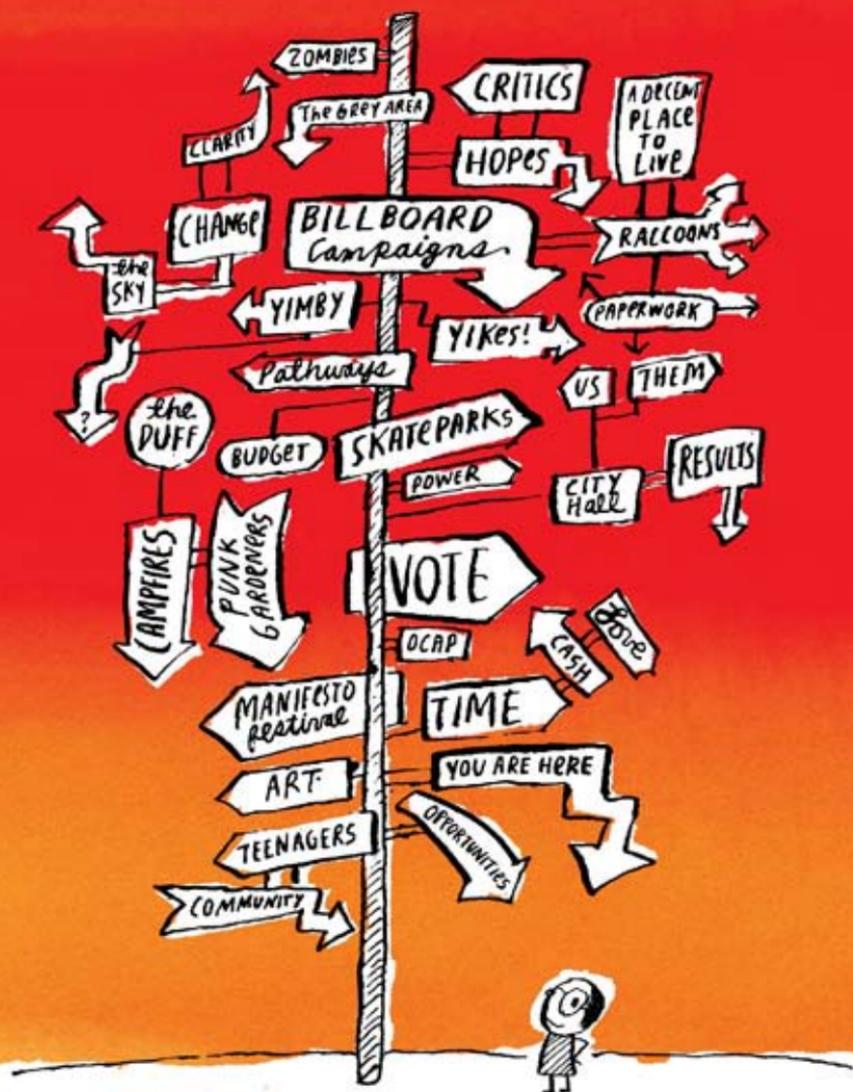


THE UTOPIA SERIES

LOCAL MOTION

The Art of Civic Engagement in Toronto



Edited by Dave Meslin, Christina Palassio & Alana Wilcox



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Coach House Books, Toronto

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Foreword

Dionne Brand

This is a remarkable city when one considers all the gifts its multicultural multitudes present. Yet its politicians are gloomy about its future, if their dire rhetoric is to be believed. They imagine it as a bloated and corpulent society in need of reining in. They describe a city in which the needs of people are excessive and unreasonable. Some suggest our problems lie in too many of the wrong sort of people: illegals – laughably raising the spectre of illegal bodies to a citizenry of immigrants. They tell us less public transit is better, fewer schools are better, fewer teachers are better and even less political representation is better. These solutions, in a city growing more populous and cosmopolitan by the second. George Orwell said, in a 1945 essay, that, in literary works, favourable utopias seemed alike in postulating perfection while being unable to suggest happiness. I'm struck by how apt Orwell's description is for the views of our municipal politicians. Cuts to every social good seem to be their idea of perfection. Happiness is another matter.

Wary of sounding apocalyptic myself, I find Toronto in a standoff, the standoff between those who run it and those who live in it. There is a failure of those who rule to truly acknowledge those who live in the city as anything more than the projections of their own fears. Orwell describes the representation of happiness in literary utopias as boring and desultory, but our politicians don't even offer us visions of a boring and desultory happiness; they do not even offer us relief from hardship and, in fact, they earnestly promise us *more* hardship.

The future seems strikingly unavailable to our politicians – they are all in a holding pattern. None even bother to fabricate a decent lie of a utopia, none even have the sincere but mad

imagination of, say, Margaret Atwood's *Crake*, and none are as daring or ordinary as her *Gardeners*. Instead they are militant in their embrace of a restricting, distressing future of nothing.

There is a city here waiting to be imagined. I know. There must be, because I see it each time I walk out of my house. I was affected by a detail of the September 2010 fire in St. James Town. Police found more than two hundred 'canary like' birds in one apartment. Now I know this story will turn out badly, for they say the birds were in poor condition; and it may be that the bird keeper was keeping birds for sale and in all probability it is all illegal and tawdry. But I prefer to read this lacuna into the life of the city differently. Someone came home each day to two hundred or more birds, someone lived in an apartment surrounded by two hundred birds – a small apartment in a maze of small apartments, in a maze of apartment buildings in downtown Toronto, with the city outside bustling, noisy, hot, cold, amid the travails and anxiety of subway and streetcar, construction and sirens – that's vision. I'd like to vote for someone with that kind of imagination.

I tell my youngest sister about this person and she tells me, Oh, that's not unusual. She happens to know a guy who raised birds, hundreds, in his basement in Scarborough. He fed them different-coloured dyes in their food so their feathers would turn those colours, she says. Are you kidding me, I ask. No, no, she replies, his wife got fed up with the noise though, so now he collects electronics. Then there was a family in the downtown who grew a fig tree every summer only to dig it up and bury it for the winter and then replant it to grow again the next summer. All for the brief possibility of a few fresh figs. So the person in St. James Town is not unique. Well, I think that's even more astonishing. It looks like there are eruptions of imagination all over the city.

And that's what this book is for. The imaginations of our politicians are bankrupt. And, as Orwell also said, it's not that we want 'some central-heated, air-conditioned, strip-lighted Paradise ...' But a city with an imagination for birds and fig trees is a beginning step, and one many of us are willing to imagine into being. The city, after all, belongs to us.

Dionne Brand is the Poet Laureate of the City of Toronto. She has written nine volumes of poetry and four works of fiction. For her poetry she has received the Governor General's Award, the Pat Lowther Award and the Trillium Book Award, and for her fiction she has received the Toronto Book Award. She is also Professor of English in the School of English and Theatre Studies at the University of Guelph.

Introduction

Dave Meslin, Christina Palassio, Alana Wilcox

As this book goes to press, Toronto finds itself in the throes of a municipal election. The pages of this book are being printed, folded and glued together as voters cast ballots that will determine the political leadership of the city for the next four years. The timing is not a coincidence: the premise of this book is that civic engagement shouldn't start and end on election day. We often get so wrapped up in election coverage and the celebrification of politics that we forget that cities are shaped by the people who live in them. Voting for and electing a city council is just one step in participating in civic life; after we elect our mayor and members of Council, we need to find a way to work together to build the city we want.

When we think about politics, we often think of provincial or federal issues: health care, gun control or foreign aid. But the local level is where we can have the greatest impact, because the municipal government is more accessible, tangible and immediately relevant than its provincial or federal counterparts. City Hall is where decisions about roads, parks, schools, transit and planning are made. Municipal politicians are more available and approachable than their colleagues at the province and in Ottawa and, without the presence of official party structures, City Hall operates in a much more organic and intuitive way than other levels of government, which means it's a natural starting point for political engagement. Few politicians, however, know how to truly inspire, to shift the political landscape to create new opportunities: most simply operate in the narrow space between the goalposts of existing norms. Real change is most often driven by ordinary people who are stubborn, passionate and motivated.

One thing that has troubled us the most during the run-up to this municipal election is the shift of vocabulary: in much of

the campaign-speak, we are no longer ‘citizens’ but ‘taxpayers.’ This is an unfortunate word because it limits the role we play. Our relationship to the city is not purely financial. We’re not here as customers. We’re here as neighbours and families. In other words, we don’t just pay for the city, we live in it, and we care about the shape it takes and how that affects our lives.

In fact, we think that the word ‘citizen,’ while it automatically entitles us to certain basic rights and privileges, also demands something in exchange. What your city can do for you is important; the flip side, what you can do for your city, is the other half of the deal. It needn’t be as extravagant as building a hospital: you can organize a neighbourhood picnic, fight the demolition of a beautiful building, run for City Council, even just pick up some litter. We can’t wait for the politicians to do these things for us. The way to make our city better is to do it ourselves.

The first five books of the *uTOpia* series looked at great ideas for Toronto, giving voice to bold and creative proposals about culture, the environment, water and food. In these books, contributors talked about creating a Children’s Council, a legal place for street art, a better Brick Works, spaces for community-driven plans for Toronto’s waterfront and urban farms. In *Local Motion*, we shift the focus from the ‘what’ to the ‘how.’ We examine some of the ways our city doesn’t work: Ed Keenan looks at the flaws in our electoral system and how they might be reformed, and Denise Balkissoon considers how we might make City Hall more representative of our diversity. We also explore the lives and stories of Toronto’s city-builders, who show what it means to be civically engaged. Hannah Sung writes about how Tamara Dawit uses music to empower incarcerated youth. John Lorinc profiles Nick Pierre, who worked with Council and the City to build a skate park in his East York neighbourhood. And Catherine Porter talks to the indomitable Jutta Mason, whose

efforts at Dufferin Grove Park, sometimes perpetrated under cover of night, are often cited as an example of the best civic engagement can accomplish. Each of the stories in the book is unique, but common themes emerge: change is collaborative, change requires patience, and to effect change, you have to know how the system works. We offer some help on that front, including tips for navigating the bureaucracy (with great illustrations by Marlena Zuber), and from-the-trenches advice from Jennifer Lewington on winning over the media. Inspiring examples and practical tips give you tools and information you can use to start changing your community for the better.

The most vital ingredient for a healthy, beautiful, creative and prosperous city is strong civic participation. The strength of a city lies not in the corridors of its City Hall, but in its neighbourhoods, where the collective wisdom and passion of its residents transforms ideas and dreams into projects and campaigns. This book profiles community leaders and their projects in the hopes of putting a human face on leadership and perhaps creating in you, the reader, a spark of curiosity to explore your own inner activist.

