The accumulated rust and dust of Toronto’s derelict port received a reprieve on 13 July 2001, when the International Olympic Committee awarded the Games of 2008 to Beijing. In Toronto, the resulting gloom was not just because of dashed hopes for hosting nineteen days of swimming, sprinting, and sweating. Rather, the Olympics were seen as the latest, best hope for new direction, energy and vision—an essential boost of adrenalin. Only such a deadline could sweep away the obstacles to creating a new city on the waterfront.

Cities matter. As Jane Jacobs and others have noted, they are economic engines, their vitality determining the prosperity of regions and nations (Jacobs). Canadians, like most people, go to cities to make their fortune. Our natural environment is also shaped by our urban places. Wild spaces, other species, the future global climate—all are affected by how we move, work, and consume in our cities. As the destination of choice for most immigrants, and the originating point for many exports, cities such as Vancouver, Montreal, and Toronto are the doorways between Canada and the world, generating ever more social and cultural diversity. More intangible, perhaps, are the creative interactions that cities foster: the encounters between reality and imagination, by chance and design, that take place in streets, studios, libraries and laboratories. For many, city air indeed makes one free.¹

Often, of course, cities are viewed not in terms of prosperity, diversity, or creativity, but as the site of problems and challenges. Homelessness and high housing costs. Foodbanks and economic inequities. The exclusion of classes and groups from opportunities that ought to be open to all. Poverty and social dislocation among aboriginal people in cities such as Regina and Winnipeg. Tension and distrust between cities and provinces, and between cities and rural areas. Budget cuts. Pollution. Congestion.

Three quarters of Canadians live in urban areas and face diverse uncertainties. Over the next decades we must develop new vocations for our cities within a rapidly
evolving global economy. We will need to do so while moderating consumption and cutting pollution, if we wish to breathe clean air, drink clear water, and live in a world that has not yet experienced environmental collapse. Long-term investments in transportation and other infrastructure are necessary. Most crucially, as Witold Rybczynski has argued, cities must continue to be livable—balancing rapid change and stable neighbourhoods—they must be places where people actually choose to live (Rybczynski). The urban agenda of the future is a lengthy one.

Given both the potential and the problems of urban areas, Toronto’s reaction to the news from Moscow could only be described as pathetic. Like a slacker who will tidy up only when company is coming, Toronto apparently requires a deadline to do what is necessary to achieve a livable, green and prosperous city. As if a city could be built in a day, or in nineteen.

The reaction was a graphic demonstration of the obstacles to effective city governance. But, as Caroline Andrew has recently explained in this Journal (Vol. 35.4), the origins of these obstacles are less obvious. Some critics mention uninspired urban leadership. Others cite neglect, even antagonism from senior governments: provinces download responsibilities but not resources, while Ottawa displays casual indifference. Economic factors such as declining industries and the departure of decision-making authority, especially to the south, have been noted. Whatever the origins of the malaise, this dissonant combination of urban potential, challenges, and inadequate responses can only lead to more frustration and cynicism among citizens.

The *Journal of Canadian Studies* has recently completed its millennium project: in the four issues of Volume 35 scholars sought to define an agenda for Canadian Studies. For those who study and write about cities, that agenda is very exciting. The challenges of achieving urban prosperity and effective governance, and of overcoming obstacles to collective action, suggest interesting problems in political studies and economics. Urban diversity and creativity inspire research by scholars in sociology, cultural studies, and other fields. The place of cities within their regions, and their impacts on their surroundings, are being examined by researchers in urban geography and environmental studies. Paralleling the role of cities as meeting places for people of diverse cultures and goals, Canadian Studies can provide a space for encounters between these and other disciplines that share an interest in the urban experience.
Especially interesting are efforts to build an integrative understanding. For example, the “Culture of Cities” project, based in Montreal and Toronto, is examining the tension between the individuality of cities and the forces that can render them indistinct (see www.yorku.ca/culture_of_cities/). Have differences in politics, local economies, or cultures generated characteristically “Canadian” urban spaces and styles? Contrasts with European or Asian cities are often noted, but with the homogenizing forces of global media, travel and trade, are these contrasts becoming blurred? Fifteen years ago John Mercer and Michael Goldberg described the notion of a “North American city” as a myth (Goldberg and Mercer)—but, in an age of urban sprawl and downtown decline in Canada, and the apparent rediscovery by Americans of their cities, is the “myth” becoming reality? Cross-border comparative studies can help answer such questions.

Cities in Canada present a contradiction. They struggle to govern themselves effectively, distracted by trivialities, overwhelmed by, or sometimes ignoring, the challenges they face. And yet they are the places most Canadians choose to live. Asking why this is so, and whether it can remain so, leads to questions as complex as the cities themselves. But facing these questions directly will certainly be more interesting, and more productive, than simply playing games. Such questions will also help define the agenda of the *Journal of Canadian Studies*, as it contributes to conversations about our urban nation.

Works Cited


1. After an old German proverb: “Stadtluft macht frei” (City air makes you free).