

BRANTFORD'S CITY PLANNING:
THE STRUGGLE FOR GROWTH & STATUS, AND THE IMPACT OF WWI

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Introduction

Brantford had established itself as a major economic center in Ontario prior to World War One, and was striving to keep its footing as a prosperous community. Its steady and optimistic economic growth, in both business and individual prosperity, led to the commission of a report by Toronto landscape architects L.A. Dunington and H.B. Grubb. This plan outlined numerous suggestions for development that would enhance the economic growth of Brantford. With the onset of WWI and throughout the war's duration, the city experienced economic hardships demonstrated through a decrease in building, a freeze on city improvements, and the inability to implement any of the vision from the Dunington-Grubb report. City expansion and advancement suffered extensively during the Great War, but there was evidence of limited prosperity in individual household spending due to war effort employment. A short-term economic boom followed the war's end, but the brief economic upswing was soon marred by the onset of the Great Depression, which impeded economic growth and the implementation of the vision for the city of Brantford. The economic struggle of Brantford paralleled that of other towns and cities throughout Canada. However, where some of these towns and cities were able to position themselves for economic recovery over this span of time, Brantford has continued to struggle, and, to this day, has not fully recovered from the adverse economic impact of World War One.

Prior to 1914 and World War One, Brantford was a thriving economic centre. M.P. Lloyd Harris accurately conveyed the economic climate of the city around 1909. Brantford was on its way to becoming a city driven by industry. Harris stated that "Outsiders are continually expressing surprise at the development and growth of Brantford, and our City's progress has

been the envy of other cities.”¹ There were industries based in Brantford that had international recognition, such as Massey-Harris Co., and Cockshutt Plow Co. In fact, by 1914 Brantford had grown to be the third largest industrial exporter in Canada.²

There was a climate of security in Brantford’s economic condition, which lead to the creation of a Parks Board and the subsequent commission of Toronto landscape architects H.B. and L.A. Dunington-Grubb. The goal of this ambitious plan was to anticipate the needs of the city over the next fifty years. The revolutionary concepts offered by Dunington-Grubb pertained to every aspect of the city’s development, including plans for a new City Centre, which focused around a highly anticipated Bell Memorial Monument. Then the onset of World War One brought economic hardships and a realignment of priorities, placing on hold the visioning, and shaping future conceptions for the city. A fuller examination of the implications of World War One forms the basis of the issues explored in this paper. Following the end of the war, the need to establish a space and structure to commemorate those lost in the war took on over-riding importance. During this period immediately following the war, the City of Brantford experienced a brief economic expansion, but this was short-lived due to the onset of the Great Depression. With a weakened economy on a national and international scale, many of the visionary plans for the city, as outlined in the Dunington-Grubb report, continued to be placed on hold, as the reality of sustained economic hardship ensued. However, the desire for economic expansion and the beautification of Brantford has remained, and some of the suggestions in the visioning document have been implemented over the years.

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¹ W.B. Wood, “Why There Must be a ‘Greater Brantford’”. *Expositor Greater Brantford Number, October 1909*. (Brantford, ON), 1909.

² Robert Clark, *A Glimpse of the Past*. (Brant Historical Society, 1966), 36.

City of Brantford Ontario: Preliminary Report to the Parks Commission on Future Development & Improvement

The members of the Board of Park Management in Brantford wanted to take full advantage of the natural beauty of the city and make provisions so “...that what is worthy may be conserved; that mistakes may be avoided; that the aim for the future may always be to make Brantford convenient, healthy, and beautiful.”³ Here, it is interesting to note that Frank Cockshutt is Chairman of the Grounds Committee, which provides evidence that the Cockshutt family name was widely recognized as contributing to Brantford’s economic success and world recognition. As such, they had invested much into the city already, and it would be in their interest to promote such an innovative report that aimed to create a better Brantford. The Dunington-Grubb report outlined that the health of a city is first built upon the “...lines of economy and efficiency, and secondly upon lines of beauty.”⁴ Up until the onset of the war, Brantford’s economy was booming. The view at the time was that the economic climate would only continue to be positive. One could assert that the health of Brantford as a city was stable, given its prominent standing. At this point they could afford to turn their focus to beautifying the city. Through adequate city planning and a robust park system throughout the city, Brantford could outwardly express the economic confidence being felt in industry.

The Dunington-Grubb report was published in December of 1914, in close proximity to the onset of World War I. The war resulted in the derailment of the well-intentioned plan in this report to the Parks Commission, and ultimately the plan did not receive the attention that it deserved. The time span between the release of the report and the onset of the war was not large

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³ L. A. Dunington and H. B. Grubb, *City of Brantford, Ontario: preliminary report to the Parks Commission on future development & improvement*. (Toronto: Dunington-Grubb Landscape Architects, 1914), Remarks from Members of Board of Park Management.

⁴ Ibid., 22.

enough, as the suggestions for city improvement were on a grand scale and would require extensive amounts of money, resources, time, and labour to complete. Even before the threat of the war, Dunington-Grubb noted that town planning is an arduous task and the “...principal reason why town planning control is so exceedingly difficult to exercise in this country is the lack of a permanent body.”⁵ Not having the stability in rule meant that “...any policy adopted by one council might easily be reversed at a later date.”⁶ The report provided suggestions for city development and improvement in a number of areas; however even after the war, “... other priorities intervened to prevent the implementation of any of its suggestions.”⁷

On August 4th, 1914, when official news that Britain had entered the war made it to the city, Gary Muir, local historian and author of *Brantford a City's Century 1895-2000*, contended that “Almost overnight the city’s attention had turned from local and regional matters, to national and international concerns.”⁸ As the ‘Birmingham of Canada’, Brantford’s attachment to Britain was indisputable.⁹ Although their loyalties were strongly known, Muir asserted that this city was not atypical in its reaction to the war. Muir provided insight into the fate of city plans during this time, noting: “...the war dominated every aspect of the city’s existence from its industrial output, to its social life, to its curtailment of civic projects.”¹⁰

The State of City Projects

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⁵ Dunington-Grubb, *Preliminary report to the Parks Commission*, 42.

⁶ Ibid., 42.

⁷ Gary Muir, *Brantford a City's Century, vol. 1: 1895-1945*. (Brantford: Tupuna Press, 1999), 143.

⁸ Muir, *Brantford a City's Century*, 118.

⁹ Ibid., 7. Brantford was dubbed the “Birmingham of Canada” by an article in *The Monetary Times* in 1899.

¹⁰ Ibid., 155.

The initial slump that was felt in the economic sector at the onset of the war meant that resources had to be devoted to public works for unemployed individuals. As war contracts began to come to the city, “[t]he number of men employed on relief projects declined dramatically...”¹¹ resulting in decisions made at city hall operating on “...the unspoken practice of undertaking only what could be paid for...”¹² In early 1915, Muir reported that very little was being spent on civic improvements, and by the end of that year “...public expenditures were pronounced to be “*practically nil*.”¹³ Surprisingly, a newspaper article from the *Weekly Expositor* boasted about continued city betterment with its headline: “Many Homes Bettered in Brantford: war depression has largely cut off business, but many property owners here have altered, enlarged, and improved their properties...”¹⁴ This article lists in great detail the city permits issued to homeowners who were granted approval for additions and slight modifications to their homes. Residents were adding luxuries like garages, verandahs, sun parlours and porches. This article notes that measuring or assessing building activities can be both a sensitive and accurate indication of the financial status of a nation, and likewise of a city. Reflecting on the economic climate in the years leading up to the war further reinforces the assertions in this article. Even during the time of the war, individual stakeholders attained a particular level of wealth, no doubt through their war-time related employment. Even though conditions were unstable and the city had cut down on expenditures, (only attending to absolute requirements,) it raises an interesting point:

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¹¹Ibid., 141.

¹² Muir, *Brantford a City's Century*, 141.

¹³ Ibid., 141.

¹⁴ “Many Homes Bettered in Brantford”. *Weekly Brantford Expositor*. 2 Sept. 1915. Retrieved from the Brant Museum & Archives.

Prosperity usually breeds discontent with present conditions, and one of the first thoughts of a person enjoying increasing degrees of financial good fortune is to make improvements to his place of business or his home.¹⁵

Reflecting back upon the lack of civic improvements, a very good argument can be made that civic prosperity was not on the rise. However, property owners were discontent with their present conditions and were benefiting financially from employment brought on by war contracts. Having a little disposable income, coupled with the fact that the war was expected to be over by Christmas 1915, citizens wanted to show personal prominence within the community. This display of prosperity would also serve as a visual reminder that as the troops were fighting to make advancements for the Crown, citizens were also making personal gains on the home front.

The lead civic authority for that time, Mayor J.W. Bowlby, was quoted as assuring the public that no new city debentures would be issued, and if they were it would only be “under dire circumstances.”¹⁶ One such exception to limiting city spending did occur, as indicated later in this article. *The Expositor* listed permits issued for most of 1915, with the E.B. Crompton & Co. Ltd. department store an obvious anomaly, as rebuilding of the store was

“...necessitated after the big fire which occurred on March 3 last.”¹⁷ The local history section of the Brantford Public Library aids in mapping out the progression of different historic events in the city during



Figure 1. Fire destroys E.B. Crompton & Co. Ltd. (McKellar & MacDonald-Krueger, *Brantford...A Passage Through Time*, 25)

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Muir, *Brantford a City's Century*, 141.

¹⁷ “Many Homes Bettered in Brantford”. *Weekly Brantford Expositor*. 2 Sept. 1915. Retrieved from the Brant Museum & Archives.

this time, and also showcases the overwhelming presence of industry in the downtown core. In

this map of historic sites and events, documenting the different fires, it is noted that:

A fire destroyed this store at 90-96 Colborne Street on March 3, 1915 and caused extensive damage to the adjoining stores, John Bishop and Son, hardware merchants James Young, jeweler (Brantford Expositor, March 4, 1915, p. 1) E.B. Crompton and Company sold household goods of all kinds, dry goods ... Several firefighters were injured while battling the blaze which took nine hours to put out with the loss estimated to be \$200,000.¹⁸

Another civic investment that constituted an exception to the rule of limited expenditure came in response to the deteriorating Lorne Bridge. This vital connection to West Brant was condemned in June 1915 by an engineer's report. It was deemed "...unsafe, and advised that it could only be used for traffic if costly repairs were put in place."¹⁹ Measures were taken to try to patch up the bridge because even though the work for repair was initially figured to cost \$500:

... after an expert engineer was secured, it was found that not only the surface planking was bad, but the very joists were rotten, and these had to be replaced ... with traffic held up for but two days, and the council seemed to think that it was well worth the \$2,500 expended.²⁰

To the standards of the time, the bridge had been fixed, but as regretfully noted by Alderman Suddaby, "...some of the old joists had been put back again. This was penny wise and pound foolish;"²¹ This proved to be a temporary fix, and an improper use of city funds, as in 1919 the bridge once again became dangerous to cross, unable to bear even a single heavy load. This added to the agitation of residents of West Brant who felt isolated from the downtown core.

Reinforcing the climate of financial restraint is the following account by Muir:

In 1917, the city treasurer ... acknowledged that were conditions normal, [and] there were many projects that should be undertaken, but he pointed out that,

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¹⁸ "Mapping Brantford's History: Historic Sites and Events". *Brantford Public Library*.

¹⁹ Muir, *Brantford a City's Century*, 142.

²⁰ "Many Homes Bettered in Brantford". *Weekly Brantford Expositor*. 2 Sept. 1915. Retrieved from the Brant Museum & Archives.

²¹ Ibid.

‘...we must recognize that conditions are not normal, that we are in a period of financial uncertainty, and that present financial conditions do not encourage us to add to our already heavy burden.’²²

The work that was done on the bridge tried to prevent any more costs being incurred by the city.

Repairs to this bridge continued in 1922, but after cracks on the foundation were discovered, it was recommended that a

reinforced concrete bridge be built. A contract for just over \$200,000 was awarded in 1923, and in August of 1924

Lieutenant Governor of

Ontario, Harry Cockshutt,

formally opened the bridge.²³

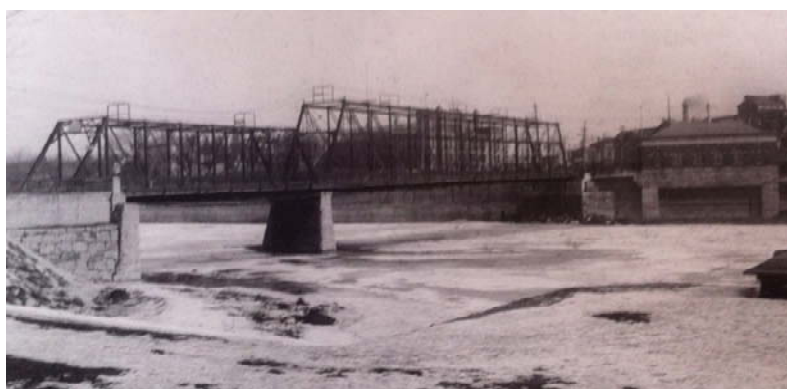


Figure 2. Deteriorating iron structure, Lorne Bridge c. 1916. Crossing over the Grand River to the Armoury [far right]. (McKellar & MacDonald-Krueger, *Brantford...A Passage Through Time*, 11)

The Importance of Parks and City Space

Although the City of Brantford bore a heavy burden during the wartime, having the foresight of planning for a few civic improvements was essential. The Dunington-Grubb report noted that a parks system was a very ‘...important issue in any scheme of civic betterment.’²⁴

The architects subdivided parks into different categories depending on intended purpose. One of the defined categories, Park Reservations, was comprised of “...considerable tracts of land on the outskirts of a city,” preserved for the citizens of Brantford and within easy reach.²⁵

Discussed in further detail was the great importance of acquiring Mohawk Park. *Remember*

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²² Muir, *Brantford a City's Century*, 141-2.

²³ Ibid., 171, 178.

²⁴ Dunington-Grubb, *Preliminary report to the Parks Commission*, 22.

²⁵ Ibid., 22.

Brantford 1877-1977 cites the area's heavily timbered 55 acres as one of the finest natural parks in Ontario.²⁶ This open space was extremely desirable, and in 1915, the city purchased this property for \$25,000 from the Lovejoy Estate.²⁷ More than 4,000 people attended the grand opening ceremony on Labour Day that September.²⁸ The high citizen turnout speaks to the sense of community and solidarity felt in Brantford and the need to have public places where people could congregate to enjoy the abundant natural beauty this city had to offer. The previous year, Dunington-Grubb stressed the significance of Mohawk Park for the advancement of the east end of the city. The report highlighted its favourable position in "...direct connection with Colborne Street and leading down to the canal basin this stretch of woodland, already beautified by nature's hand, is admirably suited to the purposes of rest and recreation."²⁹

Their recommendations were to acquire this land for the people at the earliest possibility, and thankfully, the city was able to follow through with the acquisition of this important city space.



Figure 3. Mohawk Park (McKellar & MacDonald-Krueger, *Brantford...A Passage Through Time*, 76)

Another important priority for the city was to establish a City Centre. The reasoning behind this was to provide a connection between the Grand Trunk Station and West Brantford.

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²⁶ Arn Huffman, *Remember Brantford 1877-1977*. Kinsmen Club of Brantford. (Mercantile Press, 1977).

²⁷ Clark, *A Glimpse of the Past*, 62.

²⁸ Stacey McKellar and Cindy MacDonald-Krueger. *Brantford...A Passage Through Time: Photographs from the Brant Museum and Archives Collection*. (Brant Historical Society, 2006), 76.

²⁹ Dunington-Grubb, *Preliminary report to the Parks Commission*, 28.

The Dunington-Grubb report stated that this vital component “... would also link up some of the most important civic features of Brantford, including the Grand Trunk Station, The Bell Telephone Memorial, Jubilee Terrace, Lorne Bridge over the Grand River, and Oxford Park.”³⁰ Fortunately, the land necessary for this vision had already been secured for the Bell Telephone Memorial, and the report noted that “...the development of a park around it [was] a necessity. As this of itself [would] very greatly enhance the value of surrounding property....”³¹ Unfortunately, the full vision of a City Centre surrounding the Bell Memorial was never fully actualized. However, the report – and the sentiment evident in the establishment of the Bell Memorial – acknowledged the importance of forming a City Centre and visioning for the future.

Landscape architects, Dunington and Grubb also warned the city about making changes to the already well-established Market. The prime location contributed to its flourishing success, as it was situated “...at the crossing of the two main thoroughfares in the city, [and had] developed [as] the natural business centre.”³² This barren city square did



Figure 4. A bustling Market Square in front of City Hall. (Brant Museum & Archives)

not conform to the more formal architectural character of the surrounding buildings, like the nearby City Hall, and was consequently viewed as an eyesore, when vendors and citizens alike would gather on Saturdays to sell and buy local goods. It was adamantly argued that removing

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³⁰ Ibid., 24., Also see Appendix.

³¹ Ibid., 25.

³² Dunington-Grubb, *Preliminary report to the Parks Commission*, 38.

the Market at this time, simply on the basis of its unsightliness, would be a serious misstep in city planning. Dunington-Grubb maintained that:

Open squares of this sort in the centre of a town are so rare an occurrence and of such priceless benefit to the city, especially when it grows large, that the destruction of the square would constitute nothing short of a civic calamity.³³

In 1914, Dunington-Grubb contended that Brantford had the potential to become a “...highly organized, commercial, manufacturing centre of tomorrow,”³⁴ but that “uprooting [the market] at this time would seriously endanger its extinction”³⁵ as it had become so interwoven with city life.#

Commemoration and Future City Growth/Prospects

As the end of the war approached, Brantford found itself needing to adjust priorities. The immediate concern was to shift from war contracts and manufacturing to “...retooling its industries and trying to reassert its position in the hierarchy of Canadian cities.”³⁶ Civic improvements that were pushed aside due to a lack of funds during the war effort could now be given proper attention. Muir explains that:

One of Brantford’s immediate postwar priorities was the erection of some form of memorial to commemorate the sacrifice made by the over 600 Brant County soldiers and nurses who had died in the conflict.³⁷

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³³ Ibid., 39.

³⁴ Ibid., 37-8.

³⁵ Ibid., 39.

³⁶ Muir, *Brantford a City’s Century*, 159.

³⁷ Ibid., 165.

The city was able to procure a considerable amount of land close to the armouries for a monument, with the land surrounding it to be developed as parkland.³⁸ In 1921, a permanent War Memorial Association was established, and a plan was completed in 1923, but it took almost a decade before an artist was selected and adequate funds were acquired, with the final completion of this project in 1933. Despite the city's good intentions, postwar economic hardships hampered the progress of quickly creating a commemorative monument.³⁹



Figure 5. Unveiling of the Brant War Memorial, May 1933. (Muir, *Brantford a City's Century*, 220)

Steady Stream of Building

In a snapshot from the *Weekly Expositor's* August 9, 1919 edition, a headline stated that the building boom forecasted for the Spring had in fact occurred. The city passed the half million mark in issuing permits and the author predicted that there would be no foreseeable end to this increase in building activity.⁴⁰ The newspaper projected that the present activity would continue for years, and the evidence indicated the same trend. *The Expositor* reported 200 new homes had already been constructed that year, and a dozen factory extensions, a new theatre and a new school were in the process of being built. Many citizens were adding garages to their dwellings,

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³⁸ Ibid., 166.

³⁹ Muir, *Brantford a City's Century*, 166.

⁴⁰ "Steady Stream of Building Permits Issued this Year". *Weekly Brantford Expositor*. 9 Aug. 1919. Retrieved from the Brant Museum & Archives.

an indication of personal prosperity. The number and subsequent value of permits issued continued to decrease as the war progressed. However, 1918 saw the first indication of dramatic increases in the value of permits issued. In only the first seven months of 1919, the value of permits (January to July) stood at \$506,875. If calculated on the same trajectory, the value of the total year would surpass that of 1918 by nearly \$100,000. People held the genuine belief that "... business is on the upward climb ... there is no sign of a slump. The world is crying for production and until the world is satisfied with the things it needs, the present activity will continue."⁴¹ The survey of building records since 1907 illustrates the rise and fall of the economic market, and concretely shows a steady increase since the wars' end. Unfortunately, this positive trend was short-lived due to the onset of the Great Depression, which dramatically curtailed economic activity on a world-wide scale.

Beautifying Brantford

Alan Gordon's *Making Public Pasts: The Contested Terrain of Montreal's Public Memories, 1891-1930* is useful in illustrating that Brantford was not operating in isolation. The ideas suggested for civic improvement and beautification in Dunington-Grubb's preliminary report were in line with the 'City Beautiful' movement. Gordon notes that "[i]n the 1910s, City Beautiful thought began to influence even the most practical matters of city planning. Urban theorists envisioned a more functional urban environment ..."⁴² The overall plan for an aesthetic environment also aspired to draw a connection between history and memory, and urban

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⁴¹ "Steady Stream of Building Permits Issued this Year". *Weekly Brantford Expositor*. 9 Aug. 1919. Retrieved from the Brant Museum & Archives.

⁴² Alan Gordon, *Making Public Pasts: The Contested Terrain of Montreal's Public Memories, 1891-1930*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 44.

planning.⁴³ Judge A.D. Hardy expressed a vision for Brantford's future, referring to it as the city beautiful. Provisions suggested by Dunington-Grubb for the City Centre were once again given attention in 1927:

The City Hall will then be in the new Memorial Park, between the Bell and War Memorial, an area affording, with the West street boulevard, one of the most beautiful civic centres and parks in all Canada.⁴⁴

Brantford's Bell Memorial followed the intentions of the 'City Beautiful' philosophy, and Gordon emphasizes this with the fact that between 1891 and 1914 a civic focus was to commemorate historical, national and local history through the erecting of monuments.⁴⁵

In 1925, *The Expositor* contended that "beautifying Brantford should be a general and a cordially co-operative move on the part of citizens."⁴⁶ Interestingly, Frank Cockshutt – member of the Board of Park Management that commissioned the Dunington-Grubb report in 1914 – was quoted in this article as saying he was "...intensely interested in plans for a far-reaching scheme in town planning..."⁴⁷ A prominent city figure, he was still searching for ways to bolster Brantford's status. It was up to the citizens to make up for the lack of city beautification during the war. Although the Bell Memorial was touted as a civic beauty spot, there was still more to accomplish. It was first necessary to clean up, as "dirty, unsightly avenues to the city [were] not favorably impressive to visitors and tourists..."⁴⁸, and did not portray a strong economy – the type of image Brantford was still struggling to regain.

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⁴³ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁴ A.D Hardy, "A Vision for the Future." *Expositor Semi-Centennial Edition, 1877-1927* (Brantford, ON), 1927, p.107

⁴⁵ Gordon, *Making Public Pasts*, 43.

⁴⁶ "Beautifying of Brantford Should be a General and a Cordially Co-Operative Move on the Part of Citizens". *Weekly Brantford Expositor*. 2 May 1925. Retrieved from the Brant Museum & Archives.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

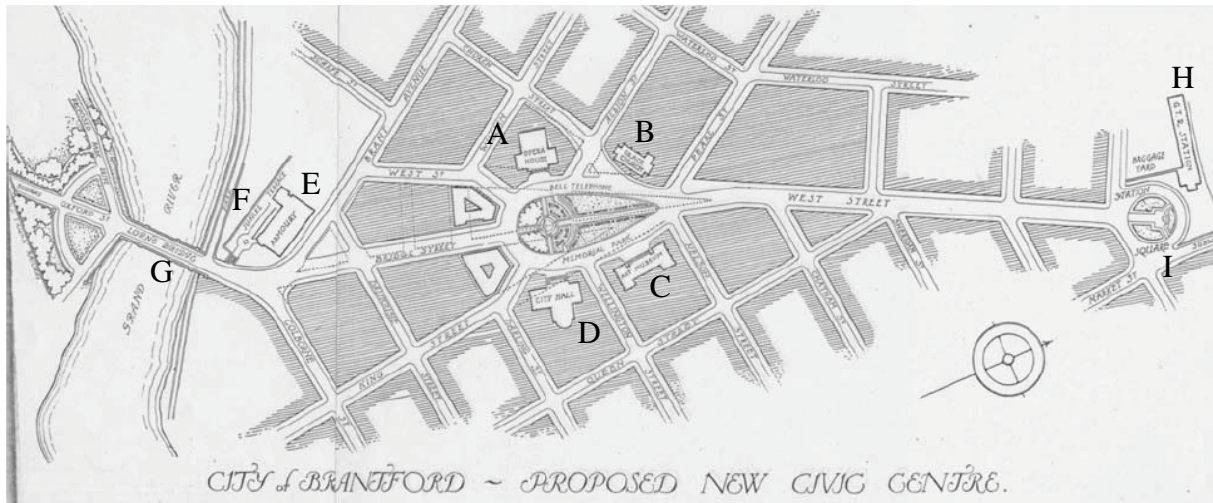
Conclusion

Following the Great War's end, city officials and citizens believed the economic climate of Brantford was on the rise. Contrary to this belief, Muir speculated that Brantford would not be able to fully recover from the First World War. A temporary industrial surge was experienced after the Armistice that ended the Great War, but economic optimism "...soon dissipated and left the city struggling with serious unemployment and relief problems."⁴⁹ The onset of the Great Depression marred any progress the city would make, and was one source that led to setbacks in the years ahead. Research for this paper has led to the conclusion that city planning and improvements should be ongoing and rooted in visionary and well researched plans, such as the Dunington-Grubb report. Despite setbacks, whether political, military, or economic, it is essential for city plans to be ongoing and updated. Having a solid framework for politicians and city planners to refer to enables positive change, and helps the city to be prepared to facilitate targeted future growth as the opportunity arises and the economic climate permits. Ongoing updates are necessary for careful planning, and are required to address existing problems and issues, and prevent future mistakes in city planning. Referencing previous reports and sponsoring new plans would serve the city well. Analyzing and reflecting upon the past is a powerful tool to help the city prepare for the future. Brantford holds great potential for growth and the improvement of its status, and city efforts need to continue focusing on the creation of dynamic and livable spaces, and the advancement of prosperity for its citizens, while remaining centered on a solid plan and vision.

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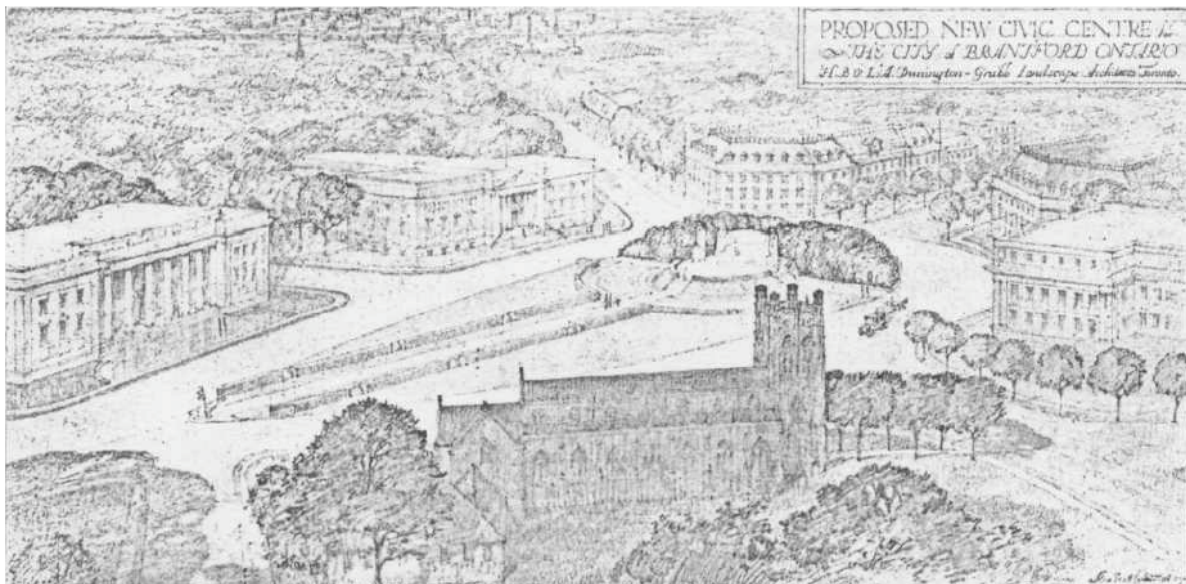
⁴⁹ Muir, *Brantford a City's Century*, 159.

APPENDIX: BRANTFORD'S NEW CITY CENTRE



i. Proposed plan with the Bell Telephone Memorial Park in the centre, immediately surrounded by: the Opera House [A], Grace Church [B], an Art Museum [C], and City Hall [D]. The Armoury [E], Jubilee Terrace [F], and Lorne Bridge [G] are already situated to the left. The Grand Trunk Railway station [H] and Station Square [I], another proposed park, are at the end of West Street on the right.

Dunington, L. A., and H. B. Grubb. *City of Brantford, Ontario: preliminary report to the Parks Commission on future development & improvement*. Figure 9.



ii. View from behind Grace Church of the intended Civic Centre. Sketch depicts the intention for an Opera house, Art Museum, and new City Hall. Dunington-Grubb advised all property surrounding the memorial to be acquired by the city.

Dunington, L. A., and H. B. Grubb. *City of Brantford, Ontario: preliminary report to the Parks Commission on future development & improvement*. Figure 1.

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