

Notes for Remarks by
Prof. Roger Keil
Director CITY

at the public launch of
The City Institute at York University (CITY)

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

[Welcomes]

British writer and arts critic John Berger described the fictional city of his novel *Lilac and Flag* in the following terms: "It is possible you have been to Troy without recognising the city. The road from the airport is like many others in the world. It has a superhighway and is often blocked. You leave the airport buildings which are like space vessels never finished, you pass the packed carparks, the international hotels, a mile or two of barbed wire, broken fields, the last stray cattle, billboards that advertise cars and Coca-Cola, storage tanks, a cement plant, the first shanty town, several giant depots for big stores, ring-road flyovers, working class flats, a part of an ancient city wall, the old boroughs with trees, crammed shopping streets, new golden office blocks, a number of ancient domes and spires, and finally you arrive at the acropolis of wealth."

We all know this city. It is our city. It has universal appeal and is at the same time the site of universal abandon. We have all been there and we still don't know it well enough. It is the place that eats its rural migrants like the ones in Berger's novel and it is full of promise of wealth and fame like Brecht's *Mahagonny*. But our city is not just a literary city, a metaphor. It is a statistical reality, the place of our everyday lives.

The City Institute at York University will take this city on as a challenge of interdisciplinary research. We are looking forward to providing a focus for the excellent urban work that has already been done at York and to extend it into the future. We will create a strong magnet for research and action in our adjacent communities and in the wider urbanizing world.

We are very place-conscious. York University is the centre of the New City. It is in the middle of that middle landscape, the "in-between-city", to use a term coined by German planner Tom Sieverts. This is the new urbanity which lies at the heart of the growing awareness of Canadians that they live in a truly urban nation.

But we also look beyond the pail into the rapidly urbanizing areas around the world, where, to use a phrase by Mike Davis, a "planet of slums" takes shape alongside the most unbelievably wondrous places such as Dubai, Singapore or Shanghai.

The recent loss of Jane Jacobs reminds us of the greatness of the city as a project and process of life in the 21st century. We all know that Jacobs did not look kindly at the exurban mesh that destroyed all urbanity. But towards the end of her life, Jacobs left the streets of the Annex more frequently to venture into the suburban reaches of Vaughan and Brampton, where she discovered surprising signs of life and opportunity alongside signs of doom, and as she said, of the Dark Age Ahead. We will not fear to tread in Jacobs' footsteps and see the city as more than a downtown simulacrum of past urbanity. We are looking straight into the open heart of the new city.

I would like to thank...

[Thanks]