PLACING THE ‘NATURAL’ EDGES OF A METROPOLITAN REGION

THROUGH MULTIPLE RESIDENCY:

LANDSCAPE AND URBAN FORM IN TORONTO’S ‘COTTAGE COUNTRY’

by

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Placing the ‘natural’ edges of a metropolitan region through multiple residency: 
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Abstract

This study examines certain ‘cottage’ or water-oriented second-home settings of central Ontario to assert that they have effectively become part of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), a major metropolitan region now undergoing rapid population growth. The central thesis is that this so-called ‘cottage country’ must be considered part of the primary life-space for many individuals and households based in the GTA. Multiple residency—the social-spatial practice by which households live in more than one dwelling—is examined to make sense of what now comprises the Toronto-centred urban territory or ‘metapolis’ and its housing markets, while also enabling us to ‘place’ the ‘natural’ edges of this metropolitan area in at least two important ways. It first helps to demonstrate certain spatial qualities of the GTA as an unevenly urban territory. At the same time, the waterfront components of ‘cottage country’ are ‘living edges’ in landscape ecology terms and significant sites or ‘places’ that enable individuals and households to situate themselves within abstract notions of ‘nature’ and the ‘wilderness’—ideas about land and landscape that have long held sway in Canadian cultural discourses.

The mixed quantitative and qualitative methodology employed here includes a generalised social history, a detailed questionnaire (n=200), and in-depth interviews with cottage users (n=30) in three discrete second-home settings. These case study areas are situated within broader discourses and processes of transformation, exploring certain dynamics of urban form, structure, and metropolitan growth while also examining important dimensions of how people think about space, place, landscape, and what has been called the ‘sense of region’—all of which are arguably revealed by ‘cottaging’ as a culturally meaningful social practice. Conceptually, the research presented here is thus a dialogue between markets and meaning. Beyond its empirical contributions, this study is intended to assert the importance of an epistemological approach to landscape and urban form—the domains of cultural and urban geography, respectively—in concert. Such an approach is needed if we are to substantively examine abstract processes, narratives, and/or conceptualisations of space and landscape without neglecting to systematically ground them in place and in the materiality of urban form.
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