

Hiking the Suburbs (Published *Public: Ideas, Culture and Art* 43 2011)

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Trip 1:	Hiking the Suburbs
Start Location:	McKenzie Towne, off Deerfoot Trail near intersection with Highway 22X, north of MacKenzie Lake
Length of Hike:	106.9 km (66 mi) from Boundless Dance Studio, McKenzie Towne to Eagle Heights, Canmore
Elevation Gain:	432 m (1418 ft)
Hiking Time:	3 to 4 days
Difficulty:	Easy
Available:	Year round



Hiking the Suburbs is an interesting multi-day hike for those who want to experience the full range of flora and fauna that make up the spaces of contemporary Canadian life. There is minimal elevation gain, which makes this a good hike for those who might want to do parts of it with small children, or those who are new to backpacking. There is only one river crossing on this trip; as the water is not safe to drink, it is important for hikers to bring enough of their own liquids, or spare change with which to fuel up at convenience stores or in mall food courts. (Note: once you leave the truck stop on the western edge of Calgary, there is a long stretch where you won't be able to find any stores, though there is a casino about half-way to Canmore that you can pop into).

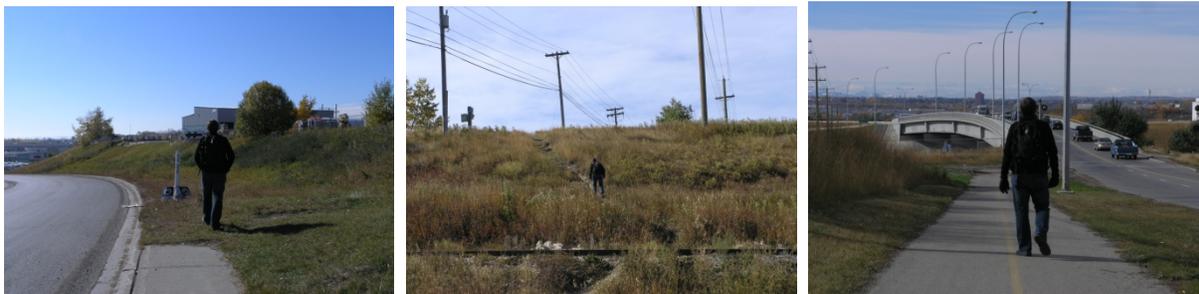
The trail begins just outside of McKenzie Towne, a newer suburb located in southeast Calgary (Interesting note: this area of the city is represented by Canada's Minister of Citizenship, Immigration, and Multiculturalism, Jason Kenney, who embodies some of its neoliberal ethos). Follow the trail up a hill (if in doubt, use the path closest to the power lines leading into the

community) and find a marked bike path that will take you through some areas of the suburb that are still being built. Stick to the sidewalk, especially if it is raining, so that you don't get trapped in the deep and treacherous mud that can sometimes accompany housing construction sites after the native prairie grasses have been plowed up and before lawns have been laid in.

McKenzie Towne is built on the model of new urbanism first tried out in communities such as Seaside, Florida: it is a suburb designed to look and feel like a small town, with more intimate and walkable streets than usual suburbs, as well as a small block-long set of shops at its heart. As you work your way to Main Street (if you are hungry, you can pick up sandwiches at Subway or a muffin at Starbuck's) and then through the residential area, note the lack of front-drive garages on the brick-faced row houses. Continue in the direction of the loudest noise: you should watch out for the cars streaming in and out of the Towne from Deerfoot Trail, Calgary's primary commuter road, especially during morning and evening rush hours.

Head west towards the Bow River. Once you hit the river, follow the bike trail to the north for about 15 kms. Take note of the aspens that line the path and squirrels that run across the trail, as well as the aggressive cyclists who will zip by in both directions (if you go in the morning, these will be conscientious or vain office workers). You might come across suburbanites walking their dogs in the beautiful natural surroundings of the river valley. Beware: they are not always friendly (the people, not the dogs).

When you reach Old Refinery Park, head east to Ogden Road. As the name might suggest, the park is the site of oil refinery that was closed in 1976 and dismantled soon after. This can be a good place to stop and build a fire. You can also camp here. Though camping is illegal within city limits, it is unlikely that anyone would bother you here. The Park is surrounded by chain link fence to keep prospective users out. The surface and subsurface remains contaminated by oil and other chemicals from the site.



Continue along the river towards the city centre. You can take any number of routes through the core to see what street level pedestrian activity is like, but try to stick to the route marked on the map, which takes you through the surface parking lots to give you the best views of the city's office towers and shows you the range of vehicles (age and make) used by those living outside of the city to drive to work in it. After looping through the core, the path skirts the northern edge of the Stampede Grounds through a low-income community—or rather, a former, low-income community of older houses, now expropriated by the city in order to allow for expansion of the Stampede.

Cross the bridge at 12th Street, which will take you through the Zoo and on to the north side of the river. Skirt Memorial Drive and head towards the canal that runs almost straight north. This older community was once the site of the General Hospital, a major medical facility in the city. You can't see it, however, since it was destroyed in 2006 in favor of new suburban facilities, despite the demand for rooms and emergency services in the city core. As you move north, you will be following Deerfoot Trail and passing through several golf clubs (these are good places to camp, too). Once you bump into 32 Avenue N.E., continue as best you can toward the north, trying to avoid streets named bays, crescents, ways, places, rises, closes, gates, greens, points, and the like, as these will inevitably lead you in circles and cause you to get lost. There are very few man-made landmarks that you can use to orient yourself. Keep your eye on Nose Hill, which rises above the housing units and will keep you going in the right direction.

At the edge of the city in the new suburbs of Panorama Hills, Country Hills Village, or Hanson Ranch, you will find a broad path marked out that will take you across the top of the city and bring you eventually to the TransCanada Highway. There are some great ridges you can hike up to get a view of the scenery of this part of the city: feel free to linger and enjoy the views. Make use of the path marked out by Stoney Trail to cut towards the mountains (note: depending on when you are reading this guidebook, this may have already become a highway, in which case you will have to walk alongside it, being careful to avoid on-coming traffic). If you plan to spend a night resting and recuperating before the long hike to Canmore, you can do so in Bowness Park, where there is also a café and fire pits that you can use.

If you stayed in the Park, make sure to load up your pack with food and treats at either the string of chain stores along the TransCanada Highway before it leaves the city, or at the truck stop at the Highway 22 intersection. This stretch of the hike is simultaneously the most beautiful and the most tedious. Follow the TransCanada towards the mountains, being careful in rainy or snowy

conditions to avoid spray from the large volume of cars that drive this way (Note: the traffic is especially heavy on weekends when city dwellers run drive to the mountains for some much needed R & R). In order to pass the time, you can count the number of cars which drive by, or create a mental list of the interesting items you'll find strewn on the side of the road (Artists can pretend that they are Mark Dion assembling his latest taxonomic piece!).

As you approach the mountains, you will see large factories to your right (north). These include gas plants, a limestone extraction plant, and a concrete factory. This means you're getting close to civilization once again! Road signs will alert you to the fact that you are approaching your final destination: Canmore, Alberta. Canmore is a rapidly growing tourist town, whose principle attractiveness appears to be that it is possible to own property relatively close to Banff National Park and to the town of Banff itself (since most people don't legally have access to property within it). It is fascinating to see how similar Canmore is in many ways to the place from which this hike begins. Canmore has a small, scenic town centre, which is ringed with newer developments plotted out in crescents, rises, ways, points, terraces and the like. After cutting through the town centre to fuel up on muffins and cappuccino, head northeast across Benchlands Trail to get a better sense of Canmore. The view of the Seven Sisters Mountains across the valley is spectacular from this rise. Walk along the sidewalk, being careful to avoid children's bicycles or spray from lawn sprinklers, up along Eagle Terrace Rd., where a row of condos abuts the mountains behind up. After following the path up the small rise in front of the condos, you will have come to the end of the trail.

Additional hikes:

From the end of *Hiking the Suburbs*, you will be able to continue on with numerous other hikes located in Banff National Park or in Spray Valley Provincial Park. You can also explore the suburbs of Canmore at your leisure: they are safe and you can easily find food and shelter in the town limits.

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It is more than a mere conceit to conduct a hike through the suburbs and to produce a photo-essay of what one encounters along the way. Hiking the suburbs constitutes a form of artistic and theoretical critique. The object or thrust of this critique is not what one might expect—those damned, blighted suburbs, supposed bane of mankind, in which most North Americans nevertheless choose to live despite the fact that they represent everything that has gone wrong with modernity. The aim of hiking the suburbs isn't to highlight the ugliness or mass reproduced character of suburbs in comparison to the beauty and unpredictability of the natural settings through which one normally engages in the activity of hiking. Nor is it to draw attention to the (by comparison) phenomenological glories of a walk through urban spaces (the older, the better) to further highlight everything wrong with the 'burbs—boredom instead of experience, cars instead of people, the same instead of difference and eclecticism. These gestures are common enough to be characterized as suburban in their own right: familiar, similar, mass produced.

This hike enacts three critical maneuvers. First, it attends to and reveals the *antinomies* in our understanding of the spaces we inhabit and those we don't, which disable our understanding of how we live in the present and how we might approach the future. Second, it draws the different *spaces* of contemporary Canadian life into relation with one another, navigating the borders between suburban, urban and 'natural' spaces in order to re-cast our sense of each of them, and to see them as interacting, intersecting and less delimited than we might imagine them to be. Third, it locates the function of *vision*, visuality and aesthetics in demarcating and positioning these spaces in our imagination.

Antinomies? The tendency, even now, to be able only to think of our spaces as structured by oppositions: urban/suburban, city/country, culture/nature. Discourses and narratives attempting to interrogate these—whether it takes the form of critical theory or public policy—tend to get lost in the necessity to affirm one conceptual pole at the expense of the other: the suburbs are unsustainable, thus we should promote the urban (and think no further about the ecological and social implications of urbanity); city life is devastating and alienating, so the country is required to heal anomie and loss of self, *or*, on the flip-side, the country is sterile and inbred, blunting the race to true self-definition that the urban enables. Can such oppositions ever result in any meaningful knowledge about the spaces we inhabit? Better to grasp the way in which our inhabitation of these antinomies are the product of single system whose violent and contradictory logic is expressed in multiple forms: red-brick urban loft spaces now celebrated for their conviviality were often (always?) spaces of profit and exploitation; nature is the other of human habitation only by a kind of too simple negation that has been critiqued by Slavoj Žižek, Timothy Morton, and others; and the city and country exist in a dialectical and ever shifting relationship in which each requires the other. Suburb-city-suburb-exurb-country-nature-suburb: access to these spaces and their social significance is framed by economic privilege and cultural capital, institutions and discourses of governmental rationality and control (e.g., urban planning, property values, etc.)—in a word, capitalism. In a blunt sense, hiking the suburbs is to pass through the multiple spaces of capitalism and to experience the desires and fantasies as well as the social and economic logics that animate them.

Space. Physical movement produces relations and connections that concepts and words on a page can run pass or overlook entirely. How we imagine the suburb depends on how we relate to it spatially. A place of home and safety located at a distance from work and crime? A prison-space in which one's movements are delimited and from which it is hard to escape? Our relation to space reinforces social expectations and typical imaginaries of cities—or undoes them. Our daily lives structure our movements through urban spaces: work and home on weekdays, nature on

weekends, zones marked as dangerous and/or aesthetically displeasing which are to be avoided altogether. Hiking a vector that cuts through the city from north to south (in a straight line, as much as possible), and which moves beyond to the city's natural 'other' means to experience the full range of spaces (and so, social relations) assembled in the contemporary Canadian city. There's no reason why Situationist psychogeography can only be practiced in a romantic tourist town like Paris (did Guy Debord and co. ever venture to the *banlieues*?); indeed, maybe undertaking a similar critical encounter in a city whose urbs and suburbs plays a crucial function in the twenty-first century economy and which has been rated highly as an ideal place to live, is likely to generate more knowledge about the mechanics and logics of the contemporary world than footfalls through New York or London.

Vision. The figure of the hiker in these photographs belongs not in the city centre or on the highway, nor occupying the sidewalk of a suburban street, whether in a mountain town or in the city. His gestures and movements are out of place, as if he were transposed from photos of valley walks in Banff or Jasper into photos by Geoffrey James via the intervention of Photoshop. It is essential to render the suburbs into visual form to highlight the important role played by vision and aesthetics in how we respond to and understand these spaces. Uniformity and repetition are celebrated in (say) the formalism of Donald Judd, or some of Warhol's pieces, but are one of the main reasons to indict the suburbs. Banality, plainness, lack of colour—categories that should cause us to sit up and take note that attitudes and ideas about the suburbs are infused by the game of cultural capital as much as any aesthetic form. The attribution and patrolling of 'better' or 'worse' kinds of aesthetic form reinforce much of the moralism about the suburbs. Structure and history are thus reduced to matters of individual decision in a manner that allows those with the means to feel morally comforted about their *style de vie*, while never taking up the political and social forms that generate the spaces we inhabit and our visual imaginaries concerning them.

Hiking the Suburbs isn't intended to revalorize the suburbs, to engage in that all-too-easy flip of valences that can sometimes be passed off as an act of criticism. Its aim is to participate in a reinvention of the visual and verbal discourses through which we conceptualize the spaces in which we live, in order to lay bare the logics (from the economic to the affective) through which modern urban spaces are shaped and experienced.