



THE REAL-LIFE MISSISSAUGA

BY KATHY BUCKWORTH PHOTOGRAPH BY MARISSA NEAVE

For many people, where they don't live is just as important as where they do live. It's not a comparison of wealthy developed nations versus war-torn or ravaged third world countries. In North America, particularly in larger cities, it's all about the "big city" versus the suburbs. Both have reputations, myths, realities, and a certain image that the residents apply to themselves which one must consider when deciding where to live. Similar to the way a typical Canadian voter casts a ballot for or against a certain party, they choose either a life in the city or the suburbs.

Hands down our country's largest city, Toronto is Canada's answer to NYC's "big apple"—on a much smaller scale, of course. Toronto has a considerable number of suburbs, which handily provide residents with a sense of superiority. They cling to the dream of one day owning a fantasy house in the city—one with a private driveway. Ask any Torontonian about the benefits of living in the city and they will rattle off the romantically overused list of arts, culture, restaurants, shops and the "hustle" and the "bustle," of being "in it." Ask any suburbanite about the benefits of their domain, and you're likely to hear about "space," the "quality of life," more value for your dollar, and mostly, convenience. Clearly very different

standards of measurement.

Many Vancouverites will tell you that they love their city because they can "swim in the morning and ski in the afternoon." Logistically, this would be one of the toughest tricks to pull off in a city which believes that highways are aesthetically damaging. While theoretically performing this Herculean task is possible (yes, there's an ocean, and yes, there are mountains with skiable snow to be found into June), the very idea of the "could" has people looking past the overpriced houses, the impossible commutes, the increasingly frustrating and crumbling bridges and the influx of preferred climate-seeking homeless people.

In Toronto, the theoretical "could" life has also formed. Is this purely a defense mechanism employed by its overcrowded, overtaxed residents, or is it a more intrinsic feeling that should be admired in these eternal optimists? The more a "big city" household starts to resemble the suburban ideal—two parents, two children, and a dog—the more theoretical and less real their situation becomes.

Most Torontonians will tell you that they love being able to walk or take transit most places. They "dash out" for milk at the corner store, they "jump" into cabs to head to the trendy bar down the street,

they stroll through museums with their children on a Sunday afternoon, and they meticulously shop for cheese on Saturdays in ethnic and busy marketplaces. They eat at small, un-chained or un-franchised restaurants, treat their children to the theatre and international sporting events, and know the best place to buy vintage clothes.

Is this truth or fiction? Perhaps pure optimism. Experience a day with a "real" Toronto family: The subjects wake up in their "cozy" two-bedroom, recently renovated semi. The gleaming hardwood floors and trendiest "essence of nature" painted wall tableau is marred only by the overflowing, bi-weekly-collected blue recycling bin dumped unceremoniously in the corner of the tiny, but tasteful, gourmet kitchen. As they hastily drink their coffee made from "cat-shat" beans, the two professionals begin their daily jaunt to either the subway, or their car, both of which are located some 15 minutes from their front door. Stopping to pick up the remains of their raccoon-eaten trash from the front lawn, they scurry to their successful downtown jobs, not forgetting to drop their children at the "best" daycare (only 20 minutes out of their way, by car). The children have been officially enrolled since before their actual conception date.

At the end of the busy day, fighting the subway crowds, and stopping at the overpriced grocery store for frozen nuggets, they find themselves hastily eating before dashing out to get the kids to their skating lesson. Having stood in line all night to secure a placement in the “supertots” session, they are more than eager to arrive at the rink 45 minutes prior to the start in order to procure a parking spot within a two kilometre walk.

That evening, as the children are finally snuggled into their side-by-side beds, their parents fret over a) the latest property tax bill, b) the overnight guests they have coming to stay, who can't sleep in the basement due to the suspicious insulation, and c) who will stay up tomorrow night to enroll their oldest daughter in summer swimming lessons.

Theoretically, of course, they could have been enjoying art and culture versus living a “Real Life.”

Is living the theoretical life in Toronto more satisfying than living a practical life in the suburbs? The generally prescribed life in the suburbs is one of sterile, cookie-cutter homes, expanses of industrial malls and “big box” shopping monstrosities. Residents drive everywhere, commute unfathomable amounts of time, eat at bland, “American” restau-

rants and go to multi-plex movie screens, community hockey rinks and potluck dinners as the extent of their cultural experiences. They shop at gargantuan, yellow-packaged grocery stores, where the ethnic food shelf contains “spicy” tomato paste.

Smug Torontonians sit in their tiny overpriced houses, knee to knee with their café au lait and chuckle that the once-weekly garbage collection is a much needed concession to those unfortunates living in such squalid conditions.

Mississauga residents do most of their shopping at shopping malls. In a country where adverse weather conditions affect upwards of 30% of our days, this is a practical choice. The theoretical Torontonian eschews such conspicuous and indiscriminate shopping methods. Who then is jamming the real urban malls each and every Saturday? Ah, well. They could be on Queen Street.

We do drive almost everywhere in Mississauga. This is mostly due to the fact that a) the roads are quite drivable and free-flowing for the most part, and b) the space between the houses logistically accrues extra land between destinations, and c) there is *always* a parking spot at the end of the journey. Free.

Mississauga is full of huge multiplex movie

theatres which are well attended. The theoretical Torontonian is known for his support of the Toronto Film Festival and also ventures out to watch small (but important!) films at many of the city's smaller film venues. Yet indie movie venues like the Eglinton Theatre have closed, mostly in part to low revenues, while the two huge multiplexes located just a half a mile down the road at Yonge & Eglinton thrive. The question we need to ask is: Why do we choose the McDonald's of movie theatres when instead we could experience a rare and genuine film at smaller, more intimate venue?

The feeling of “could” is one which sustains many through times of adversity, but embracing it as a way of life requires much attention and most importantly, the ability to share with those who have given up the fight and moved to the suburbs.

I was once told by a whimsical woman that she would love to move to Paris and buy Jean Paul Sartre's crumbling cold water flat. Practicalities aside, she would, in her words, wake up each day “enchanted.” Perhaps this is the feeling that most big city dwellers get when they open their eyes and ponder wondrously about the fabulous life that is awaiting them just outside their front door. ■

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