

URBAN STUDIES

‘Aggressive, Progressive and Up-to-date:’ Sport and Cultural Experience at the Industrial Exhibition of Toronto, 1879-1910

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The Industrial Exhibition of Toronto was conceptualized by the City Council in 1878 as an annual festival to celebrate the vitality and progress of the city’s industrial and commercial presence in eastern Canada and the north eastern United States. Initially, the programming of sporting events and demonstration of physical prowess at the exhibition appears to have been eclectic and random, in not outright chaotic. Upon closer inspection, however, logical and coherent relationships emerge among the sports events and other structural elements of the fair-going experience. The historical method and research questions of this paper are informed theoretically by the works of Anthony Giddens, Don Handelman, Meg Armstrong and John MacAloon. The Industrial Exhibition of Toronto evoked social reflexivity in the fair-going experience; it integrated sporting and physically active bodies as cultural symbols that presented, re-presented and re-enforced the social and political discourses of order and power in modern, progressive Canadian society. This paper examines how the Industrial Exhibition of Toronto was constructed temporally and spatially into a spectacle, a cultural performance that was characteristically modern. Accounts of the fair, derived from newspapers and Exhibition Association documents, reveal that sport served as a cultural medium that wove narratives of modernism and progressivism through the fair-going experience. Between 1879 and 1910, the Industrial Exhibition of Toronto transcended its functional purpose of promoting industry and manufacturing to the fair-goers of Toronto. In the extra-ordinary context of the Exhibition, sport served as an agent of modern culture that helped define and re-enforce a class, race and gender-based social hegemony in Canada.