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Pulling Strings: Textiles, Community and DIY in Post-Industrial Hamilton

Jen Anisef, Thea Haines and Tara Bursey

In the city formerly known as Canada's Steeltown, the economic recession of the 1990s, suburban sprawl, and the collapse of Hamilton's steel industry had a devastating impact on the city's vitality. An exodus of commercial retail and corporate tenancy from the core of the city left many buildings vacant. In the last decade, Hamilton's creative community has emerged as a major force in downtown renewal, neighbourhood building, and civic engagement and pride. Our collective and textile event series Pulling Strings has grown out of this context serving as a vehicle for research and community building. Through research, projects and activities we have examined intersections of Hamilton's industrial history, textiles, contemporary art, DIY and place among artists and craftspeople in Downtown Hamilton. In this paper we further pursue this line of inquiry, asking: *How does a city's history of industrial production intertwine with contemporary local craft and textile-based activity?* We begin our exploration with a brief discussion of Hamilton's boom and bust years.

Hamilton, Ontario, Canada: "The Ambitious City," Steeltown, Union Town

Hamilton is a port city of over 500,000 people situated in the densely populated and industrialized "Golden Horseshoe" region of Southern Ontario. With a population of 9 million people, the Golden Horseshoe makes up over 26% of the population of Canada and contains more than 68% of Ontario's population, making it one of the largest population concentrations in North America.¹ Hamilton's location, at the most westerly end of Lake Ontario within close proximity to the US-Canada border, strategically locates the city as a hub for industry and transportation.

From the early 19th to early 20th century, Hamilton, Ontario blossomed into a thriving industrial city. Small artisan workshops around the head of the lake evolved into small manufacturers.² The arrival of the Great Western Railway in 1854 attracted further industry to the city. Along with early adoption of hydro-electric power, these developments positioned Hamilton as an ideal setting for homegrown industry, and later, an influx of American branch plants³. By the 1870s, the labour movement that Hamilton would later become famous for was in its infancy. In the 1880s, women joined the labour movement and were among the workers populating Hamilton's factories, especially its textile mills, many of which opened in the latter part of the 19th century.⁴ During the first half of the 20th century, Hamilton's industrial sector was characterized by a growing labour force comprised of immigrants from Italy, Poland, Armenia, and other parts of southern and eastern Europe, and the shifting of industry from central Hamilton and the Waterfront to the city's East End.⁵ This period also saw a shift from depression-

¹ Laurent Martel and Éric Caron-Malenfant, "Portrait of the Canadian Population in 2006: Subprovincial population dynamics, Greater Golden Horseshoe". *Statistics Canada, 2006 Census of Population*, accessed July 12, 2014. <http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/as-sa/97-550/index-eng.cfm?CFID=368179&CFTOKEN=58813894#ggh>.

² Rob Kristofferson, "Introduction," *Made In Hamilton 19th Century Industrial Trail*. (Hamilton: Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, 2000)

³ John C. Weaver, *Hamilton: An Illustrated History*, (Toronto: Lorimer, 1982).

⁴ Rob Kristofferson, "Introduction," *Made In Hamilton 19th Century Industrial Trail*. (Hamilton: Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, 2000)

⁵ Rob Kristofferson, "Introduction," *Made In Hamilton 20th Century Industrial Trail*. (Hamilton: Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, 2000)

era anti-unionism to the rise of powerful union activity, most notably the election of unionist Sam Lawrence as mayor of Hamilton in 1943, and strikes at Stelco, Firestone and Westinghouse factories in 1946.⁶ At Stelco workers fought for higher wages, better working conditions and the development of a grievance system — and won.⁷ This victory opened the doors to Hamilton becoming a full-fledged union town.

Hamilton in Decline

Globalization and deindustrialization in the second half of the 20th Century saw the dissolution of Hamilton's textile industry in the 1960s. Even Hamilton's steel industry — the largest in Canada anchored by Stelco/Steel Company of Canada (now US Steel Hamilton) and Dofasco (now Dutch company Arcelor Mittal) — has suffered great losses since the 1980s and 1990s. Following the announcement of the permanent closure of Stelco's facilities in 2013, Dofasco now stands as the last remaining steel manufacturer in the city. The city's economy has undergone major shifts, marked in particular by the steady decline of manufacturing. The percentage of the labour force employed in construction and manufacturing fell from a high of 58% in 1951 to a low of 12% in 2013⁸.

The deindustrialization of Hamilton is sometimes compared to that of American "Rust Belt" cities — a rare phenomenon in Canada, where urban centres such as Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal and Calgary have steadily grown as cultural and economic centres and home to millions of long-time residents and new immigrants. Hamilton's decline was particularly acute during the recession of the 1990s. As manufacturers left the city, people were left unemployed or underemployed, living on reduced incomes or social assistance. Canadian retail suffered, chain stores slowly left the downtown; big box stores were built in the suburbs. Downtown, empty storefronts were left behind as businesses and services abandoned the core. Buildings were left vacant by absentee landlords and several suffered demolition by neglect, while others were torn down to make way for surface parking lots.

Hamilton has often been mischaracterized by outsiders, and its reputation has largely been a negative one, particularly during recent decades of decline. Toronto writer Christopher Hume describes Hamilton as "a self-hating city dismissed by the rest of the world for its coarse ways, unwashed residents and knuckle-dragging politicians".⁹ Hamilton's dominant reputation is that of a working-class town. This description simplifies the complicated social and economic fabric of the city, but it is an apt description of the city's people. Hamilton is a city that likes to work, and get its hands dirty. It's a plucky place, where people make things.

Hamilton: Creative City?

⁶ Rob Kristofferson, "Introduction: Work In East End Hamilton," *The Workers City A Walking Tour: Hamilton's East End*. (Hamilton: Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, 2000)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ John C. Weaver, "Hamilton," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, July 15, 2014, accessed August 1, 2014, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/hamilton/>.

⁹ Christopher Hume, "Toronto and Hamilton switch prince-and-pauper roles," *Toronto Star*, Wednesday, October 29, 2014, accessed July 12, 2014.

http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2013/10/13/toronto_and_hamilton_switch_princeandpauper_roles.html.

In recent years, Hamilton has slowly shifted from manufacturing and industrial production to a service, medical and technology-based economy. In tandem with this shift, artists have populated what was once a depopulated downtown core over time. The widespread vacancy described above set the stage for artists and entrepreneurs to take advantage of affordable real estate to open small shops and galleries, or to acquire studio space in the core. James Street North, a major artery dividing the west and east sides of the city, has gradually become a hub for a number of galleries, artist studios, creative retail spaces, music venues, artist-run centres and cooperatives. A recent new-comer to the city describes her impression of Hamilton as a “really interesting place to live and work, in contrast to her first impression of the city as “a dirty, dangerous and crime ridden place”.¹⁰

In Hamilton, much evidence of a broad popularization of DIY can be found among a certain demographic of people in their 20s and 30s interested in pursuits such as hand making, preserving, home-brewing, urban gardening and small-scale building. Though these activities have become popularized in recent years through contemporary lifestyle blogs, magazines and so on, this “Deep DIY” ethos is more akin to the domestic lives of Hamilton’s working classes in the early 20th century. For these Hamiltonians, activities such as mending, canning and growing vegetables on modest patio gardens was borne out of dedication to a life of rewarding labour, necessity and sustainability, rather than simply a “lifestyle choice”. This desire to create and make extends beyond Hamilton’s younger population: according to a recent self-reporting survey, 80% of Hamiltonians self-express through art.¹¹

The bolstering of Hamilton’s hard-working art community in recent years has led to an increased sense of excitement in the city. Artists from nearby metropolis Toronto who have been priced out of Canada’s largest city have moved to its neighbour city, attracted to the relatively affordable cost of living as well the authentic, romantic notion of post-industrial Hamilton as a figurative blank canvas. Taglines on t-shirts, pin-back buttons and bags painting Hamilton as Canada’s comeback city are emblazoned with the phrase “You Can do Anything in Hamilton”. Another popular tagline is “The Ambitious City”—a sarcastic label coined by a writer for the Toronto Globe paper in the mid-19th century¹²¹³, re-adopted and re-appropriated to signify Hamilton’s toughness in the face of adversity.

Most notably, the tagline “Art is the New Steel” has become a slogan touting Hamilton supposed transformation from a steel town to a creative city. While this slogan has been met by much enthusiasm amongst those excited by the revitalization of Hamilton’s downtown core, the claim has not gone uncontested. A recent exhibition at the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, Hamilton’s museum of local and national labour history, responded this past spring with an exhibition called “Art as the New Steel?” This exhibition presented a picture of James Street North’s past and present which recognizes rather than negates the influence and importance of industry and working class communities to Hamilton’s history and collective identity. Moreover, the increase in creative activity in Hamilton has not necessarily translated to artists making a living wage or a major increase in adequately paid positions for cultural

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ City of Hamilton, “Love your City -- Cultural Policy and Plan,” *City of Hamilton*, October 16, 2013, accessed July 12, 2014. http://www.hamilton.ca/CultureandRecreation/Arts_Culture_And_Museums/culturePlan.

¹² Hamilton Spectator, “Namesakes: The Ambitious City – Stories behind local place names.” *Hamilton Spectator*, June 17, 2013, accessed July 12, 2014. <http://www.thespec.com/news-story/3843608-namesakes-the-ambitious-city/>.

¹³ Julia Chapman and Amber Hildebrand, “Can Hamilton regain its title as the ‘ambitious city?’” *CBC News*, June 11, 2012, accessed July 12, 2014, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/news/can-hamilton-regain-its-title-as-the-ambitious-city-1.1231616>.

workers. Many continue to work jobs outside of their fields or commute to Toronto for work, raising the question of whether you can indeed, “Do Anything in Hamilton.”

Textiles and Civic Engagement in Hamilton: The Beehive Craft Collective

Textiles have had a visible presence in Hamilton’s tight-knit DIY scene over the last five years. The Beehive Craft Collective, a craft and urban homesteading collective focusing on hand making, skill sharing, DIY and sustainability formed around the time that downtown Hamilton showed signs of revitalization. Its members include textile artists, researchers, educators and designers as well as proprietors of downtown boutiques selling locally made goods and sewing supplies; all have a history of engagement with the cultural activity that has brought new life to the downtown core.



Figure 1. Knit Night on the Brain (2012). With permission from the Beehive Craft Collective. Image by Kate Hunter.

The activities of the Beehive — workshops, canning and natural dye sessions, field trips to local farms and quilt exhibitions are shared locally and beyond via social media channels, bringing textile, craft and domestic arts to greater prominence in the local cultural landscape. Two installations or “textile interventions” by the Beehive, created as part of annual Hamilton art and music street festival Supercrawl, physically embedded textiles into urban space. In the site-specific installation *Knit Night on*

the Brain (2012), knit bricks, window boxes, and storefront signage were integrated into the facade of a downtown watering hole to create a visually satisfying, seamless (double) take on yarn-bombing. Similarly, the Beehive's installation the following year, *Modular Beauty* (2013), used English Paper Piecing to smartly connect architecture and textiles in a contemporary art intervention that mimics modular designs found in urban space. Both of these projects depended on contributions from community members in the Hamilton area and beyond, guided by downloadable patterns and instructions and other skill sharing tools, recognizing that many hands make light work. These two installations are important examples of art projects in a DIY spirit that aimed to critically position and make visible textile-based activity in both Hamilton's contemporary urban landscape and a local contemporary art context.

Introducing: Pulling Strings

In response to what we perceived to be a lack critical inquiry in both local contemporary art and craft, our collective Pulling Strings (formed in 2013) builds on the production-based work of the Beehive Craft Collective to facilitate critical discourse around textiles in Hamilton. Through a quarterly textile event and lecture series, we strive to create an accessible and dynamic space for practitioners across disciplines to come together around a shared material interest in textiles. As our inaugural year as a collective comes to a close, we've seen our focus evolve. Beginning with programming that pushed the boundaries of handwork within a context of contemporary art, we then saw the blending and cross-pollination of textiles, research and community building in a project that engaged a diversity of makers and thinkers. Our current project constitutes a contemporary investigation of the history of textile production in our city and its connection to contemporary textile-based production.

Pulling Strings 1.0: Shannon Gerard

Pulling Strings' inaugural event was an artist talk and crochet workshop led by Toronto-based interdisciplinary artist Shannon Gerard. Gerard's practice spans publishing, textiles, comics, drawing, animation and pedagogy. She is currently the head of the Publications department at Ontario College of Art and Design University in Toronto. We chose Shannon Gerard as a first speaker due to the critical complexity of her practice and the remarkable accessibility of her work and speaking style, a balance we strive to strike in all of our activities.

Gerard introduced the Pulling Strings audience to her challenging take on crochet, a craft traditionally associated with leisure and the production of utilitarian and decorative objects such as blankets, clothing and lacework. In her talk which took place at Hamilton Artist's Inc. — the city's first artist-run centre (founded in 1975) — Gerard discussed the genesis of her work with crochet. In her practice, crochet is often seamlessly integrated with other approaches to art-making such as self-publishing, the production of limited and unlimited edition art multiples, community-based art practices and storytelling. Gerard's talk ran through her past projects such as *Boobs and Dinks Early Detection Kits*, which consist of crocheted breasts and penises containing small lumps that can be found by following illustrated instructions in screen-printed booklets that encourage self-examination. Gerard initiated this project in response to a cancer scare involving a loved one. The *Boobs and Dinks* project touches on people's bodily fears through a soft, playful form, and initiates conversations about our bodies while confronting human frailty through education and humour.



Figure 2. Crocheted art and multiples by Shannon Gerard, Hamilton Artists Inc., 2013. Image by Tara Bursey.

In her artists talk, Gerard also discussed some of her work in progress that incorporates hyperbolic crochet, an approach developed by mathematics researcher Dr. Dana Taimina as a way of illustrating three-dimensional hyperbolic planes. Inspired by archaic maps of time and space sourced in esoteric printed matter, Gerard described working on a series of hyperbolic crochet “life maps” that use principles of hyperbolic crochet as a language of life writing. In her own life map, Shannon uses tension, colour, varying crochet stitches and the increasing and decreasing of stitches to render her childhood, periods of study, important milestones and periods of — in her words — “increased novelty” in yarn.¹⁴ She is also creating another life map in collaboration with a friend who served in the army in Central Europe, illustrating how the vocabulary of stitches used can evoke vastly different life experiences. While Gerard’s life map is broad, light and pliable, her friend’s is tight and small in comparison, with stitches resembling scar tissue that give voice to periods of trauma and great turmoil in his life. Gerard’s artists talk culminated in a conceptual crochet workshop where people were encouraged to come up with their own vocabulary of stitches inspired by her life maps. This workshop, which took place at local fabric store and creative workshop Needlework, was open to people of all ages, and brought together Hamilton based artists, textile enthusiasts and members of the general public.

Pulling Strings 2.0: Pulling Strings Textile Reference Library

¹⁴ Artist’s talk with Shannon Gerard (presented at Hamilton Artist’s Inc., Hamilton, Ontario, November 12, 2013).

The second Pulling Strings initiative drew from our collective love of books and textiles and brought together members of the textile community from across Hamilton and the rest of Canada. Pooling our collection of textile-related books, catalogues and periodicals together, we launched a library of printed matter and temporary reading room in the display window of Needlework. Our impetus for initiating this Library was to pillage the archive of textile and craft printed matter and create a historical context for the local maker community, promoting a sense of continuity while bringing them new inspiration for their work. The public was also invited to donate books to our collection, and in this sense, the library serves as a manifestation of the collective interests of our community. Our library currently includes a broad range of publications that include: books on Macedonian folk costume, the arts and crafts of Mexico and Gees Bend; monographs by Canadian artists Janet Morton and Kai Chan; zines about craftivism and textiles and sport patterning; and an antique book on life at an Ontario Cotton Mill.

As part of this program, we invited a list of textile “heroes”— including Canadian textile artists Susan Warner Keene, Robyn Love and Grant Heaps and Curatorial Director at the Textile Museum of Canada Sarah Quinton, to contribute blog posts about a favourite or influential textile-related book in their private collection. Our program concluded by bringing together Canadian textile artists Grant Heaps and Kate Jackson, knitwear producer and amateur Textile Historian Anna Zykowski and past director of the Textile Museum of Canada Jennifer Kaye to “show and tell” textile-related books from their collection to a small audience over breakfast. While Heaps and Jackson discussed their subversion and queering of kitchy craft books from the 50s-70s in their own art work, Zykowski shared her extensive collection of Italian knitting pattern books from the 30s-50s, discussing how the patterns and designs included in the books reflected the spreading of fascist ideology through garment design in the years leading up to the second world war.

Pulling Strings 3.0: Hamilton: Textile City

For our latest project, we seek to investigate Hamilton’s 19th and 20th century textile industry. Textiles were among one of the city’s most important industries by the early 20th century, with garment factories, cotton processing plants and knitting mills cutting a broad swath from Hamilton’s downtown across to its east end. While Hamilton has been known as Canada’s “Steeltown” and, along similar lines, the “Pittsburgh (and) Birmingham of Canada,”¹⁵ it is a much lesser known fact that Hamilton was the third largest producer of textiles behind Toronto and Montreal, no small feat due to its difference in size from those Metropolitan centres.¹⁶

We are currently engaged in a process of researching Hamilton’s industrial sites related to the history of textile production in the city. Our research has uncovered countless industrial sites, some torn down, some disused and some adapted for new use. The former Cosmos-Imperial Mill, the plant of the Imperial Cotton Company, is currently home to 270 Sherman, a cluster of artist’s studios, spaces for creative professionals, and the home to small-scale manufacturing that includes custom woodworking and sign production. The vicinity of James Street North, now home to a modern fabric store and workspace and an

¹⁵ Thomas Melville Bailey, *Dictionary of Hamilton Biography (Vol II, 1876-1924)* (Hamilton: W.L. Griffin Ltd, 1991), p. 143.

¹⁶ Rob Kristofferson, “Glendale Spinning Mills, 1916,” *Made In Hamilton 20th Century Industrial Trail*. (Hamilton: Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, 2000)

artisan yarn shop, was previously a neighbourhood that was home to a sewing machine manufactory, three knitting mills and two cotton companies.



Figure 3. Greetings from Hamilton: Textile City. Illustration by Jacqui Oakley for Pulling Strings

For this project, we are collaborating with acclaimed Hamilton-based illustrator, Jacqui Oakley. Specializing in dynamic map illustrations that often feature contemporary takes on historical map-making conventions, Oakley has been commissioned to create a textile map of Hamilton that combines 19th and 20th sites of textile industry with contemporary sites such as the Ottawa Street Textile District in Hamilton's east end, and Needlework, the shop and workspace that was the site of Pulling Strings' first two programs. This map pays homage to a local industry that has historically been overshadowed by steel and small appliance manufacturing while illustrating a blending of industrial and post-industrial textile production and culture. This is one component of a greater project, titled *Greetings from Hamilton: Textile City* that will culminate in a walking tour and the sale of Oakley's artist-designed map as a limited edition multiple, reproduced as a textile that draws inspiration from souvenir tea towels. The goal of the project is to draw critical attention to a culture and tradition of textiles and textile-production that has always been a part of the lives and labour of Hamiltonians.

Hamilton: A Labour of Love

The following excerpt from the statement produced by the Beehive Collective about their installation *Modular Beauty* encapsulates many of the themes we've discussed in this paper:

(Our) large-scale textile installation (will) creep and grow out of unexpected places along the street, mimicking natural beehives - a symbol of industry. Hamilton has always been an ambitious

and industrious city; its residents are those who are familiar with working with their hands. We feel a connection to (this aspect of) its manufacturing past, and wish to pay reverence by draping the street in our softer and gentler, but just as driven, methods. This installation is as an external projection of the fruits of our labour. Our combined concentration of energy determined to revitalize in the best way we know how— (through an intervention of fibre).¹⁷

Through our activities thus far, Pulling Strings has aimed to learn the various ways maker culture can permeate a place. In Hamilton, we've found that the past and present are always colliding through acts of creative labour. Our projects serve as interdisciplinary acts of thinking, making and working together that are nothing if not in conversation with the hands and minds that came before us.

Pulling Strings would like to thank Roxane Shaughnessy, President of the Textile Society of America, for encouraging us to submit this paper to the 2014 Symposium, New Directions.

¹⁷ Beehive Craft Collective, artwork proposal for "Victory Garden," 2013

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