My Toronto

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Introduction

Toronto, the cultural and economic hub of Ontario, plays a major role in Canadian life throughout the province. It is the most populous city in Canada as well as its financial and commercial center. The city rests on the northwestern shore of Lake Ontario, strategically located near the St. Lawrence Seaway giving access to the Atlantic shipping routes. Toronto has good farmland and international shipping lanes. The Great Lakes have allowed Toronto to become a major international trading center with transportation, distribution, manufacturing, and financial institutions. Toronto has strong economic ties and influence from, the United States.

Toronto is a city I am very familiar with and holds a special place in my heart. From the ages of 14 to 18, I spent considerable time in Toronto on account of my involvement in a youth sailing organization called Toronto Brigantine. It is really the only major city I feel like I know or have a connection to. My "turf", Figure 1, was bordered by Spadina Avenue to the west, The Don to the east, Dundas Avenue to the north, and Lake Ontario to the south. This downtown area encompasses many landmarks, businesses, and neighborhoods teeming with the vibrancy of city life. Using my Toronto experiences as a foundation, this paper discusses the urbanization, urban culture, and urban space of this wonderful city through the eyes of three scholars of urban planning. The scholars I chose to describe this place are Lewis Mumford, Jane Jacobs, and Richard Florida. There is a common thread among these three and that is their unabashed love for city life and their desire to examine and improve it.

Evolution

Toronto's growth and demography were influenced by several political and economic events. Following the American Revolution many English-speaking loyalists chose to move to British North America. Immigration, mostly from Europe, continued as transportation improved. Industrialization in Toronto occurred just as it did in the United States. Population exploded between 1871 and 1911, the population of Canada nearly doubled with the most growth occurring in Urban areas. Toronto and Montreal's urban growth dwarfed other Canadian cities (Belshaw, 2016). By the end of the World War I, both cities passed the half million mark. Figure 2 shows the population growth versus time for Toronto, this initial steep slope can be seen starting around 1900, but it is nothing compared to what was to come.

Following World War II, Toronto was a magnet for thousands of new immigrants fleeing war ravaged Europe. Then in the 1970s, unlike the U.S., new immigration laws opened the doors for another flood of new arrivals, mainly South Asians and Chinese. By 2006, more than half of the Toronto metropolitan area was made up of "visible" minorities, making Toronto one of the most diverse and cosmopolitan cities in the world (Howarth & McGillivray, 2021). But industrialization and immigration were not the only factors. "Toronto's ascendancy was in large part precipitated by the move by Québec […] to assert the primacy of the French language even though much of the Montréal business community was Anglophone. Many of these businesses, and their employees, decamped to Toronto" (Cox, 2013). Metropolitan influence spread to the surrounding areas, suburban sprawl, just like in the states. The "Golden Horseshoe" is the nickname for this region at the western end of Lake Ontario, Figure 3, with Toronto at the heart of this conurbation. Today, the Golden Horseshoe contains over a quarter of Canada's

population and boasts an even larger share of the economic output (Cox, 2013). As of 2020, the Toronto census metropolitan area (CMA) is the fastest growing in the entire United States and Canada (Landau, 2020). The upper half of Davis's S curve of urbanization from 1960 to 2020 for Canada and the United States see Figure 4, shows that Canada urbanized faster and earlier. The U.S. catches up around 2012 and is still steadily increasing whereas Canada appears to be reaching its plateau, urbanization unlike growth does have an end. In 2018 Canada had 81.4% urban population and the U.S. was at 82.5% (The World Bank, 2018, Davis, 1965). The population of the U.S. is about 10x greater than Canada.

Mumford

Lewis Mumford "was one of the great public intellectuals of the 20th century and certainly its foremost American urbanist" (LeGates & Stout, 2020). To him, a city was defined, above all, by human dimensions as opposed to economic factors, population size or density, or attributes of the built environment. Mumford saw the city streets as a stage on which life's drama is played out, an "urban drama". The foundation of this drama is dialogue, "made possible by the inclusion of human diversities within the enclosed urban amphitheater" (Mumford, 1961). The dramatic dialogue is a strong indicator of a successful city. And likewise, the lack of it reveals a city's failure. Silence is the sound of a dead city but worse is everyone repeating same words and ideas in complacent conformity, devoid of dialectic opposition or intelligent conflict. Complacent conformity is the exact opposite of Toronto. Mumford would see the city of Toronto as a good example of his urban drama. The restaurants, markets, and shops crowded with such a variety of people from all walks of life providing the competition

Mumford says is required to enliven the plot and elevate the conscious participation (Mumford, 1961).

It is difficult, maybe even impossible, to quantify this urban drama. Perhaps social capital, the networks of relationships of trust, social connections, and civic engagement that enable a society to function, could be correlated to Mumford's urban drama. Typically, social capital is highest in small homogeneous communities which share ethnic and cultural ties (LeGates & Stout, 2020). But the Toronto Social Capital Study found "at the broadest city-wide level, social capital in Toronto appears to be solid" (2018). Toronto, arguably the most multicultural city on the planet, has been uniquely successful in attracting large numbers of newcomers from across the globe while generally avoiding the tensions and civic strife experienced by other cities (Toronto Social Capital Study, 2018). Mumford would certainly agree that diversity plus social capital leads to a great show.

Jacobs

The Toronto I know would not exist without the formidable Jane Jacobs. Jane Jacobs had no professional training in the field of city planning, instead she relied on her observations and common sense to explain why certain places work and how to improve those that were not. Along with her mentor, William H. Whyte, Jacobs "led the way in advocating for a place-based, community-centered approach to urban planning, decades before such approaches were considered sensible" (Project for Public Spaces, 2010). In 1968, after writing her seminal work The Death and Life of Great American Cities and following her grassroots efforts to protect New York City neighborhoods from downtown expressways, urban renewal, and slum clearance

plans by Robert Moses, Jacobs moved to Toronto. (Project for Public Spaces, 2010). Jacobs led

the opposition to the controversial Spadina Expressway that would have linked downtown

Toronto to the northwest suburbs, but in the process would have displaced homes and

destroyed neighborhoods. The provincial government, in response to massive protests,

canceled Spadina, along with other planned freeways through Toronto. The thought of a

freeway running through Kensington Market, Chinatown, straight through one of the most

important streets in Toronto is unthinkable. Toronto certainly has traffic congestion, but such

inconvenience has benefited public transit options, resulting in a more pedestrian and livable

city (Howrath & McGillivray, 2021).

In "The Uses of Sidewalks: Safety", Jacobs discusses what makes city streets safe when

they are always full of strangers. Required are three qualities: a clear boundary between public

and private space, eyes on the street, and continuous use. These qualities are achieved by

having many kinds of enterprises (aka mixed-use development), to give people reasons for

being on the street at various times of day and night. The more people, the more surveillance

and the livelier and safer the street. When working properly such a street performs a kind of

intricate sidewalk ballet (Jacobs, 1961). In an ode to Jane Jacobs, I present my Toronto sidewalk

ballet: When I arrive in Toronto early Friday evening the ballet reaches its crescendo. This is the

time of busy commuters rushing for trains, streetcars, and busses, anxious to return home for

the weekend. This is the time of waiters in white aprons setting their tables and friends

gathering for happy hour. This is the time of rowdy Maple Leaf fans in red and white jerseys

flocking to the arena and elegantly dressed theatergoers heading to the play. This is the time of

teenagers on skateboards weaving their way, small children on scooters riding ahead of their

parents, and dogs pulling their owners to the park. This is the time when Chinese grandmothers

shop at T&T market for last-minute dinner ingredients and The Boys play soccer at Cherry

Beach fields. This is the time when Instagram obsessed girls take selfies in front of the boats

while guys on the Empire Sandy crew try to catch their eye and us on the Pathfinder boat try to

photobomb them.

Florida

Richard Florida is an urbanist, researcher, and professor at the University of Toronto

who coined the term "creative class", a new socio-economic class that creates innovative ideas

rather than just products. His theory, developed in 2002 during the height of the tech bubble, is

that metropolitan regions that have a strong creative class exhibit higher levels of economic

development. Florida's research showed "there are clear indications that innovation and

entrepreneurial activities, [long known to be spatially clustered and concentrated], are now

becoming more quintessentially urban and place based" and he proposed that "cities are not

just containers for smart people: they are the enabling infrastructure where connections take

place, networks are built and innovative combinations are consummated" (Florida, 2016). The

key then to urban success was to attract and retain talent, not just to draw in companies. He

contends that this new creative class will be the driving force of post-industrial, global

economies and that cities are a required component to enable their work.

Toronto, where Florida lives, was certainly a model for his hypothesis, a bastion of the

very best of urbanism; a diverse population, a thriving economy, safe streets, great public

schools, and a cohesive social fabric (Florida, 2017). Other creative class attractors/generators

are Toronto's world-class universities, medical centers, museums, corporate research and development centers, entertainment venues, and financial institutions. The existence of all these different elements in proximity creates an agglomeration effect, "a clustering effect of […] creative individuals in ways that tend to multiply productive capacity through collaboration and the constant exchange of ideas and energies" (LeGates, et al., 2020).

Does Florida's creative class theory hold up in 2021? Critics of Florida have called his theory elitist and Florida does seem to be a "peddler" of some sort, selling books and speaking engagements via his company creativeclass.com. Others hold fast to the belief that it is companies and jobs, not the creative class, that drive an economy. Even Florida himself has voiced problems with his theory saying that along with prosperity comes gentrification and clusters of wealth causing alienation (CBC News, 2017). In 2017 Florida writes in Bloomberg City Lab "I entered into a period of rethinking and introspection, of personal and intellectual transformation. I began to see the back-to-the-city movement as something that conferred a disproportionate share of its benefits on a small group of places and people. I found myself confronting the dark side of the urban revival I had once championed and celebrated." Research showed only a handful of superstar cities, and a few elite neighborhoods within them, were benefiting from the clustering of talent while everywhere else was stagnating. This was happening in Toronto as most evidenced by the election of mayor Rob Ford. Rob Ford was, according to Florida, the most anti-urban mayor to ever hold the office. He immediately set about tearing down just about everything urbanists believe make a great city. Ford's rise coincided with the decline of Toronto's once sizeable middle-class. The old middle-class neighborhoods faded, and the city split into small clusters of affluent, educated areas packed

around the major transit lines and a much larger expanse of disadvantaged neighborhoods located far from the city center and public transportation (Florida, 2017). Ford, [referred to as the Canadian Trump by some], connected with this constituency of working people and new immigrants who felt passed over by the benefits of the city's revitalization. Today, Toronto needs to be stitched back together. Creativity, innovation, and technology for all, not just for the elite, is Florida's battle cry now.

Conclusion

Toronto followed a similar trajectory of urbanization as most of the major cities in the United States. It was founded by Native Americans because of its strategic location near waterways, fertile land, and immense natural resources. Toronto saw first a wave of immigration from loyalists fleeing north after the U.S. War of Independence, followed by a 2nd wave during the industrial revolution period similar to the United States, and yet more surges following World War II and changes in immigration laws in the 70s, making it one of the most, if not the most, diverse city in the world. Suburban sprawl occurred but the core city maintained its population and vitality unlike many cities in the states. Today the city of Toronto is the fastest growing city, and the Toronto CMA is the fastest growing metropolitan area in all of Canada and the U.S., overtaking Dallas-Fort Worth in 2019 (2020, Landau). Unlike population growth, urbanization has an end and Canada is beginning to approach it, currently its at 82% urbanized population.

Toronto, in my opinion, is the best city in the world. Granted my experiences coming of age in downtown Toronto were overwhelmingly positive. Thus, it is no wonder that I chose to

describe the city through the eyes of the three urban scholars that most idealized city life; Mumford with his urban drama, Jacobs with her sidewalk ballet, and Florida with his creative class. It is also interesting to note that two of the three scholars, Jacobs and Florida, lived/live in Toronto, a fact I only learned after selecting them. Jane Jacobs is the author that best describes my Toronto. Never during my time there, did I ever feel in danger and now I know that it was because of the reasons described so commonsensically by Jacobs in "The Uses of Sidewalks: Safety". Each point she made I could equate directly with examples I experienced in Toronto. As she described her sidewalk ballet, my own sidewalk ballet came to my memory. Jacobs' battles to protect the city life she loved is admirable, instructive, and inspiring. Toronto owes a great deal of gratitude to Jane Jacobs.

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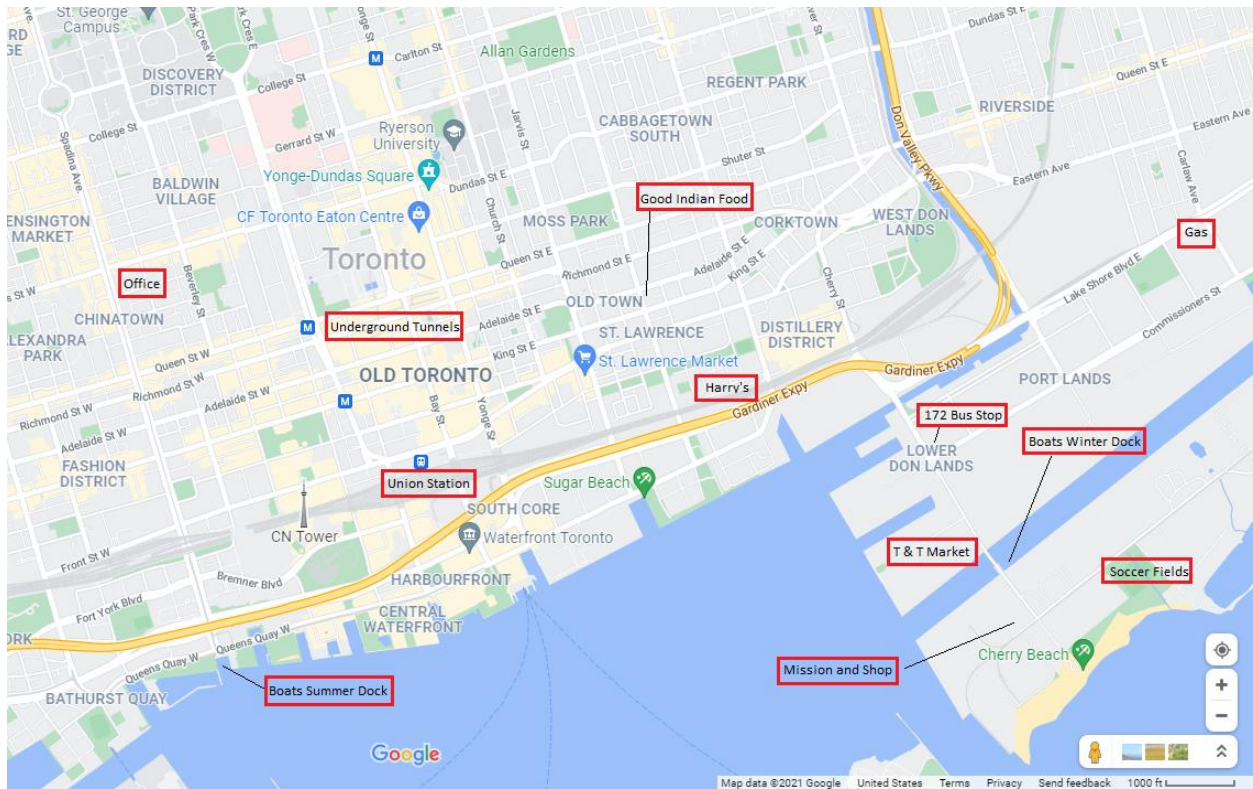
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Appendix: Figures

Figure 1: My Toronto; area of familiarity and key locations in red boxes. Source: Google Maps

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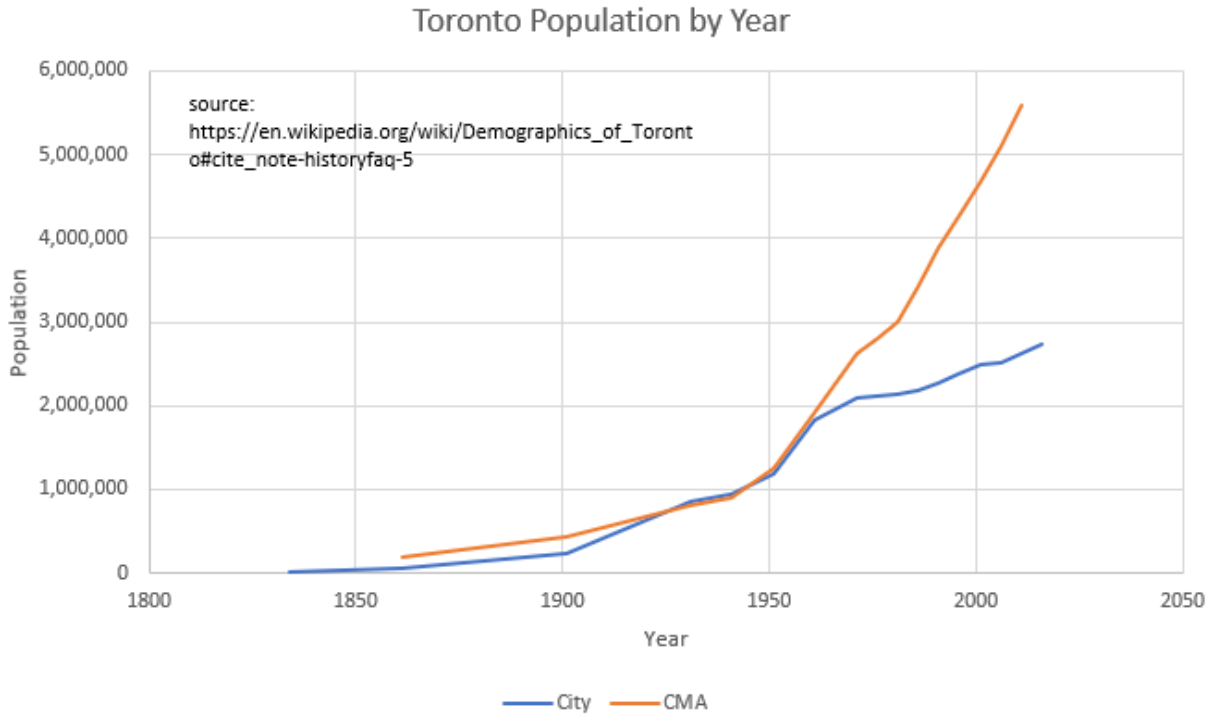
Figure 2: Toronto Population by Year for city proper and census metropolitan area (CMA) [back]

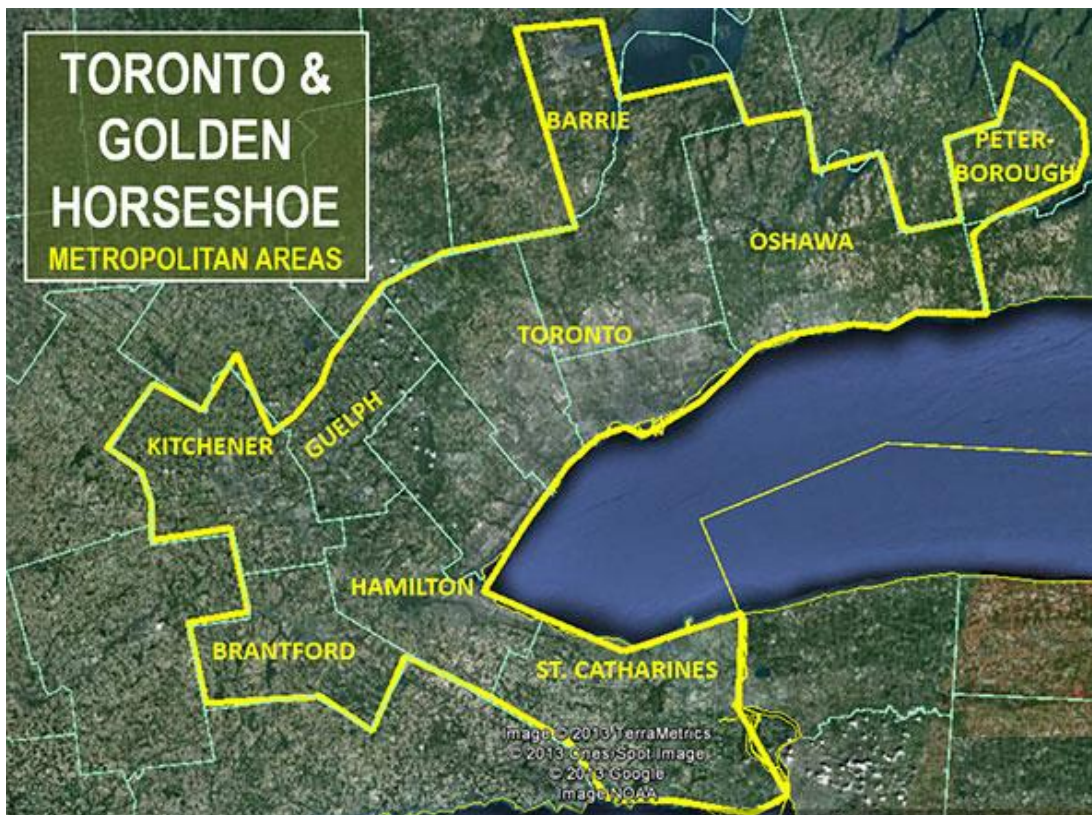Figure 3: The Golden Horseshow, the regional urbanized area which metropolitan Toronto is the center of (Cox, 2013) [back]
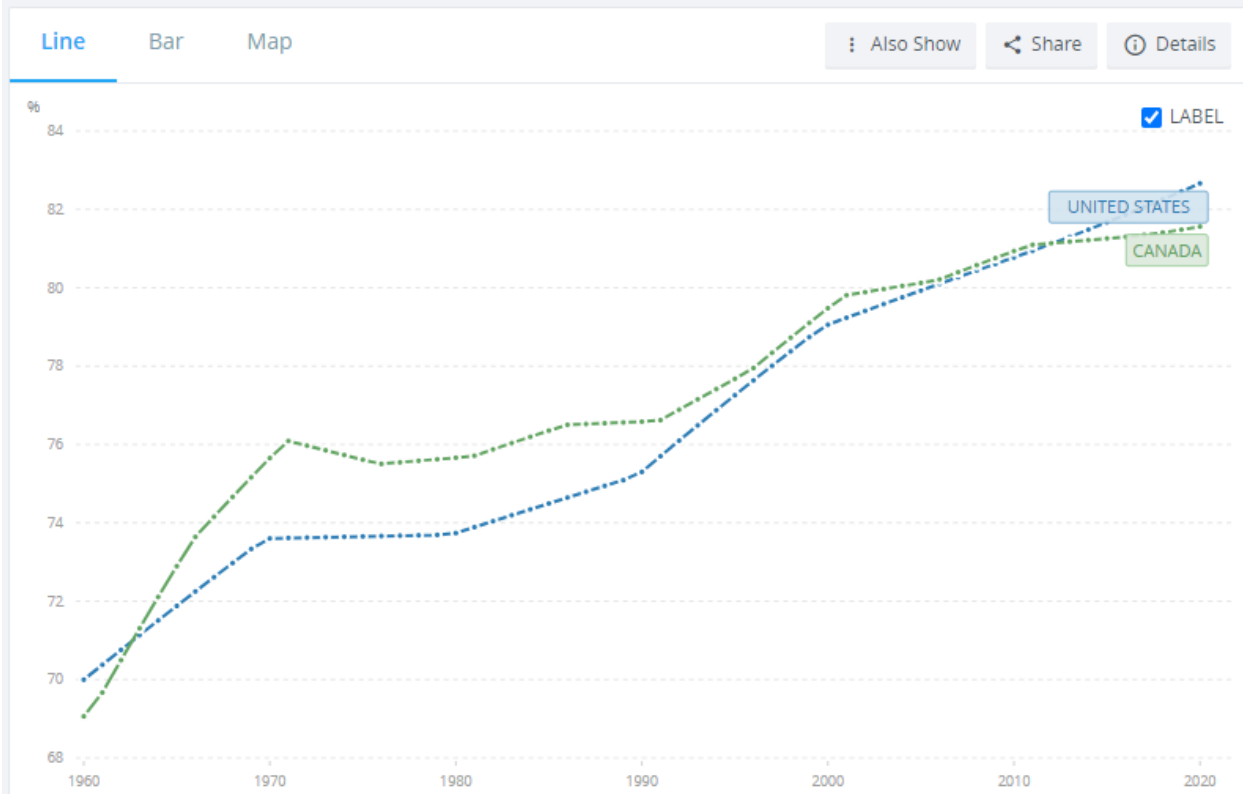
Figure 4: % Urban Population v. Time for 1960-2020 for United States (blue) and Canada (green). Source: The World Bank [back]