



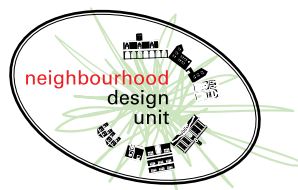
[bærg]: latin burgus; informal: a town or city

William[s]burg

Williamsburg is urban development within Town of Whitby, in Durham Region, 50 km away from Toronto, capital of Ontario, Canada.

Psychogeographical Portrait

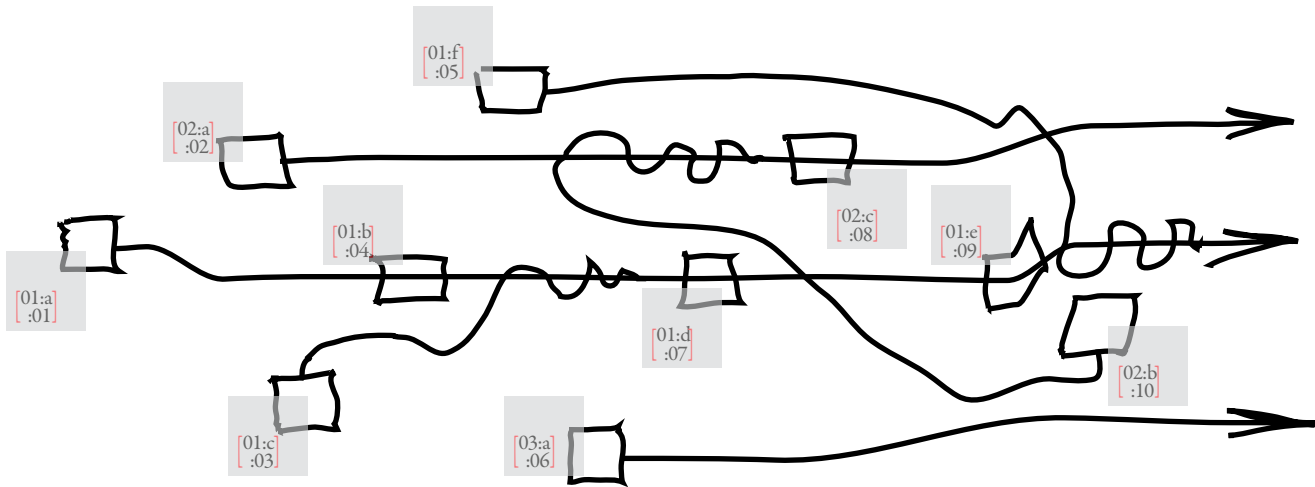
Seneca
Centre for the Built Environment



psychogeography

[urbansquares.com definition]

The subjective analysis of neighbourhood behaviours related to geographic location. A chronological process based on the order of appearance of observed topics, with the time delayed inclusion of other relevant instances.



[<http://www.psygeo.org/essays/psychogeography.php>] →

Psychogeography,

as understood here,

is the active search for, and celebration of, chance and coincidence, concurrently with the divination of patterns and repetitions thrown up by the [meeting/collision] of the chaos and structures of cities, personal histories and interpretations. It is based on the technique of the "dérive", an informed and aware wandering, with continuous observation, through varied environments. It can be sought and can lead anywhere.

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In response to the question of the fellow in the Williamsburg as to what we are doing, the best answer is:

“We’re not quite sure but whatever it turns out to be it will be great, joyous, and incredibly detailed - thick description I think is the term - uncovering the modern meaning/sensibility of the neighbourhood”. [Bill Humber fellow drifter]



What is unique here?

[01] Detached and Semi-Detached Houses



[01:a]
:006



[01:b]
:040

↑ Snout nosed garages, empty lawns, and wide paved driveways but what if people parked back to back on a single lane alongside the house. They might have more room for planting, or for a diminished front lawn allowing houses to be tighter to the street in homage to Kirkpatrick Sale's (Human Scale) appropriate ratio of road width to building height in support of feelings of human comfort and safety while walking those streets.

Yes, there is something unique in this community. All the structures in this neighbourhood are either detached or semi-detached individual houses. Yes, there are some other buildings close by: four schools, one bus shelter, and that's all. Looking through the magnifying glass one might notice some other unique details like size of the house, size of the car [in most cases truck or SUV], or number of the garages behind which house itself is hiding. If you pay really close attention you may notice that not all of the houses have basketball rim on the driveway or that flowers [if any] are of slightly different colour. One more characteristic is noticeable. Nowhere, not even in the park, one can find a bench, where walkers can sit and relax or have a chat, or exchange some news with the neighbour. Together with absence of the sidewalks it must be a signal that walking is not desirable. [Walking is only for city bums, as someone once said!?!]

Only one truly unique instance is a hand impression of the child on the sidewalk, noticeable personal touch and actually very pleasant surprise.

Is that enough or in this case too much for the neighbourhood? If you have to drive 10-15 minutes to the nearest corner store, if everybody who is working needs car and in extreme cases several hours drive a day, people need to be very meticulous to find some satisfaction. Almost no signs "For Sale" anywhere and the extensive expansion of the neighbourhood [page 016] probably means that this is what inhabitants want. Lets try to answer those questions later at the conclusion of this walk. ❖

→ Little hands leave a permanent concrete memory.



[01:c]
:001



[01:d]
:003



[01:e]
:034

First question arising after 10 meters of our walk was not how to create bonds but do these people need and want bonds at all. Only gathering place, created unintentionally, in the whole neighbourhood is a bunch of mailboxes for approximately 45 houses where "citizens" on their way to collect mail occasionally exchange couple of courteous words with their "neighbours". Others are using sides and back of these boxes to communicate not only their services but also some community concerns, like the one below, where residents are warned about the imminent 8-lane highway link coming near this neighbourhood [NIMBY].

How to create bonds?

[02] Gathering Places



[02:b
:047]

Noticeable is a lack of garbage bin [for a junk mail] or a bench to check some urgent message. Is the cost an issue here in the same way as the reason for this type of collective mailboxes?

We detected a small group gathered around the car on the street. Trigger for immediate suspicion! What they are doing there, conspiring to do something evil? →

← Seemingly a somewhat narrower roadway, but above all else the overwhelming profusion of automobiles, on the street, in driveways, and perhaps even hidden in garages – but there are signs of life - some lads huddle at the bottom of the street and a kid on a bike.

→ The community mail box developed by Canada Post so postal workers no longer go door to door in new suburbs. Notices are posted here, campaigns for different causes are mounted, babysitters are sought, and guitar lessons are advertised.



[02:c
:004]



↓ The new town square of the suburb – the ball diamond. Could it appear to be any more functional? – why not some mention of local sports heroes or tips on how to play.

↓ The only place to sit! – functional at best but there's no shade in the summer or protection in the winter – a somewhat dreary landscape for most of the year.

There were two more spots where groups of people were detected. Children play ground area and the other one around the baseball field.

Those were the only spaces where people sitting in public were found. First one is equipped with three benches where tired parents are allowed to sit. Public seats destiny is not secured. There is a rumor in the community that the patch of the leftover wood just behind those benches is used for drug trafficking to the local teenage population. [I am very surprised that they are allowed outside of the house without supervision!]. So both wood and those three benches are endangered.

The other gathering place, obviously only legal public one [does its square shape have any significance=urban square?], is a baseball diamond. Scene was with few kids wearing baseball outfit but there were few dads and moms, some bringing their infants and family dogs, with the intention to bond with other people and spend some quality time communicating. Space was richly outfitted for relaxing: couple of benches and a watching stand.

If not all of the people in the community at least some of them are in need of regular human contacts. It is easily imaginable that other people beside those with small kids or interested in sports are in need, and not afraid of some kind of public gathering area in this type of urban development. ❖

[02] Gathering Places



[03:a]
:017



This community was developed on the agricultural land approximately 10 years ago around patches of conservation areas with few beautiful streams, wooded areas, fields etc. They are still everywhere around and as much as connecting this neighbourhood with the nature they are in the same time totally disconnecting it from the rest of the town of Whitby.

Even connection from the built areas are not really well defined. This example at the bottom is a disproportional, enormous, unnecessary, turning circle at the end of the dead end street. Path to the preserved green space is not marked in any way. Other example, more visible is full of forbidden warnings, quite discouraging. This park is obviously under used. During this walk on a beautiful Sunday morning we met only one single person!

There are not only unpleasant experiences regarding green spaces. I actually think that one of the best sides of living in this type of urban neighbourhood is this contact with nature. Very shy efforts are made to personalize it and bring it closer to the users. Storm water management pond is created to look quite close to the natural lake [with usual warning of the unintended usage?!]. Pedestrian pass over the stream is named "Eagle Bridge" but plaque is so small almost invisible. Users are also making effort to personalize it [or maybe just to show their protest], in this case in a negative way. →

How to give it expression? [03] Green Space

[03:c]
:012



← A narrow lane and country patch of growth – a lovely setting for contemplation or a setting for drug deals?

← Lots of do's and don'ts and warnings – but it would be fun to see noted a few ideas of what to do, or places demarcated for picnicking, nearby benches, tree shade, vantage points for photography or watercolour painting, or sentimental walks for ageing lovers.

← Or a place for jogging? – quietly and one hopes safely.

↓ Massive, paved, dead end cul-de-sacs but why? – Other than for overflow parking they connect to nothing - why not instead a single lane for homeowners on the street, and in the cul-de-sac, a communal garden/park, a water fountain, a bench or two, and some trees.

[03:b]
:029



[03:c]
:016



[03:c]
:021



[03:f]
:011





[03:g]
:029

← Trees and wooded area in the midst of the subdivision – hopefully a permanent feature to be treasured as one looks up to see tree fringed sky, or across to nearby sun dappled housing.

→ A neighbourhood swale for collecting rainwater and slowly distilling into groundwater or holding for eventual release into smaller sized storm sewers - a “ray” of hope.

Small wooded area mentioned earlier is very pleasantly preserved and, as a member of our group noticed, “can be a valuable selling point” for any of the houses around. Other good example, the saved natural field connecting the house with the conservation area and grassed swale for excess water collection, are environmental features welcomed anywhere.

Public park and wooded area are located in the geographical center and are used more than preserved nature areas mainly because they are serving as a community space and couple of school and public sport fields are near.

Alarming trend to discourage any activity that involves spontaneous [not organized] groups of more than one, specially young people, is certainly visible and all the public spaces, specially green ones, are put together having adults or supervised small kids in mind.

Greenery around individual houses is mostly well looked after. Even the areas maintained by the town, are in pretty good shape, despite complaints by locals. Nobody is very inventive and hearing about problems with finding someone to cut grass and expenses connected with it leads to the conclusion that such a big front and back yards are a burden more than anything else. One looks for an instance of spontaneity - such as a front lawn covered with wild flowers! ❖

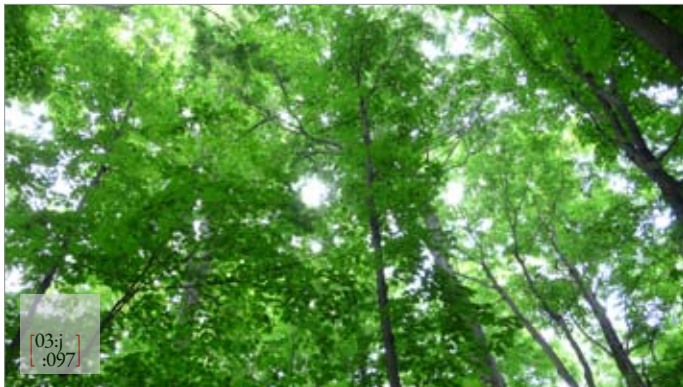


[03:h]
:062

[03] Green Space



[03:i]
:033



[03:j]
:097



[03:k]
:025



[03:l]
:103



[04:a]
:015



[04:c]
:036

I am in serious doubt about the term living [working even less] in this community. Sleeping is, I think, the most appropriate one. There was a kid delivering papers, there was a person fixing car, there was a suspicious group plotting something [mentioned on page 07], few people in a park with kids and there was someone walking around and taking photos [that was our group!]. No other visible signs that anything is happening here. Even the notices visible here and there offering services are years old.

What the people are doing? Do they have life? How to make it function? This place definitely doesn't have any identity and making it function in the first place require examining why they do not have more needs, and why they are in the state of mind where all the initiatives are targeting consumerism for larger houses [with larger front and back yards] and larger vehicles with, of course, larger distances to drive to?

Maintenance of this type of urban developments are enormously expensive. Greenery, parks, snow removal, sidewalks where they exist, streets—much wider than necessary, public transportation, public parks, utilities, economically questionable schools, are all in this low density living. Hard to justify with the amount of property tax they are now paying. Just mentioning that inhabitants should cover all the costs, meaning significant increases, is making everyone furious.

Describing this community as urban in this case is also questionable, and this neighbourhood is not rural since there is no connection to the farm land. It probably has rural roots where people were taking care mostly about themselves. But what is it now? →

How to make it function?

[04] Mixed living & working areas

↓ **Compacted earth during construction** may doom these trees to permanent dwarf status – a man under his car, the marriage of equals or does the car dominate this relationship (it's on top after all)?

→ **A boy delivering newspapers** – suburban flyers, no doubt, with a sprinkling of surface news but primarily used to wrap around mounds of disposable advertising – still the lad is one of the few signs of life on the street.

← **But most of us live in this metropolitan region and lifestyle.** Our work, our pleasure, our friends, our interests, our shopping are located in 100 km plus land around old city of Toronto. So those folks are not much different from those who live in traditional multi use neighbourhoods!



[04:b]
:008



[04:d]
:009

→ Garages almost always become extra household rooms or storage lockers – the basketball hoop as the quintessential suburban symbol and plaything.

↓ Wide streets allow us to get in and out quickly. We live in the privacy of our homes, the privacy of our cars and then privacy of our personal interests we drive to. Is there a room for the public in our lives?



On this Sunday morning this community is one large parking lot for predominantly SUVs and trucks. I can imagine that all of these vehicles are in usage during the week and the whole neighbourhood is empty. Streets with almost no traffic are safe for kids driving bikes or playing and that is best side of this issue.

All the streets are way too wide, and there is no distinction between those with more traffic or those very short or dead end streets. Is their intended usage to encourage people to have more cars and then park them on the streets? Or is it just poor planning?

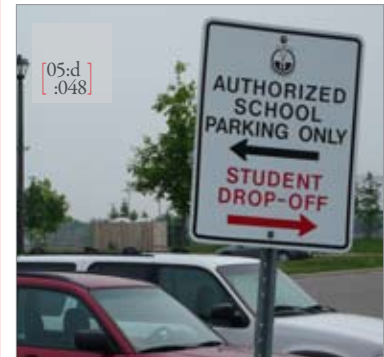
Schools are designed with huge parking spots [according to the locals used only during election times?], and with more than generous drop-off areas. Sources are telling us that everybody is driving their kids to the school, even those from the nearest houses. I will never understand this, isn't it our role as parents to prepare our children for independent life, and taking care about being on time in school and making small effort to walk there, should be an excellent practice. There was a comment that this is then invitation for all kinds of dangerous individuals to prey on defenseless kids, but in that case we should increase security, police foot patrols or intensify community watch.

Public transportation is pathetic. There is one bus line but if you are not among few familiar with it you will never find is it actually functional or when and where this bus adventure will take you.

Sense of separation and loneliness is making visitors [tourists!?] lost in this space. ❖

PS. Walk Score [recently opened website: www.walkscore.com], helps people find walkable places to live. Walk Score calculates the walkability of an address by locating nearby stores, restaurants, schools, parks, etc. This neighbourhood scored 7 out of 100 on this scale!?

[05] Traffic



Should we communicate community?

[06] Individualism



Some individual efforts to separate from the crowd are visible but most of them in my opinion are leading to further isolation not only from the neighbours, but also from the society. What is the purpose of advertising your Scottish origin? What is a purpose of not removing someone's pants blown away and left to stay on the middle of the road for obviously more than couple of days?

Toy left in a grass ditch is sign that there was some kid activity around, but somehow it is leaving impression of loneliness, and being a toy gun must have some symbolism too? →

← Lots of grass and a kid's ray gun – metaphor of doom, space invaders, or lack luster emptiness.





[07:a]
:113

One of the goals of our walk, and we were trying not to set up any in advance in order to avoid expectations and influence, was to find "Blacksmith Lane". Such a poetic name. Finding out that there was no reference to any local characteristic, or historic object, that name belongs to one of least attractive dead end streets, lead to the conclusion that all of the topographical names are fake, probably "invented" by the planner and used "million" times over and over. That is just adding to the overall picture of anonymity of everything related to this neighbourhood.

Occasional exceptions [and truly a reward for our effort!] like when we met someone who we were talking with few minutes before [polite touch by the boy offering a flower to the female member of our group], public art effort by gifted child, or a stone structure [inuksuk] deliberately made to be visible by passers by, are still fitting perfectly in this "lack of identity" portrait. →

← The hackneyed use of words that have no meaning to this place but which describe what was imagined to have once been here (but probably wasn't!).

[07] Identity



[07:b]
:118



[07:c]
:107



[07:d]
:086



[07:e]
:104

[08] Atmosphere

It was a beautiful Sunday morning, little breeze, twenty something degrees Celsius. Impression anywhere but here will be pleasant. Ambiance in the williamsburg [I am intentionally starting with the lower case – it doesn't deserve to share glorious past] is very murky, depressing, uncomfortable, upsetting.

Uniform rows of houses obscured by huge vehicles, then garages in the unproportional, deserted streets, totally non imaginative lawns, distances too big for walking, nothing to attract one's attention, no natural or built landmarks visible, lack of any community activities or involvement, no personal touch anywhere, no connection to the rest of town of Whitby, and this list can continue endlessly.

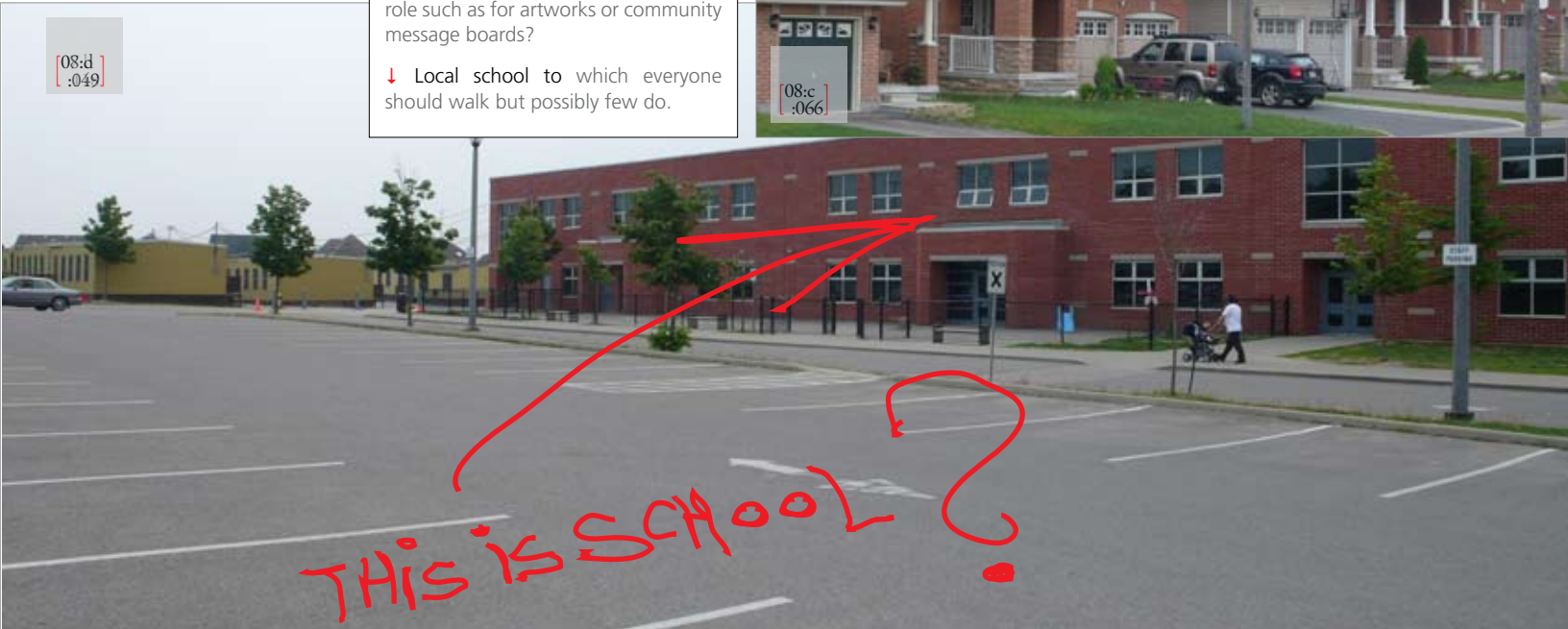
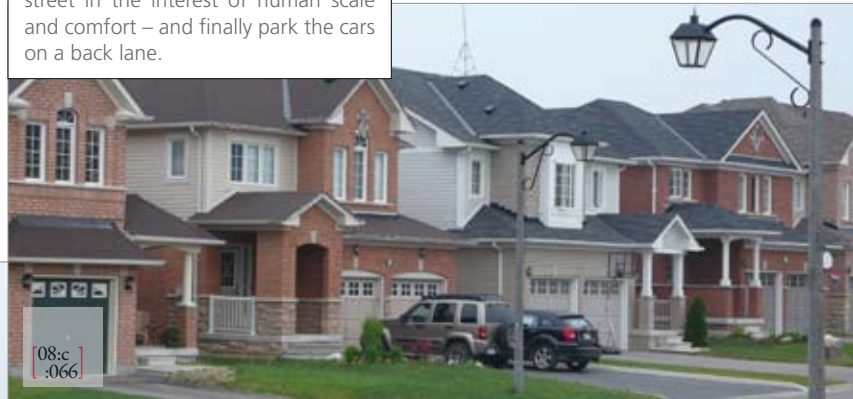
Neighbourhood described in any schoolbook is at least having some social or cultural bonds which is not case here not even in traces. No atmosphere at all! →

← Utility boxes – ugly but functional – could they not serve some additional role such as for artworks or community message boards?

↓ Local school to which everyone should walk but possibly few do.



↑ A dead end street but no sidewalks – could it not be a real semi-paved country lane with “naked street” pretensions in which one could walk with as much ownership of the space as that once solely accorded the car – and tighten those homes up to the street in the interest of human scale and comfort – and finally park the cars on a back lane.



THIS IS SCHOOL?

Where is this neighbourhood going?

[09] Need for Expansion

Surprisingly, probably just for me, there is a huge demand for expansion not only for this neighbourhood but for communities like this all over North America. This dramatic image at the bottom best illustrates this trend. Prime agricultural land, swamps, even conservation areas are eaten up by creeping expansions. It looks like giant "Land Art" project; it is land grab but it is definitely not an art and it is certainly not healthy for the environment. The most terrible effect is that environment once conquered is not even remotely recognizable. Larger and larger lots are providing more green space. It is green, before and after but very much differently green. →



[09:a]
:064



[09:d]
:067



[09:e]
:073



[09:f]
:075



[09:g]
:076

↓ Words like swamps and ditches are pejorative. But if we call them wetlands and swales they sound and are used more positively.



[09:k]
:057



"It's all suburbia. Very contrived. Planned by the developer and plunked into a field". This was a sentence used to describe this neighbourhood by Sally Moore, associate walker, and inhabitant for last 10 years.

Each of us has its our own opinion about this community but we all agree that something needs to be done. For this part of Williamsburg, in my opinion, it is too late. To create need for improved well-being of the citizens in this new expansions, first lots of of thinking needs to be done. ❖



↓ The subdivision advances towards the low lying wetland – soon all this green space will be more low density, single use, car dominated suburb - oh woe is us!



Future should be of hope and revitalization.

Optimism is rising specially when you see beautiful small forest, amount of social contacts on the garage sale, and especially looking at the mixture of happy kids in the rich natural background. Trouble is that these photos are not what we experienced, they are taken out of context, these kind of photos can be created anywhere, but future should be certainly going in this direction.



[10:a
:094]



[10:b
:124]



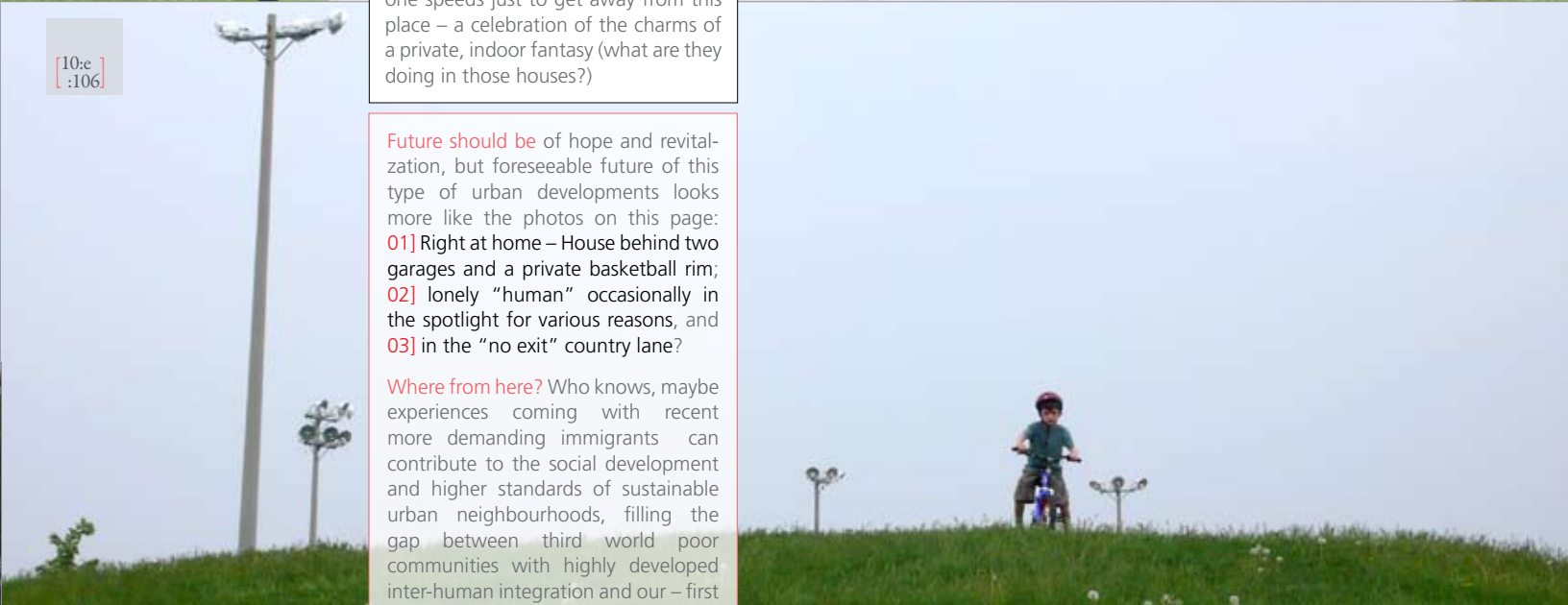
[10:c
:054]

↓ Kids at play – the mound of earth on the right is landfill slowly encroaching on low lying wetland so that it can be raised to acceptable developable levels.



[10:d
:038]

→ The property industry has to live somewhere! Real estate transactions celebrate the lifestyles of people constantly moving from one residence to another, never putting down roots. Quality of life in public space means less than functional pre-requisites like wide unencumbered roads along which one speeds just to get away from this place – a celebration of the charms of a private, indoor fantasy (what are they doing in those houses?)



[10:e
:106]

Future should be of hope and revitalization, but foreseeable future of this type of urban developments looks more like the photos on this page:
 01] Right at home – House behind two garages and a private basketball rim;
 02] Lonely “human” occasionally in the spotlight for various reasons, and
 03] in the “no exit” country lane?

Where from here? Who knows, maybe experiences coming with recent more demanding immigrants can contribute to the social development and higher standards of sustainable urban neighbourhoods, filling the gap between third world poor communities with highly developed inter-human integration and our – first world economic power with overall trend of isolationism?

In any way people living in the area, must be convinced to start thinking of their neighbourhood as the self sustained village and initiate love bond with it. In that case pressure of demands will find way to transform it to the livable space. ❖❖



[10:f
:087]

This **Psychogeographical Walk** was performed on Sunday, June 3, 2007, between 10 a.m. and 12 noon. Our guide and host was Sally Moore, living in the area and the other party members were Bill Humber and me, Aleksandar Janicijevic [both from Seneca College, Neighbourhood Design Unit].

More Info & Credits

We covered small but I think very representative portion, of the Williamsburg. Red line on the map below is our path. Yellow area is danger zone, teenagers are usually around and someone is selling drugs, so they say! Marked with blue is a local square, but unfortunately not an urban public square as you might think, it is a baseball diamond serving occasionally as the only decent gathering space.

The objective of this analysis of the Williamsburg, [psychogeographical portrait] is to be used as a subjective cross section of an observed situation and one of the case studies for the project 'Digital Neighborhoods' at the Centre for the Built Environment of Seneca College in Toronto.

All the photos and texts in boxes with red outline, as well as the concept and production of this document, have been created by Aleksandar Janicijevic and they remain his intellectual property. The texts in boxes with black outline are written by Bill Humber.

Toronto, August 16th, 2007 ☼

