

“Are we to go literally to the hot dogs?”

Parking Lots, Drive-ins, and the Critique of Progress in Toronto’s Suburbs, 1965–1975

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Abstract

This paper examines reactions to drive-in restaurants in the suburbs of Toronto, Ontario, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It begins by laying out the main themes of a suburban critique of drive-ins, which were seen as symbols of larger problems of automobile landscapes, urban sprawl, runaway progress, and honky-tonk modernity. Next, the paper focuses more closely on an extended anti-drive-in campaign in Bronte, Ontario, one of many villages swept into the growing suburban sprawl around Toronto after World War II. There, a vocal group of activists rebelled against the nature of development in the area, mounting vigorous resistance to high-rise apartments, increased traffic, gas stations, and fast food restaurants. Drawing on the “pro-people,” participatory democracy rhetoric of urban reform movements, Bronte activists pressed their case on municipal institutions and scored some important political victories. In the end, however, the drive-ins remained, since activist ratepayers could not overcome the limitations of zoning as a tool of redevelopment or the decline of citizen activism over the course of the 1970s. More importantly, they had to confront the continued popularity of the car itself, a commodity upon which their own suburban lifestyle depended.

Résumé

Cet article examine les réactions vis-à-vis des restaurants dotés d'un service au volant des banlieues de Toronto (Ontario) à la fin des années 1960 et au début des années 1970. L'article débute en donnant un aperçu des principales critiques banlieusardes des services au volant, qu'on percevait comme des symptômes de maux plus larges, tels les nouveaux milieux urbains planifiés en fonction des autos, l'étalement urbain, le progrès effréné et une modernité clinquante. L'article se penche ensuite sur une longue campagne d'opposition aux services au volant à Bronte (Ontario), un des multiples villages engloutis par les banlieues torontoises après la Deuxième Guerre mondiale. À Bronte, des militants firent effectivement entendre haut et fort leur désaccord quant à la nature du développement local, de même que leurs vigoureuses objections contre la construction des immeubles à appartements, l'accroissement de la circulation automobile, l'implantation des stations-service et des restaurants à service rapide. Influencés par les « pro-people », ces adhérents à la rhétorique des mouvements de réforme urbaine promouvant la participation démocratique, les militants de Bronte firent valoir leurs positions devant les institutions municipales en récoltant plusieurs victoires politiques. En bout de ligne toutefois, les services au volant survécurent à leurs pressions, parce que les militants se sont montrés incapables de surmonter les limites de

zonage en tant qu'outil de re-développement territorial, sans compter le déclin du militantisme citoyen pendant les années 1970. Qui plus est, ces militants ont été forcés de constater la popularité constante de l'automobile, une commodité sur laquelle reposait le mode de vie en banlieue.

Introduction

“Bronte has had much growth,” local columnist Terry Mannell wrote in early 1971,¹ “and it has attracted its rash of new commerce—drive-in restaurants, car washes, gas warriors, all along the main strip. The rash is as desirable as acne and as comfortable as poison ivy.” This was not the first time, nor the last, that Mannell weighed in on the limitations of the local commercial strip. A former fishing village 30 miles west of Toronto, Bronte was one of dozens of small towns swept into the emerging suburban sprawl around the city after World War II. Here, the suburban dream was popular: beginning in the 1950s, middle-class subdivisions had been grafted onto a quaint village with a historic harbour. Partway through this change, Bronte itself was amalgamated with neighbouring Oakville, an affluent community also undergoing increasing suburbanization. Yet with these developments came problems. In numerous letters to the editor, in front of seemingly endless meetings of the planning board and local council, next in his own weekly column, and finally as a councillor himself, Mannell was one of the most public spokesmen for activist suburbanites fed up with the development of their area. The drive-in restaurant and its attendant parking lot was a flashpoint for these concerns. For Mannell and a vocal group of Bronte residents, A&W, Dairy Queen, car washes, and gas stations represented the ravages of the modern age, the end of their dream of blending country and city, past and future, people and progress into an intricate balance. “The hissing of the ever-present neon barrage,” the “red brick apartment buildings that . . . spit up automobiles from the semi-underground parking lots,” and “the crass signs and tasteless facades” all buried the town’s heritage—its beautiful harbour and scenic tree-lined streets—under a shocking barrage of modernity.

This paper examines the character of these anti-drive-in sentiments, placing them in the context of a much larger discussion about the form and use of automobile landscapes.² By the late 1960s, some residents of the suburbs around Toronto denounced the form of drive-ins, pointing out that suburban commercial strips were ugly “concrete canyons,” examples of bad urban planning and landscapes given over to the automobile. Such aesthetic concerns about roadside architecture were not new. After 1965, however, criticisms became much louder and more confident as these groups adopted reformist ideas—environmentalism and urban reform, among others—to launch a broad critique on what they saw as the blind acceptance of progress and development in metropolitan areas. But as they struggled with these developments and marshalled

metaphors to condemn them, they confronted two problems of central concern to cultural and urban history. On the one hand, however powerful their metaphors, they had to convince town officials to adopt them and translate them into programs that conformed to the processes of municipal institutions. On the other, they had to confront the limitations of their own bourgeois rhetoric, the popularity of fast food, and most importantly, the triumph of the car, a development upon which their own suburban lifestyle depended. In many ways, Bronte's struggles with drive-in restaurants provide a good case study in the tensions and contradictions of postwar suburban development across the Greater Toronto Area.

The discussion of these themes is divided into two main sections. First, I lay out the general contours of the suburban critique of drive-ins across the Greater Toronto Area, particularly its links to larger problems of automobile landscapes, urban sprawl, runaway progress, and honky-tonk modernity. Next, following historians and geographers who increasingly stress the complexity of suburban history, the paper focuses more closely on an extended anti-drive-in campaign in Mannell's hometown of Bronte, Ontario.³ There, a small but vocal group of activists rebelled against the nature of development in the area, mounting vigorous resistance to high-rise apartments, increased traffic, gas stations, and fast food restaurants. Drawing on the “pro-people,” participatory democracy rhetoric of urban reform movements, Bronte activists pressed their case on municipal institutions and scored important political victories. In the end, however, the drive-ins remained, revealing the contradictions and ironies of postwar suburbs.⁴

“I do not know who has the bigger job”

The concerns of Bronte residents were one small part of a much larger story: a struggle to come to terms with landscapes built for the automobile. The postwar era was the age of the car. Motor vehicle registrations in Canada more than doubled between 1945 and 1952, and doubled again by 1964, far outpacing population growth in this period. Rates of ownership relative to population recorded rapid and steady increases, growing from one automobile for every seven people in 1941 to one for every five 10 years later, one for every 3.3 in 1961 and one per 2.4 by 1971. Car ownership continued to vary widely by region, type of municipality (urban, suburban, or rural), and income, but in southern Ontario the automobile's triumph in everyday life was undeniable.⁵ Raw data only hint at the scope of this transformation. While the car certainly affected urban life before the war, it mainly forced the reshuffling of existing urban spaces that had already been stretched out by previous transportation technologies.⁶ After the war, the car burst out of the existing urban fabric and began making new landscapes in its image, creating what historian Kenneth Jackson called a “drive-in society.”⁷ In Ontario, the provincial government ploughed unprecedented funds into highway building, and municipalities transformed residential streets from peaceful two-lane rambles to four- or six-lane arterials, all to manage the relentless flow of traffic. Beside these widened roads, farmers' fields were trans-

formed into webs of subdivisions, at first haphazardly and then with increasing efficiency by the late 1950s.⁸

The car transformed shopping as well. “Since before the last World War, our market potentials are no longer . . . confined within city and town limits,” L. R. Atwater told the Toronto Chapter of the American Marketing Association in 1955. “Markets today have a new dimension, which is changing every day to increase the potential range of every retail business: a dynamic dimension of movement which erases the static lines of civil divisions that used to be our units of measurement. The new dimension is travel time by automobile.” For Atwater, the main feature of this new style of commerce was the ability of traditional downtowns to reach out to their fringes, drawing in retail dollars from suburban and exurban areas still under-served by commercial institutions.⁹ But as the 1960s approached, the new dynamics of automobile commerce changed: consumers continued to stretch out their shopping, but increasingly bypassed traditional commercial areas. New institutions that had been only novelties in the mid-1950s became increasingly common, producing the more uniform commercial landscape that one American geographer has called McUrbia.¹⁰ The shopping mall, surrounded by enormous parking lots, grew to rival the downtown retail district, keeping more dollars and more consumers in fringe areas.¹¹ Drive-in restaurants, once developed haphazardly by individual entrepreneurs, proliferated with the arrival of American chain restaurants in the late 1950s, a process that was accelerated by the middle of the subsequent decade. “‘Booming’ aptly describes what the chain-operated drive-in business is doing in Canada these days,” *Restaurants and Institutions* reported in 1964, “and from all reports there are no signs of this upsurge diminishing.”¹² Indeed, if fast food companies had any problem at all, it was in keeping up with consumer demand: by 1969, the industry was opening an outlet a day across Canada, and in Metropolitan Toronto, the race for good lots was driving property costs to unprecedented levels.¹³ By the early 1970s, once-tree-lined suburban streets had become lined with gas stations, car washes, and other drive-in uses. In 1973, a *Scarborough Mirror* survey found that the borough's five main streets contained 116 take-out restaurants, including 42 hamburger stands, 23 fish-and-chip shops, 22 pizza parlours, 9 chicken outlets, and 7 doughnut stores.¹⁴

In some quarters, however, this drive-in society faced louder and more coordinated attacks. Across North America, critics questioned the value of planning for the car, building on an opposition of machines and people, “autokind versus mankind.”¹⁵ In Ontario, residents of several neighbourhoods rallied against the Scarborough and Spadina expressways. Urbanist Jane Jacobs, newly relocated to Toronto's Annex neighbourhood, railed against metro efforts to “Los Angelize Toronto,” to remake the city in the name of the car. Outside of Toronto, some suburbanites expressed similar sentiments: “The very mobility provided by the automobile is no longer a blessing but a curse. Our communities today are planned to accommodate cars, not people. Our first consideration is what to do with vehicles when



Figure 1: Eglinton Avenue, Scarborough, 1973. Along Eglinton Avenue in Scarborough, *Canadian Hotel and Restaurant* captured many of the main offenders for the suburban critique of modernity: cars, parking lots, fast food restaurants, overhead wires, and high-rise apartments.

Source: *Canadian Hotel and Restaurant*, 15 February 1973, 26. Reprinted with permission of *Kostuch Publications Ltd.*

they are in motion, and our second how to deal with them when they are motionless . . . This is progress?"¹⁶

After 1965, across the emerging suburban metropolis around Toronto, some citizens expressed doubts about the way drive-in restaurants seemed to be invading once-peaceful neighbourhoods. Paul Godfrey, later chair of Toronto's innovative metropolitan government, made headlines as a North York alderman by waging war on Dufferin Street's drive-in restaurants.¹⁷ It was a losing battle. Six years later, new Scarborough mayor Paul Cosgrove devoted part of his inaugural speech to lamenting the development of one of the borough's main streets. "I do not know who has the bigger job," he quipped, "Mayor David Crombie [of Toronto] in removing sin from Yonge Street, or myself in removing hamburger stands from Eglinton Avenue."¹⁸ Some suburban councils passed or considered zoning amendments that banned all drive-in restaurants from specific neighbourhoods or even from entire townships.¹⁹ Across the suburbs around Toronto, some citizens offered similar laments about the nature of the drive-in landscape. "Is it important that we should all know that a certain hot dog stand has 'served 7 billion'?" ratepayer activist Willis Collinson asked the editor of a local newspaper in 1971. "Are we to go literally to the (hot) dogs?"²⁰

For suburbanites like Collinson, the proliferation of drive-ins symbolized larger issues. Even Paul Cosgrove admitted that his criticism of hamburger stands on Eglinton Avenue was only one part of a larger problem. Surprisingly, *Canadian Hotel and Restaurant*, the main trade publication for the foodservice industry and not especially disposed to criticize restaurants of any kind, agreed with the mayor: "Tour those six miles a few times," the magazine reported, "and you realize that this visual blight is the result of uncontrolled growth . . . The mayor's comment should . . . serve to point up the public's growing awareness of visual blight—the ugly hydro poles and sleazy shopping centres—as well as its growing intolerance of those who pollute the environment."²¹ Poles, plazas, and hamburger stands were joined by a horde of other offenders: overhead wires, neon signs, widened roads, and high-rise apartment buildings, all of which added up to ugly, grey, and barren streetscapes. In Bramalea, the *Guardian* complained that "the countryside has quite a sufficiency of signs already. They slash the landscape with their ugliness, adding nothing to the view and subtracting much."²² In North York, Councillor Fred Schindeler went on a personal campaign against garish commercial architecture, extending his wrath to other symptoms of drive-in society, including "expressways, cars . . . and especially the plethora of gas stations which service them."²³

Drive-in society symbolized still larger problems. To many suburbanites, mundane developments like fast-food strips, parking lots, trees, poles, and asphalt were symptoms of a society embracing runaway progress and modernity. The drive-in restaurant was just the latest example of the 20th-century battle of grey and green, artificial and real, progress and history. Tim Horton raised a commotion in Oakville when he convinced town council to let him cut down a maple tree in the parking lot of his doughnut outlet. The council agreed that the tree was a nuisance—the mayor even admitted that he had hit it several times—but many residents mourned the loss as a product of the age. "People today are too concerned with the so-called 'progress' of the present that they have no regard for the future," a local teenager lamented.²⁴ Eight months later, the local newspaper used the doughnut shop in a similar way, contrasting the formerly peaceful life of Charlie Sherry (an elderly neighbour of the shop) with the cacophony of the doughnut shop parking lot: "All night the donut shop's big yellow sign brightly whirls round and round, its reflection showing on the windows of Charlie Sherry's home . . . The parking lot is floodlit . . . Cars stopping and starting. Youths shouting and swearing. The neighbourhood has come alive . . . Don't ask Charlie Sherry if he thinks Oakville needs more progress . . . Progress has become Charlie's private nightmare."²⁵ In Scarborough, Paul Cosgrove tapped this well of concern about progress run amok by calling his inaugural speech, in which he complained about hamburger stands, "Future Shock." For one local paper, commenting on his speech, Eglinton Avenue was one example of the conflict of human and concrete, pitting authentic, natural landscapes against modern consumer paradises.²⁶

“Are we to go literally to the hot dogs?”

These critics drew on well-worn bourgeois laments about ordinary commercial landscapes.²⁷ Symbols of “honky-tonk” architecture like Coney Island, Las Vegas, and Sunset Strip were common reference points. “This place is starting to look like Coney Island rather than a historic part of Oakville,” reported a resident of Bronte. “Every time I see the smiling face of Colonel Sanders on the front of the fried chicken shack in Bronte, I think the joke is on us.”²⁸ Reference points could be far away or closer to home, but the conclusion was the same. “We’ll get a Sunset Strip here if we just let drive-ins keep sprouting up,” Oakville councillor D. M. Clarke told council. “We’ve got them in Bronte and Cooksville already and they’re a horrible blight.”²⁹ Other critics lamented the sleazy look of New Street in Burlington, Yonge Street in Willowdale, Kingston Road in Scarborough, and so on, constructing colourful metaphors to make their point. People feared their neighbourhoods would turn into hamburger alleys, concrete canyons, asphalt jungles, gasoline alleys, asphalt monsters, or concrete wastelands.³⁰

These were very old battlefields. In many ways, such suburban complaints simply updated the arguments of progressive-era urban reformers and interwar highway beautifiers, who attacked the aesthetic qualities of auto commerce in similar terms. Both groups shared, for example, a tendency to adopt the language of environmentalism to express their aesthetic criticisms.³¹ *Pollution* was a particular favourite. In one Don Mills newspaper, a full-page photographic feature documented the “landscape pollution” caused by “overhanging wires, uncovered pipes, billboards, [and] commercial signs.”³² A few months later, the Scarborough edition of the *Mirror* lamented the “ever-increasing eye pollution of tasteless, huge, garish signs.”³³ Though sharing certain forms of rhetoric, 1960s concerns were not merely throwbacks to earlier ideas and campaigns. Highway beautification had returned to the United States by the mid-1960s, with the widely publicized campaign of Lady Bird Johnson and a coalition of reformers, who forced the passage of the Highway Beautification Act in 1965, and continued to push their agenda in the next decade. A government commission on the subject toured the United States in 1972.³⁴

North of the border, suburban residents not only applied this older language of urban and highway beautification to new suburban spaces, but marshalled a series of updated metaphors. With so many drive-ins coming to Canada as branch plants of American fast-food companies, Bronte activist Gerald Young tapped the burgeoning nationalism of the 1960s in naming the main offenders: “Burger Chef, McDonalds, Dairy Queen, H. Salt (fish and chips) and many more, the very same buildings for these outlets can be seen all over the United States. I think most Canadians agree and hope that we have a better standard of life and living on this side of the border, so let us not bring their less desirable garish exteriors to food chain buildings in Oakville.”³⁵ Most observations looked closer to home—assessing not American developments but commercial strips in other Toronto suburbs—but like Young, tied the strips to broader ideas. One favourite strategy linked blighted drive-

in landscapes to the development of North America’s plastic, disposable society, and crucially, to the growing turn against it. “I think a tremendous number of young people have picked up this cry about the plastic society and therefore resistance to strip development will increase measurably,” one Bronte resident wrote in a typical letter to the editor.³⁶

Yet plastic and progress had a strange allure. It is a typically modern impulse to find progress simultaneously thrilling, repulsive, inevitable, necessary, and tragic. Writing of America in the 1920s, Lawrence Levine noted the “paradox” of “a belief in progress coupled with a dread of change; an urge towards the inevitable future combined with a longing for the irretrievable past.”³⁷ Indeed, progress and nostalgia coexisted in an ambiguous relationship, though one often seemed more powerful than the other. In the 1960s, the promise of progress might have seemed limitless—one need think only of the popularity of a pop culture genre such as science fiction—but some critics wondered if that promise wasn’t itself a curse. These doubts took many forms, from critiques of affluence, through attacks on the omnipotence of science, to questions about the safety of technology.³⁸ Other critics of progress wondered how the modern world had lost its connection to older, simpler, more soulful values, a concern that could be applied to the most mundane projects. “Progress has no feeling,” summed up the *Bramalea Guardian*, speaking of the demolition of a historic house in Brampton to accommodate a new underpass.³⁹

These critiques of progress were complicated, however. Nostalgia was more a lament for the past than a wholesale return to lost values. Some observers thought that the solution to the problems of progress and development was more control of landscape, not less. “Let us not take the easy way out and simply throw up our hands and say that we cannot stop ‘progress’ and that growth is inevitable,” argued Carl Erikson. “Surely, if there was ever an age in history in which man was capable of controlling his environment and determining his own destiny, it is ours.”⁴⁰ Moreover, even critics of widened roads and demolished old houses analyzed drive-in culture from behind the windshield of their cars. The frequent comparisons to other commercial strips revealed a wide knowledge of Toronto’s suburban areas based on the very automobility that was feeding drive-in society. Bronte residents, in assessing their own commercial strip, were doing exactly what L. R. Atwater had observed for retailing: “erasing the static lines of civil divisions that used to be our units of measurement.” In a particularly contradictory moment, one Oakville resident surveyed the insidious effect of the car on Trafalgar Road by driving the length of the newly widened street.⁴¹

If there was a single symbol of the contradictory pull of car culture, one example of drive-in society that served as an emblem of both the potential and the limitations of progress, it was the parking lot. By the 1960s, parking lots were a slice of automobile geography most needed and most abhorred. Everybody knew that adequate parking was a necessary condition of development, both in terms of building and imagining the

spaces of consumption. Zoning requirements set precise ratios of number of spots to retail space,⁴² but parking was not just a technical question, it was the core principle of the imagined economic geography of the car, expressed in the most mundane business of everyday suburban life. One survey of residents of Bramalea discovered that “parking—or lack of it—influenced 88 [of 122] persons in their choice of store,” a fact well known to retailers simply by watching customers arrive at their shops.⁴³ In an advertisement placed by a group of merchants in Weston, an older streetcar suburb of Toronto, we get a hint of the desperation of an older group of retailers struggling to assert their traditional skills in the new world, straining to come to terms with the transformative power of the car.

Now! Shopping Centre Parking in Downtown Weston

The ease of suburban parking in downtown Weston has been made possible through the cooperation of these public spirited merchants. Now you can have low downtown prices and wide downtown variety . . . with all the ease of shopping plaza parking.

The ad made its priorities clear: local businesses were named around the outside, framing a photograph of the parking lot.⁴⁴

Parking lots also represented the dangers and limitations of progress. Even with landscaping, they were essentially just flat, ugly pieces of asphalt.⁴⁵ Parking lots were ubiquitous visual reminders of “the car as architect,” of streetscapes given over to the almighty automobile. “Like cancer, the asphalt has eaten away at all the grass and trees around the myriad little buildings, creating Oakville’s own black plague,” Terry Mannell wrote of the development of Bronte’s drive-in strip.⁴⁶ Across the wider suburban region, opposition was clear. “Should we make it a park or a parking lot?” the Ontario government mused in a bit of propaganda for regional government and conservation policies. “Unplanned expansion in our province could lead to an unpleasant way of life. Our large cities could become plagued with runaway pollution or parking lots instead of parks for our children to play in . . . Canada’s life style of tomorrow presents many challenges. But it’s Ontario’s style to meet these challenges today.”⁴⁷

It was easy enough to complain about progress and to scoff at fast-food stands or parking lots on main streets, but in communities so dependent on the car, how could they be controlled? As a clever editorialist for the *Mirror* pointed out, Paul Cosgrove had gotten it horribly wrong: in fact, it would be a good deal easier to banish sin from Yonge Street than to exile the hamburger from Eglinton Avenue. The “dingy dens” purveying pornography downtown were generally despised, but how could Cosgrove “ever rouse the rabble against the meat pattie with relish, onions and ketchup”?⁴⁸ It was a question that many municipalities asked more seriously in the decade after 1965, as the franchise economy pushed up the numbers of drive-ins dramatically, gobbling up more trees and grass to feed what Mannell called the “asphalt monster.”⁴⁹ Back in Bronte, however, residents of the former fishing village would discover that the monster was easier to track than to kill. Asphalt, drive-ins, and runaway progress were here to stay.

“Where to draw the line?”

“Since amalgamation with Oakville in 1962, Bronte has been turned into a concrete and asphalt jungle, boasting drive-ins as their chief ‘industry,’” local resident L. F. Cunningham complained in 1970.⁵⁰ Cunningham’s lament signalled Bronte’s ambiguous position in postwar suburban space. It was no longer a village of its own. Since the early 1960s, it had been one part of the larger community of Oakville, stretching from Mississauga on one side to Burlington on the other, all blended into an emerging suburban sprawl west of Toronto. “By the end of the 1950s,” sociologist S. D. Clark wrote in 1966, “the Toronto suburban community . . . consisted of a great arc based on Lake Ontario and sweeping over the top of the city. To the east, what was part of the Toronto suburban community became at a certain point indistinguishable from what was a part of the community of Oshawa, while, to the west, Toronto suburban development met and joined forces with suburban development growing out of Hamilton, to be confounded still further by the efforts of Oakville in between to maintain an independent existence.”⁵¹ Indeed, postwar development had stretched the space of cities, sweeping once-distinct towns and villages into one almost continuous sprawling development, forming what one developer called “the Southern Ontario megalopolis,” (figure 2).⁵²

On the ground, however, the sprawling region remained a patchwork of different spaces: old villages, new automobile subdivisions, small towns eagerly grasping at the promise of rapid development, older streetcar suburbs fighting to adapt, and rural areas alternately resisting and embracing the new order, all pressing their distinctive (if changing) forms onto the shape of the new metrocape. For her part, Cunningham still spoke of Bronte as a real place, albeit one that fit into larger municipal institutions. For anti-drive-in campaigns, it was a crucial point: as much as Bronte residents looked at their commercial strip as a symbol of broader developments and shared the fears of suburbanites in other areas, they were not trying to remake Scarborough, Burlington, or Coney Island. To transfer their rhetoric into actual landscape, they had to confront local institutional arrangements and to struggle with the particular history of Bronte in the emerging suburban sprawl around Toronto.

For most of its history after the village was settled in 1834, Bronte followed the archetypical stages of development for lakeshore communities west of Toronto. Its early fortunes rose and fell with the movement of staples like wood and wheat, which flowed from the interior to the mouth of Twelve Mile Creek for milling, and out through Bronte’s harbour onto Lake Ontario transportation routes. After the village was bypassed by railway development in the second half of the 19th century, the harbour’s focus shifted to fishing. Later, the automobile age arrived in Bronte, initially when affluent urbanites followed King’s Highway No. 2 (which ran straight through Bronte on its way from Toronto to Hamilton) in search of a summer playground.⁵³ After World War II, developers assembled land north of the original settlement to build low-density subdivisions, hoping to sell

middle-class families on Bronte's central location in the emerging Hamilton-Toronto megalopolis along the Queen Elizabeth Way (QEW).⁵⁴ The population of the area boomed, probably doubling during the course of the 1950s, and continuing to increase (at a slower rate) in the subsequent decade (figure 3).⁵⁵

Bronte's institutional fate followed its increasing integration into the suburban sprawl around Toronto after the war. Population growth and rapid development brought typical problems of planning and servicing. After 1948, a joint planning board laid out the zoning schemes for all of Bronte, Oakville, and Trafalgar Township, and the village itself was eventually swallowed up in a round of annexations and amalgamations, first joining Trafalgar in 1959, and then Oakville in 1962. By this time, residential development closed the gap between the communities south of the QEW, and Bronte was virtually indistinguishable in the continuous sprawling development along the lakeshore. By the late 1960s, then, Bronte had faced challenges similar to those of other communities west of Toronto: growing subdivisions of middle-class homes north of the old main street, harbours turned over to recreational uses, pressure from the emerging sprawl between Toronto and Hamilton, and amalgamation of small villages into larger suburban municipalities.⁵⁶

For Bronte, amalgamation with Oakville seemed to coincide with a change in the nature of the village's residential and commercial development. By the early 1960s, responding to concern about the placelessness of the emerging Toronto-Hamilton megalopolis, planners across Southern Ontario encouraged the development of “high-density nodes” in an attempt to impose a shape on the region's sprawl. Oakville's Official Plan and subsequent amendments—the basic zoning layout of the community—adhered closely to this “nodes” approach, encouraging apartment development to provide a skyline and give visual shape to the community. Only two low-rise apartment complexes, however, had been constructed in the area by 1965, when residential densities were increased by an amendment to the Official Plan. Two years later, “elevator” apartments began to appear in Bronte.⁵⁷

Coincident with such residential developments was a new configuration of commercial space. The village's original business section was largely confined to a single block near the harbour, but by the late 1950s, scattered commercial development, including some service stations, had mixed into the existing residential stock east of Jones Street. After amalgamation, Oakville officials increased speed limits and modernized roads and bridges throughout the town to accommodate mounting east-west traffic between lakeshore communities. Most significantly for Bronte, the town widened Highway 2 (now called Lakeshore Road) to four lanes, opening an extra lane across the bridge over Twelve Mile Creek and through the centre of the old village. Already facing competition from nearby plazas in Burlington and Oakville, the traditional Bronte commercial section was in no position to deal with any changes that sped up the passing-by flow of traffic, and after 1965, drive-in commerce along “the Strip” increased, mainly through the addition

of fast-food restaurants, car washes, and other automobile services (figures 4 and 5).⁵⁸

Compared to developments in other suburbs, Bronte's drive-in strip remained small, but it still became a symbol of broader trends. Complaints about the strip started to appear in local newspapers in 1969,⁵⁹ and soon intersected with concerns about residential development in the area. Opposition to two new high-rise proposals (called Delta Mar and Wuthering Heights) in 1969 and 1970 quickly expanded to a frontal assault on the entire nature of commercial and residential development in the area. Like many other suburban residents across the Golden Horseshoe, Bronte homeowners attacked what they saw as the blind acceptance of progress and development in the emerging megalopolis. “If [the Wuthering Heights apartment complex] does go ahead,” lamented Jack Pettitt in a typical letter to the editor, “the apostles of progress will be able to claim along with their other achievements, the car washes and drive-in eating places, that we have the biggest monument to man's stupidity and greed yet erected between Toronto and Hamilton. Right where everyone can see it too.”⁶⁰

Residents pressed their claims on the municipal government, adopting much the same rhetoric as the citizen participation movement sweeping through municipalities across Canada. By the late 1960s, diverse constellations of community organizers, political radicals, ratepayers' associations, historical preservationists, anti-highway activists, and not-in-my-backyard homeowners pressed municipal governments on a number of common issues. In most large cities, these groups were described as “reform movements,” although even supporters admitted that the coalitions were rarely united in any meaningful way, except in opposition to unchecked development and in favour of a vague sense of democratic participation and “people power.”⁶¹ In Bronte, which became the southern part of Ward 2 of Oakville's municipal government upon amalgamation in 1962, the West Oakville Residents' Association (WORA) became the main vehicle of local discontent. By any standard of political activism, WORA had been an irregular affair since it was founded in 1958. It tended, like many ratepayers' groups, to rely on a small core of activists to mount occasionally vigorous resistance to specific projects, but it attracted few long-term members and even less ongoing popular interest. After 1969, however, WORA became the chief beneficiary of increased citizen activism in Bronte, coordinating letter-writing, public meetings, and petition campaigns, all in the name of “people power.”⁶²

As in larger urban centres, Bronte activists soon began to transform the municipal government. Though initially stymied by what they saw as an Establishment majority on council, WORA built links to activists in other wards (who were mainly fighting high rises and widened roads). After the 1970 elections, they found support from five of eleven councillors, and more importantly, four of nine members of the local planning board (including Bronte activist Don MacCharles). Though still a minority on both bodies, the “pro-people” bloc on the planning board

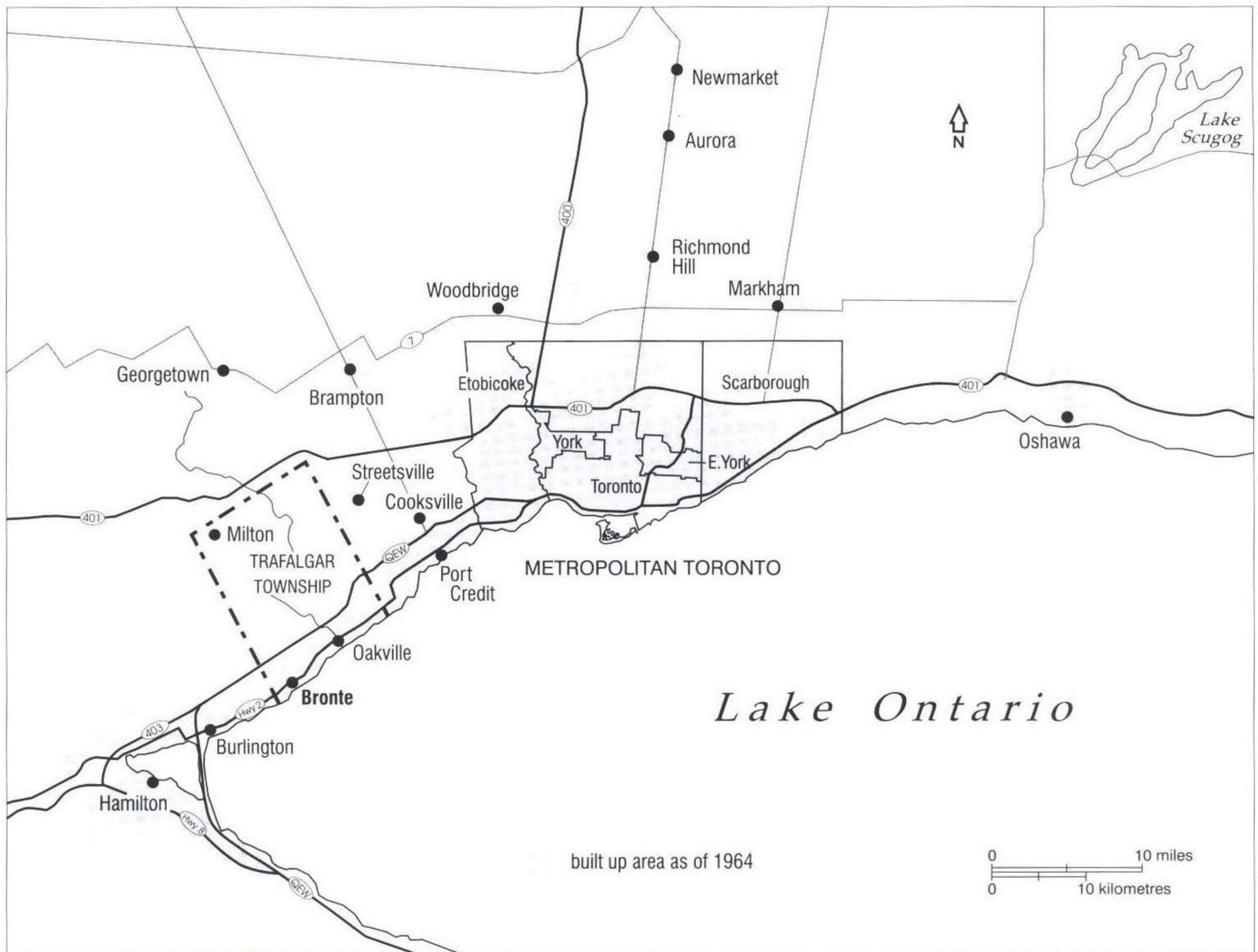


Figure 2: Toronto and surrounding communities, 1964. (Note: Map shows Metropolitan Toronto boundaries as of 1967.)

convinced council to undertake an Official Plan review of the area, and later to commission a planning study by architects Jack Diamond and Barton Myers, who were associated with the Toronto urban reform movement.⁶³ Buoyed by such successes, and energized by the wave of urban reform sweeping North America, Bronte residents joined citizens' groups across Oakville in electing a "pro-people," "anti-development" slate in the 1972 municipal elections. This new reform slate was soon dubbed the "Barrett Bunch" by the local press, after new mayor Harry Barrett.⁶⁴

Just after the election, with almost theatrical timing, Diamond and Myers delivered their report. The plan dripped reformist rhetoric, both in its methodology and in its actual proposals for development in Bronte. Up to 1969, much of planning in the area made little serious commitment to consultation with residents.

Planning was handled by a planning board, an advisory committee composed of three council members and six "lay," or citizen, appointments. Citizen participation in planning (at least in the way later reformers imagined it) was neither the intent nor the result of lay appointments to the board. Citizen members were typically chosen because of specialized knowledge (many were architects or engineers) or because of a longstanding connection to community affairs (typically businessmen who had lived in the area for some time).⁶⁵ Public meetings were held, but officials were often ambivalent about democratic input, which they saw as a potential threat to sound planning principles. "Since they are appointed and not elected," remarked a Planning Board information sheet, "the members of the Board have no direct responsibility, real or imagined, to any individual or group . . . but only the municipality as a whole. The Board's recommendations to council, therefore, are primarily based on planning principles and do

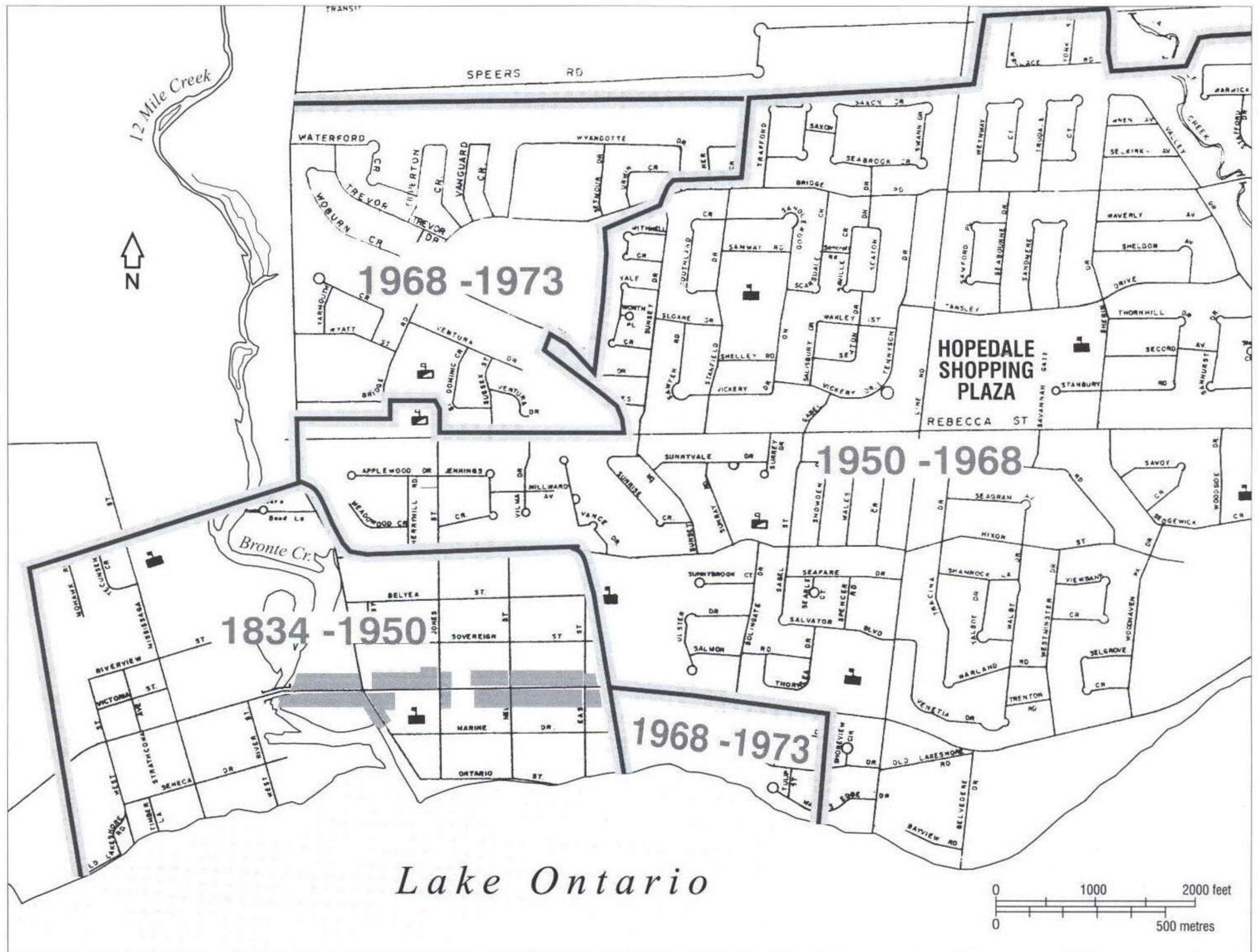


Figure 3. Stages of Residential Development in Bronte. (Note: Shaded area along Lakeshore Road shows commercial development in 1971 [see figure 5]).

Sources: Oakville Street Directory (Oakville Planning Board, 1973); A.J. Diamond and Barton Myers, *Bronte Planning Study* (presented to Oakville Town Council, 6 Dec. 1972); Thomas Heath, *Housing Conditions in the Town of Oakville* (Oakville Planning Board, 1971); Might's Oakville-Trafalgar Directory, 1958, 1960, 1962; Might's Oakville Directory, 1965, 1971, 1973.

not attempt to reflect political expediency.⁶⁶ Regardless, grander plans were often farmed out to experts like E. G. Faludi's town planning consultants, who produced technical reports to serve as guidelines for development. Describing his "method of approach" to a report titled "A Proposal for the Future Development of the Oakville-Milton-Trafalgar Area," Faludi listed the basic criteria for making recommendations:

- a. We have defined . . . the larger geographical area involved . . .
- b. We have examined and analyzed:
 - 1. The growth

- 2. The economy of the area
- 3. The existing conditions in the component municipalities
- 4. The forces and influences which will have an impact on their future development
- c. We have defined the basic problems
- d. We have established those principles which will be applied in considering solutions for the basic problems
- e. Finally, upon those basic principles and other premises we have formulated our proposals.⁶⁷

Notable for its absence was any reference to "the wishes and desires of local residents" or some other democratic impulse. A

"Are we to go literally to the hot dogs?"

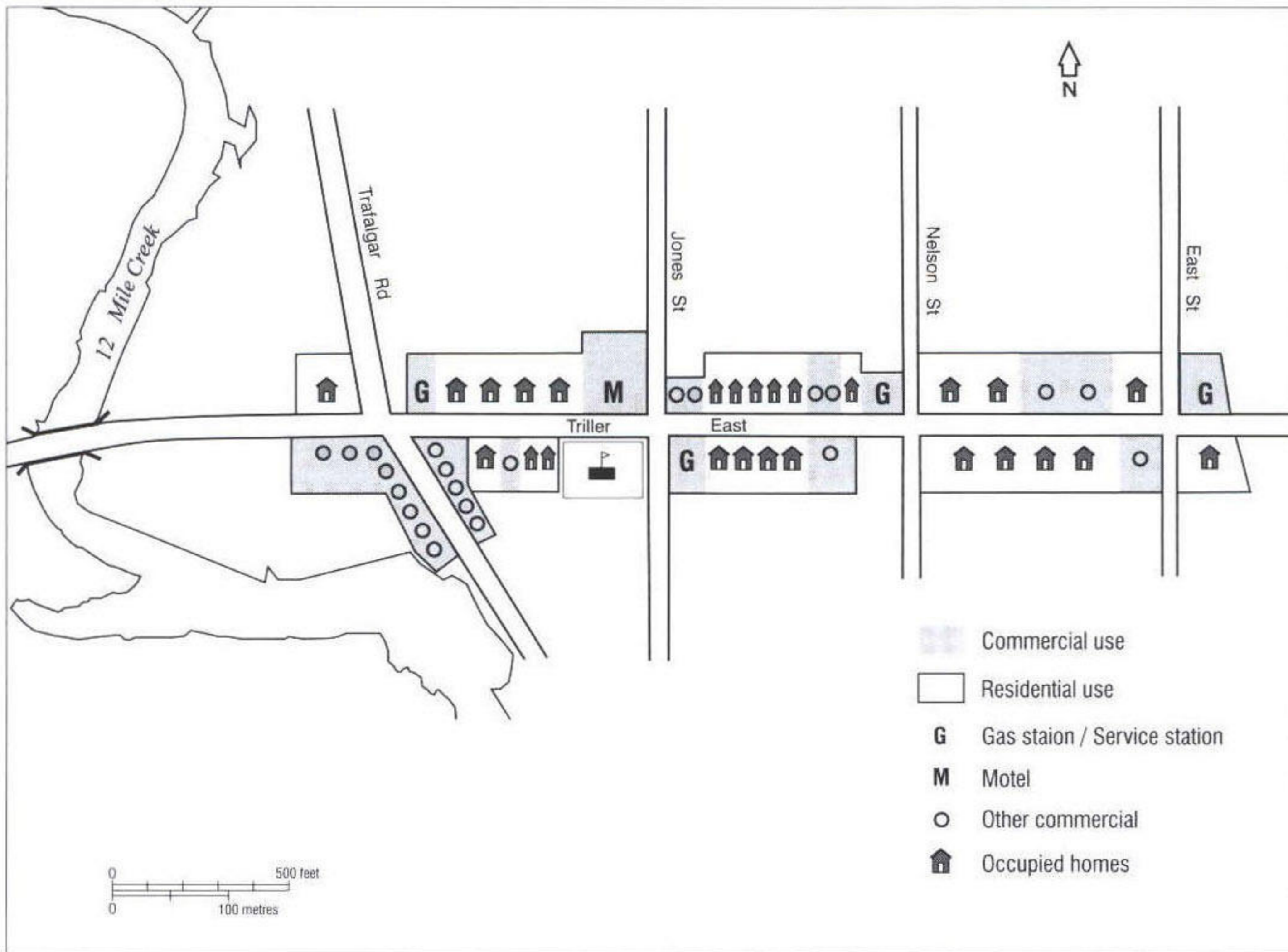


Figure 4: Bronte's Main Street, 1958.

Source: Might's Oakville-Trafalgar Directory, Oakville, 1958.

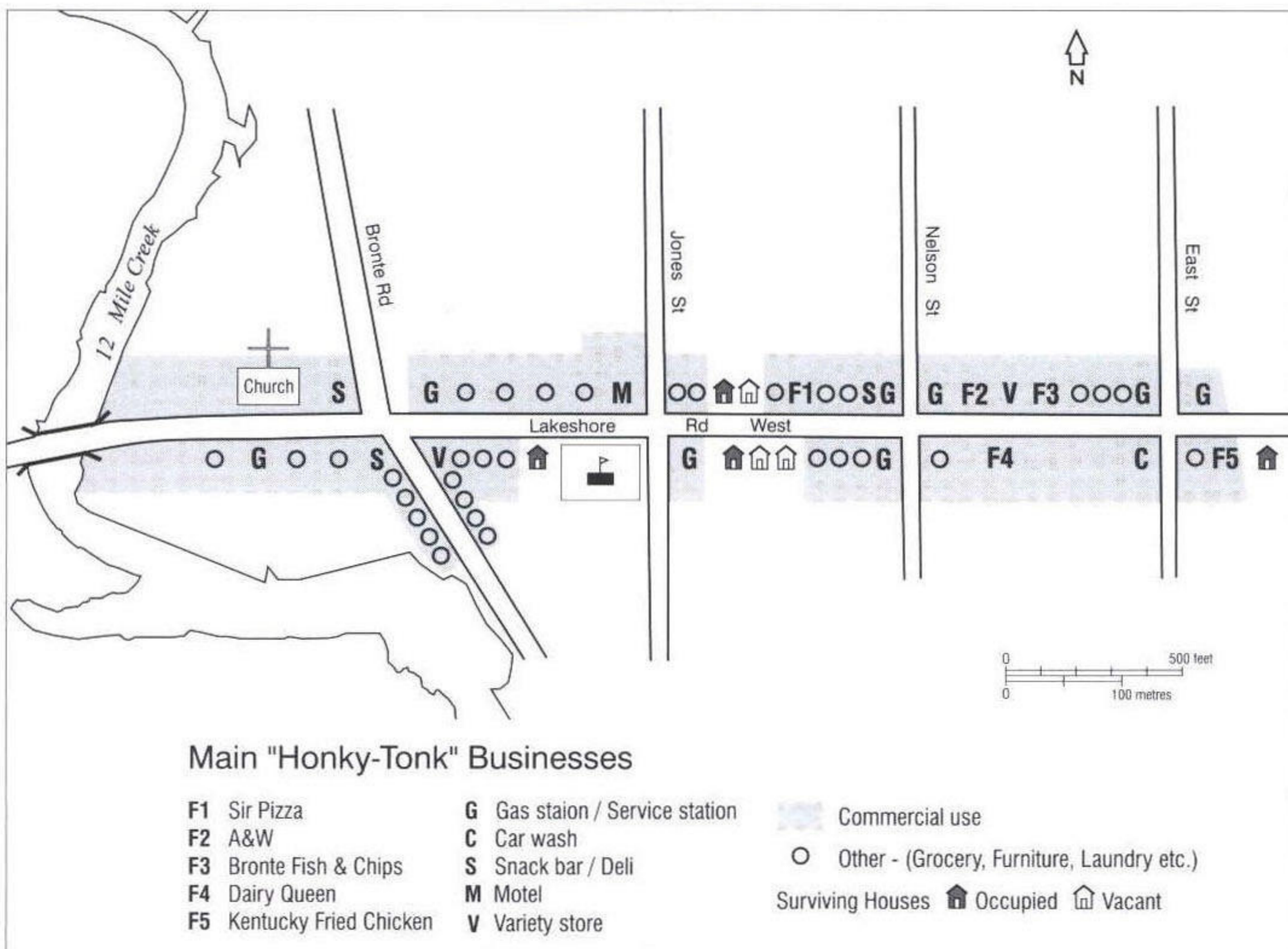


Figure 5: The Strip, Bronte 1971.

Source: Might's Oakville Directory, 1971.