

Speed Bumps Ahead: Work and the Commuter Experience in the City

Lucas Mollame

ANT4301 – Anthropology Practicum (Future of Work Showcase)

Introduction

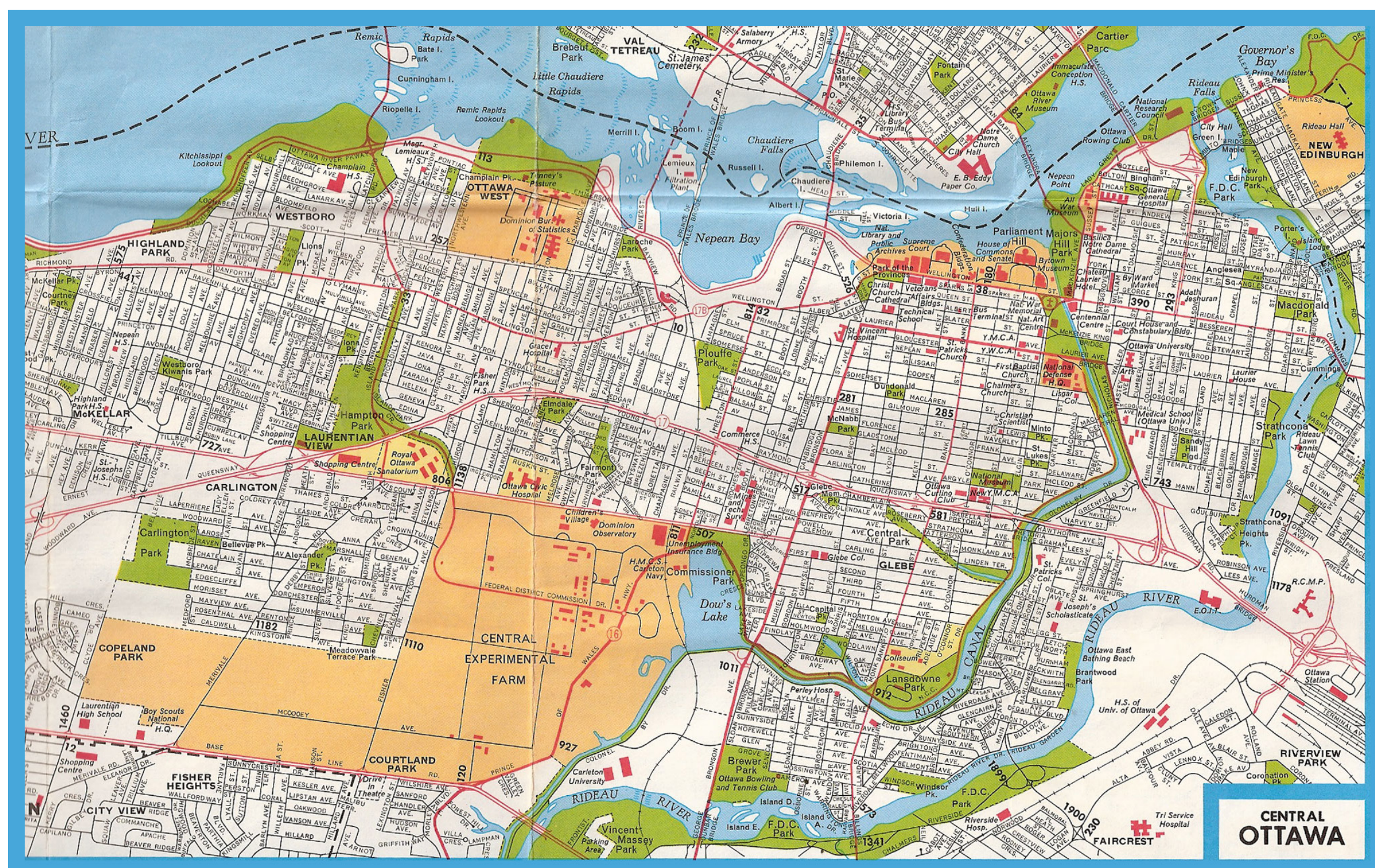
“With the car twisting and turning along the country road, Dominic began to warm up his vocal chords. With the car already filled with the music from his workout playlist, the addition of his various vocal exercises was an interesting mix. As I tried to quell my laughter, Dominic chuckled to himself saying “I know this probably looks and sounds a little strange, but I have to do this to be prepared for work. You can’t just start shouting at a class with dry vocal chords!” He went on to talk about the importance of having a focused mindset when coming into work, and that the best time to transition from “home mode” to “work mode” was during the commute.”

Research Question: What role does commuting play in managing time for workers?

Argument – During the commute, workers pass through a transitional time, where contemporary notions of productivity, downtime, and multi-tasking become just as important as they are at work. Yet, the activities that workers engage in while traveling to and from their jobs are distinct and different from the routine of their work hours, making “the commute” a special kind of time.

Literature – This research is situated between two bodies of scholarship: the future of work and its relation to notions of productivity, multi-tasking, and downtime as well as the built environment in the city. Lastly, I have also incorporated discourses on Taylorist management as it relates to the dominance of speed in late-capitalism and the commute.

Central Arguments from the Literature – Built environment as a social-ecological system; practice of commuting as its own place within this system; these places are filled with social and temporal inequalities.



Show Your Commute!

Methodology

Research in motion: ethnographic observation took place within the vehicles that my interlocutors used to take to work. I conducted my observations with each of my interlocutors twice: two commutes to their place of work and two commutes back. All of my interlocutors are students, which speaks to a different dimension of a work-life balance.

Conceptualization

Built environment – human-constructed infrastructure or surroundings that provide the setting for human activity, such as commuting.

Place and Space – While a space should be understood as any geographical location, place is a space with a particular subjective meaning attached to it. As spaces become places, they undergo certain activities or projects, known as place-making.

Temporal Management/Sovereignty – While temporal sovereignty is understood as the ability to choose how you allocate your time, temporal management speaks to how you allocate your time.



During the commute, time and space can become stretched, making the entire commute seem like one continuous place – as this picture attempts to illustrate.

Emerging Themes

Productivity – one’s time must always be maximized at all occasions of the day, even when one is outside of the actual site of work

Downtime – on the way home, my interlocutors seemed to flow through the commute, wherein their attention was not just in going back home, but also relishing in the fact that their work-shift was completed.

Multi-tasking – a commute to work could mean an opportunity to study for a quiz and/or read over presentation materials for schoolwork

Conclusions

As a response to the desire for more time, workers use the commute as a site of “between-work” wherein they work in collaboration with a culture of speed to produce an efficient worker. While the foci of the worker changes depending on whether the worker is traveling to and from work, they nevertheless see the commute as an opportunity “to do something” rather than just travel through the space. Desires for an efficient and specifically quick commute run parallel to this opportunity, regardless of the transportation vehicle or lack thereof. While commutes are inherently unique to each worker, they nevertheless follow Taylorist management practices when the commute time becomes a part of the work day. Therefore, these notions of productivity, downtime, and multitasking are not only activities but aspirations which each worker strives to make a part of their commute.

Sometimes the flow of the commute stops, from waiting for the next bus to a set of lights changing. Yet, the activities that make the commute a special kind of time are continuous.



Bibliography

1. Cresswell, T. 2004. *Place: A short introduction* (Short introductions to geography). Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub.
2. Gregg, M. 2018. *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy*. Durham: Duke University Press.
3. Moffatt, S., & Kohler, N. 2008. “Conceptualizing the built environment as a social-ecological System”. *Building Research & Information*, 36(3), 248–268.
4. Sadana, R. 2018. “We Are Visioning It”: Aspirational Planning and the Material Landscapes of Delhi’s Metro”. *City & Society*, 30: 186–209. doi:[10.1111/ciso.12163](https://doi.org/10.1111/ciso.12163)