



Justice et injustices spatiales, Nanterre 2008

“It doesn’t bother me...”: Local neighbourhoods, planners and the meaning of spatial justice in an industrial city, 1955-1985

“Ca ne me tracasse pas...”: Quartiers, aménageurs et la signification de la justice spatiale dans une ville industrielle, 1955-1985

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In 1978, the urban government in Canada’s “steeltown”, Hamilton, moved to purchase homes and property in neighbourhoods severely affected by “truck and train noise and pollution from nearby heavy industry.” One steelworker, having heard city planners describe the area where he had grown up and recently purchased his own home described as appalling, retorted “But I’ve lived around tracks all my life and so has my wife. It doesn’t bother me...My house looks good inside and out. It’s well kept and so are my neighbours”.

The city’s 1978 policy represented one in a series of programs aimed at protecting residents from environmental degradation by resettling them. This paper explores and compares the debates surrounding four of these planning initiatives, two involving attempts to relocate residents of small neighbourhoods located in the shadow of the steel mills and two involving former lakefront cottage communities transformed into residential suburbs after World War II. The debates over the planning policies took somewhat different shapes and resulted in different outcomes. In all cases, residents did face serious environmental problems from industrial and traffic pollution, and, in the case of the lakefront communities, from serious flooding. Yet in each of the cases a number of residents, like the steelworker, remained attached to an identity defined by their neighbourhood and home, however degraded.

The debates offer an opportunity to reflect on several themes of this conference, particularly the questions of environment and “What is a just territorial policy?”. To some extent, these initiatives were rooted in an ideology of planning that did smack of “coercion, exclusion and oppression”, yet all forms of planning, as Heather Campbell recently underlined, are premised “on the need for action and the ability to make choices between good and bad, right and wrong, in relation to the making and shaping of places.” Between the 1950s and 1980s, planners and residents in Hamilton struggled to find ways to make the right, and just choices between environmental degradation and health, and local attachment and identities.