

## A messy, inspiring urbanism

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CREDIT: Peter Redman, National Post File Photo

Stepping onto one of Toronto's many streetcars is like simultaneously stepping back in time and into the future, says noted Los Angeles urban planner James Rojas.

The following, first reprinted yesterday at Spacing.ca/ wire, is a salve for a city in a bit of a budget-crisis funk. Los Angeles urban planner James Rojas -- a founder of the Latino Urban Forum -- visited Toronto for the recent Walk 21 international conference on pedestrianism and sent back his impressions of the city. I spent last week in Toronto and fell in love with what I will call its messy urbanism. The city contains the usual suspects on the menu of elements of contemporary good urban form: mixed-use, bike paths, transit, street trees, etc. However, there's a sort of less-than-manicured quality to the whole thing, and coupled with a huge diversity of people, the city ends up feeling gloriously messy, in a functional and walkable way. The city's messiness and realness stands in refreshing contrast to oft-cited beacons of "smart growth" and good urban design, such as San Francisco and Boston, where the perfection of the built form has almost transformed these cities into museums. In Toronto, rickety and ramshackle Victorian buildings sit snugly next to sleek modern 20-storey condos. Tree-lined streets of row houses (some restored, many not) run right into bustling commercial boulevards filled with streetcars, bicyclists, traffic, produce vendors. The end result is that Toronto is a great city to roam around in and explore. The city's street grid and generous sidewalks provide the urban explorer like me with ample opportunity to get lost, discover new spaces in the process, and then make my way back to where I was headed in the first place. The blocks are small; the streets narrow (jaywalking is a snap!); the city is relatively flat; the architecture is varied -- from the massive to the very fine-grained. Many of the Toronto's downtown streets are broken up by sweeping vistas of great pieces of architecture, such as the university buildings and churches. Distinct neighbourhoods abound, each with its own host of unique spots and spaces to discover. The following is a rundown of what elements I thought seemed to make Toronto fantastically urban and messy all at the same time. **BICYCLES ABOUND!** Bikes in Toronto are like cars in L.A.: they are everywhere! I could not believe that in front of almost every sleek sexy skyscraper in downtown Toronto are bike racks, which are packed full of bikes. In L.A. it's the parking lots that are packed full, whereas a bike rack is a rare find, let alone one that's actually used. In Toronto bicyclists ride in all parts of the city, on streets with bike lanes and without. Motorists tend to respect the space cyclists require, whereas in L.A. drivers almost run cyclists off the road. **BUILT ENVIRONMENT** The mix of old and new buildings creates an excitement in the built form. Some parts of the downtown such as the financial and waterfront districts feel like Manhattan with their sleek modern skyscrapers and condos, while older parts of the downtown fringe feel like forgotten parts of Baltimore. The fact that old buildings show their age and are not preserved in a "ye olde shoppe" style truly heightens the city's feel as a functioning and vital urban space. The ramshackle two-to three-storey buildings on Yonge Street speak so much to how vital and vibrant an urban space can be even if it isn't completely manicured or beautiful. All 20-or 30-storey condos have pedestrian amenities on the ground floor such as cafes and stores.

### STREETCARS

Stepping onto Toronto's streetcars was like simultaneously stepping back in time and into the future. These little red cars criss-cross the grid of city streets and remind one of virtually every American city of yesteryear (or, at least, how we imagine them being). Yet the streetcars serve as much more than a trip down nostalgia lane; they are an efficient way of navigating the city without a car and for travelling distances perhaps too far or too slow to walk. As a bonus, the streetcars seem to help contribute to a convivial and congenial social culture on the streets. They create yet one more opportunity for people to opt not to drive and to thus be surrounded by other people and not be behind the windshield of a personal vehicle. This simply increases the frequency of casual social interactions and a negotiation of shared space. This is in sharp contrast to spending inordinate amounts of time in a personal vehicle, where anger and aggression tend to be the name of the game. The proof of Torontonians' chivalry can be seen when people exit and enter the streetcars from the sidewalk to the street and vice versa. The streetcar pulls up to the intersection and people walk from the sidewalk across a lane of traffic and onto the streetcar, or vice versa. Cars stop behind the streetcar and let the transit riders enter and exit. This level of courteousness towards pedestrians and transit riders is unheard of in L.A. The pedestrian world that the streetcars creates benefits everyone -- especially immigrants, as one can more easily start up a business without having to provide parking. Then, Toronto's pedestrian traffic supports these small shops and helps them to flourish in the city.

**FRUIT STANDS** I really like the use of sidewalks for displaying and selling merchandise. Many sidewalks have white lines drawn on them to define areas where to display merchandise. This maintains order on the street while making them a rich visual experience. I fell in love with the fruit stands on sidewalks in front of the small shops. This practice makes buying and eating fruits and vegetables an attractive choice. Far too often fruits and vegetables is sold in some big fluorescent-lit supermarket, which you normally have to drive to. The produce section is not located in the centre of the store but usually off to the side. The lighting does not complement the produce as well. However, when produce is located on city streets under natural light its beauty comes out. The full display of produce adds a rich texture to the street, making it very pedestrian friendly. Buying an apple off a city street makes it an urban reward or a sort of find.

### MULTICULTURALISM

Toronto is culturally diverse, and it shows -- on the sidewalks, on the streetcar, in stores, cafes, restaurants. As the city is so accessible without a car, the myriad different kinds of residents of all backgrounds end up sharing public space in a palpable way. It is truly refreshing -- especially compared to L.A., where class lines often coincide with racial lines, and the haves drive, while the have-nots take transit and walk. Everybody knows that diversity breeds innovation, but only through allowing classes and races to interact in more than just an economic way can L.A. become a truly great city where social justice and urban form complement each other. Toronto's urban messiness creates a truly unique city to visit and use as a role model for U.S. cities. I will be back!