CHILDREN AND THE CITY – THE CITY AND ITS CHILDREN

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What is this a picture of? Pathways from an image, departures and story-lines, stories within stories.

Details matter. Social work is a profession that works with details, mostly up-close, though not always. As art historian, Daniel Arasse, tells us, looking up-close at paintings, magnifying revealing details, even choosing as a viewer to select particular sections of an image, such gestures take the viewer, the visitor on to different pathways, into various interpretations, various story-lines (Arasse, 2004).

Our project started from a photograph (as Julia describes it in this publication under "Thresholds"), a particular photograph of children that we saw on the website of the City Archives (it is no longer present). We had looked at several photographs, but gravitated towards this one. This is the first animated image of the exhibit. We were drawn to this image because it is ambiguous. It did not seem to lead us into a scripted message or story line, it was ambiguous or open enough that it could have multiple story lines. A picture can have many story lines depending on the company it keeps, and how we perceive it.

New Registry Office Site, May 15, 1912, City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1231, Item 1846

We first wondered about the presence of these children in the street, at a curb. We first noticed the two girls in the foreground, and later the two boys in the background. Their posture suggested they were being there, looking around, among themselves, one of them very young, seemingly at ease in the street, the street as an ordinary space of living. There was no particular action or event. It was the ordinariness that impressed us. Children could be on the street without adults and seem quite at ease, being, observing. We could not imagine such a situation today, with the children taking up the street as their space, and no adult presence in sight.
This led us onto a story-line or quest: What other public spaces could we find them in? We later discovered the lanes, backyards, rear houses, construction sites, and also the stoops, and outside staircases leading into the houses. There were many such public spaces. This triggered our own recollections and imaginations about such spaces as children.

In looking closer at the photograph, we noticed in the lower plane of the image an inscription, with the month, the year, and the day, 15 May 1912 (apparently when the photograph was taken), and the place: south west corner of Elizabeth and Louisa streets, which we knew to be in the Ward. An additional indication written on the photograph, functioning as the title, was: "The New Registry". We were initially clueless as to that last note in particular. The photographer's name did not appear on the photograph. Who was the photographer, and what was the motive or circumstance of the photograph?

The photographer we were told by the archivist was Arthur Goss, the city photographer. We then became interested in other photographs by Goss.
"The New Registry" made sense once we were able to decipher the bureaucratic code classifying the photograph, a series of numbers which was added on the photograph next to the initial caption. The commissioning department was neither Health (intended at the time as the health condition of housing) nor the department of Education nor Parks and Playgrounds. It was commissioned by the street and architecture units. The photograph had been taken in the spring of 1912 in anticipation of the demolition of the corner house(s) shown on this image.
In fact, several photographs held such a caption. In those photographs we could see additional residential buildings, stores, also passers-by, a man with a bicycle and even a horse. We could get a sense of the social surrounding where the children lived from looking at the richness of details in this cluster of photographs. Weeks later we found a 1925 photograph of the inside of the Registry building, now in full operation. It showed us the importance of city archives.

What was this Registry? A Registry of Lands and Deeds, expanding the administrative activities of the city government; introducing another mechanism of order and classification. This building had a story of its own. It was initially planned as one government building that would exist alongside other government buildings, creating a large public square, or Plaza, as existed in Vienna, London, Paris or Berlin, which would glorify Toronto. An architectural competition was set up to choose among several architectural designs. World War I interrupted such grandiose plans, followed by the Great Depression of the 1930s. The Registry was erected, but the square was not built around it. A larger history of the city is now deployed before us. As to our photograph and its sisters, where did the residents go when the corner of their neighborhood was demolished? Eaton's was already close by, also the Armories, and the Toronto General Hospital were already squeezing out many residents of the Ward. And if we link this story line with the presence of children in the photograph, these children were not aware of what was going to happen. They and their families would be removed as the space where they live was to be used differently, with other priorities in mind.

What lines of questioning would we follow? Or what was this photograph about?

We were now facing two story lines, one clearly about the city, construction, planning, local and international referents, and another story-line about children in the city, their place, displacement, their space. We embarked on the project with these questions in mind, emphasizing the role of photographs in taking us on various pathways.

EXPANDING UPON THE TWO STORY-LINES

We found secondary material about the city's expansion, and what had happened to the streets of the Ward, and in particular to that site where the Registry was: This later became the new City Hall (see Threshold article), showing how a city is built up through layers, and some sectors destroyed more often than others. The areas targeted are often the more desirable and poorer. Their population can be moved about more easily than the residents of wealthier areas. The story-line now emphasizes the discrepancies and the relationships between the more powerful and the less powerful, a common story.

Many years later, at the beginning of the 21st century (in 2001), the photograph we started from was included in an exhibit called "Playing by the Rules: Organized Children's Leisure in Toronto 1897-1934" curated under the auspices of the City of Toronto. This time, there was a small difference in its presentation, almost slight but quite severe in meaning. An additional caption had been overlaid onto its descriptive text: the single word of "loitering", appearing in bold letters, had become the title of this photograph. The photo's ambiguity and openness had been lost. It now held a strong moral message about the presence of the children on the street, and it was not good. The term 'Loitering' suggests laziness, idleness leading to the possibility of deviant activity. Those who loiter should instead be in school or at work. Moreover, poor people loiter. Rich people do something else, they enjoy leisure. Yet, this new caption belied what we were seeing in the photo. These particular children were quite young, too young to be thought of as loitering, some even too young to be in school. This caption leads the viewer in a particular direction. It assumes that children who stand on the street, who look around in the space of the street are problem children, a problem to themselves, and a problem for society. Such wording links Victorian morality of the beginning of the 20th century to the present, suggesting the more contemporary term of 'children at risk'. The brutality of the caption opens up a whole line of thinking and decision-making, from child welfare to broader social policy, measures of prevention and surveillance.

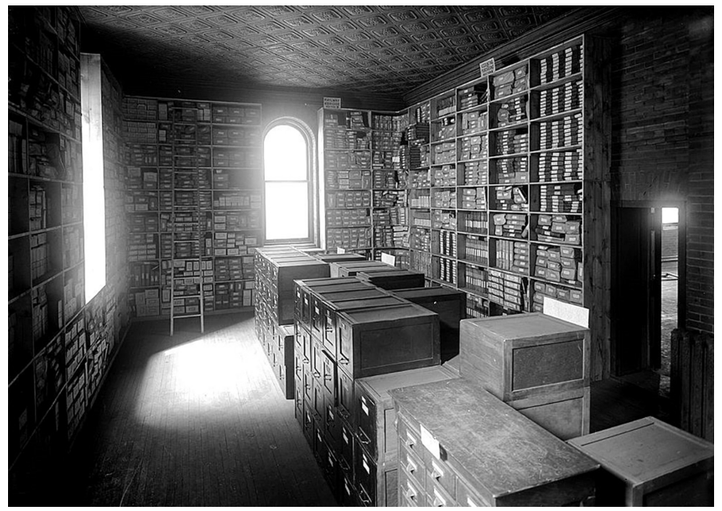
And yet, when we look back at the image itself, this is not what we see. As Derrida (1998) has argued, when looking at photographs, a necessary condition for 'seeing' is to dwell on the image in the absence of a caption. If there is one, it has to be removed. Otherwise, the authoritative power of the text (any text according to him) will override the image and foreclose other possible meanings. The caption, as arbitrary as it can be, will impose its message. This realization opens up our interpretation to an additional story-line: the reworkings of a photograph, or series of photographs, its circulation and its multiple uses. This comment also suggests we examine the complicated relations between text and image given our materials.

We then wondered about the various types of representations of children in texts (newspapers, novels, reports) and in photographs. Charity images would look different than happenstance photographs, which may look different from social documentary images or from advocacy photographs during the same period. Or would they? This made us examine the photographs of more than one photographer.

Thus the photographs taken by William James, for instance, which we leave you to consider as to their 'kind', and the photographs made by amateur photographers under the auspices of Central Neighbourhood House (see our panels and display cases).

We moved on to another consideration as a team. If the story-line is based on the commission or function of the photograph, what can we say of the presence of children in such images? Is it fortuitous, unnecessary, superfluous? We looked at such pictures and found that many photographs made for architectural, road and building purposes contained the presence of children. Children are everywhere (thus the title of one of the sections of our exhibit). The children are accidental, incidental, circumstantial, unintended. And/or the photographer may have chosen to include the children in the photograph since the children were there; or chosen to include them because they were interesting to photograph, as figures and as children. We cannot know, but we do not exclude the photographer's motivations alongside the official function of the image.

And if children are everywhere, then the city and the children have a particular connection to each other. Questions arise: What does the city do with its children? How do the children occupy the space of the city? The two story-lines of 'the children in the city' 'and 'the city and its children' have become one. The representations of children in the city spaces function as commentaries upon the (transformative) state of the city.



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