty movement of the 1960s. He lives in Hamilton, Ontario.

CITY OF WATERFALLS, STEELTOWN, THE AMBITIOUS CITY – HAMILTON, ONTARIO,

has gone by many names over the years as it has risen to economic heights and fallen from them. In this wide-ranging collection of essays editor Paul Weinberg has gathered together some of Hamilton's most tireless advocates to chart the rise of a new ambitious city. From examining the city's long history of immigration to chronicling vanished working-class neighbourhoods, to citizen journalism, to art advocacy, to battles over expressways and light rail transit, and with a close look at gentrification and housing, *Reclaiming Hamilton* traces the fault lines that run through the city today. What these essays reveal is a remarkable city, one that is filled with rich history and present-day ingenuity, and one that is energized by citizens who never fail to fight for what they believe in.

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