

Creating Environments for Health: Mapping Urban Recreational Land Use, 1940s-1990s

In Canada and the United States aerial photos have been regularly collected since the 1920s by federal agencies natural resource management, urban development, and to track environmental change. As a result, tens of millions of aerial photos are housed in national repositories, a vast but underutilized visual archive of historical land use data. Though scholars have used aerial imagery in rural and agricultural geospatial research, such as Sylvester and Rupley's reconsideration of Dust Bowl landscapes (2012), the use of aerial photo archives remain undeveloped for urban and suburban history, especially as these intersect with the theme of environmental health. This paper presents research drawn from a larger project that combined social history and geomatics engineering methods to use aerial photographs to create new visual sources for the study of urban planning over the long 20th century.

Using the case study of Fredericton New Brunswick, a typical small city on Canada's east coast, we create a mosaicked time series of aerial photos to examine the shifting landscapes of parks, recreational spaces, and green zoning over the post war decades. Beginning with a 1947 mosaic, we follow spatial changes over six mosaics created for every decade to 1997. This reveals new and important information about the designation, location and use of recreational and green spaces and adjacent sport facilities over a period of intentional social and economic "modernization." Analyzed against archival sources related to municipal planning and development, these sources offer new opportunities to study social land use, in this case illuminating new histories of environment, recreation, health and wellness.

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