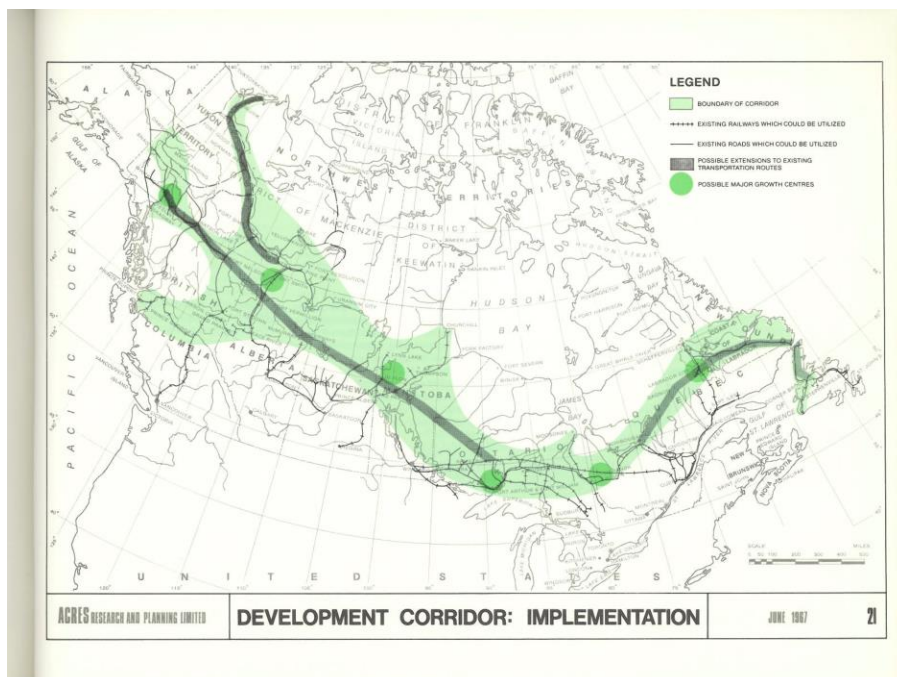


The grandiose — but failed — 1960s plan by an Ontario war hero to settle a ‘second Canada’ below the Arctic

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Acres Research and Planning Click to view a larger version of this early concept art for the Mid-Canada development corridor. If carried out, the idea was to shift development to the largely unoccupied greenbelt of boreal forest just underneath the Arctic.

If things had gone Richard Rohmer’s way in the 1960s, the Canada of 2016 could have been home to as many as 70 million people.

Canada would have had a GDP rivalling that of the United Kingdom and new highways, new railways and new metropolises, all built in the sparsely populated boreal forest region that Rohmer came to call “Mid-

Canada.” He would even help to spawn an entirely new type of citizen: The hearty, winter-loving “Mid-Canadian.”

Rohmer — a lawyer and decorated RCAF Wing Commander — was leading a charge to build a “second Canada” on top of the old one.



Cpl Katie Hodges Richard Rohmer in 2015

“It was a very simple concept; the country needed long range policies and plans for the future orderly development of this vast land that we have,” said Rohmer, 92, speaking by phone from his home in Collingwood, Ont.

This wasn't just some dashed-off 60s-era flight of fancy, either.

In its heyday, Rohmer's Mid-Canada plan attracted the attention of a who's who of powerful Canadians: Captains of industry, bank CEOs, labour leaders, scientists and Aboriginal leaders and the patronage of former Prime Minister Lester Pearson and the Governor General.

“Canada’s future is inseparably linked with the development of Mid-Canada,” read a preliminary report. More zealous boosters even claimed that a Canada without the moxie to develop its boreal forest might as well meekly surrender to U.S. annexation.

Field surveys were conducted all across the Canadian North. Fact-finding trips were organized to Siberia. A 1969 Mid-Canada Development Conference was convened in Thunder Bay, with membership costing the modern-day equivalent of \$26,000.

“What Canadians make of their opportunity will be judged by history and billions of people around the globe,” read the stirring words of a final report that, its writers believed, would soon be used as the founding document for a Canada Two.

And then, as Canada’s still sparsely populated boreal forest would indicate, it all just fizzled out.

“The North almost always disappoints its promoters,” said Ken Coates, a historian on the Canadian North and director of the International Centre for Northern Governance and Development. From the disappointing returns of the Klondike Gold Rush to the meagre spillover effects of Northwest Territories diamond mines, he notes, the promise of the North is never quite what it seems.

In his nine decades, Richard Rohmer has managed to remain persistently in the background of Canadian history.

He was in a P-51 Mustang over Juno Beach on D-Day, and only weeks later he was flying reconnaissance when he called in the British Spitfire strike that took the famed German General Erwin Rommel out of the war.

In his autobiography, he wrote of spotting Rommel's staff car from the air: "I could see two men in the front and three in the back and the glinting of gold from the uniforms."

A land-use lawyer, he had a hand in the development of Toronto lands that now host the CN Tower and Ontario Science Centre. A friend of the late Ontario premier John Robarts, he helped conceive the Ontario flag. An honorary Lieutenant-General, he is considered the most decorated citizen in Canada, with everything from the Order of Canada to France's Legion of Honour.

And throughout all this, Rohmer penned bestselling political thrillers, often focused around some fictionalized U.S. scheme to steal Canadian resources.



THE CANADIAN PRESS/Adrian Wyld Stephen Harper stands with his wife Laureen Harper and Major-General Richard Rohmer as they pay their respects in the Canadian military cemetery Friday June 6, 2014 in Beny-sur-Mer, France.

The general even takes credit for helping to conceive the name “National Post” when he was a board member with the Conrad Black-helmed media company Hollinger Inc.

The Mid-Canada plan arose when Rohmer suddenly became captivated by a map of Canada in his study. Before him, a vast corridor of green boreal forest stretched from the Yukon to James Bay, through land that he had previously dismissed as inhospitable.

“It’s one of the largest inhabitable — but largely uninhabited — sectors of the world,” he said.

Thenceforth, he began recruiting apostles to the notion that Canada was ludicrously neglecting a chunk of subarctic land the size of several European countries.



Joe BryksaView of Flin Flon, Man. in Canada's boreal forest

“Much of this area is considered to be a frigid, barren wasteland, beset with fantastic problems of climate and lengthy periods of darkness, which permits only semi-permanent life,” read a Rohmer-commissioned report by Acres Research & Planning.

“This description is most inaccurate.”

It's admittedly been a while since Canada has successfully pulled off a grandiose megaproject, but the country's current prosperity is largely owed to some grandiose Rohmer-esque scheme or another.

The St. Lawrence Seaway turned the likes of Sault Ste. Marie and Thunder Bay into Atlantic ports. Much of Alberta persists as a demographic monument to Clifford Sifton, the moustachioed early 20th century interior minister who set out to settle the prairies with "stalwart peasants" from Eastern Europe.

And across the country, whole metropolitan areas have risen in completely arbitrary locations simply because some engineer pegged them for a railway station or highway stop.

Those who joined Rohmer's conference and his "field trips" through Mid-Canada included vice presidents from Canadian National Railways, Bombardier, the Bank of Montreal and a scattering of mining brass. Among the academics and architects who joined, however, there was a base of skeptics who suspected that this was just another Ontario plot to loot the West.

"We protest the rape of the north," read signs outside the Thunder Bay conference.

But the final report is notable for a tone of conservationism and Aboriginal consultation that would have seemed positively pinko by the standards of the age.

"Thoughtless meddling and ill-considered exploitation is just as bad as wanton destruction," read the final report, which was issued in an era where pipelines and hydroelectric dams were largely a matter of paperwork.

Years before the term “global warming” entered mainstream discourse, the report even mentions the need to keep Canada’s forests as a brake against rising carbon dioxide levels.

The conference featured an address by Walter Currie, president of [what was then called](#) the Indian-Eskimo Association of Canada, who essentially told the gathered powers that Indigenous people rarely come out on top when a megaproject comes rolling in.

“Will tomorrow, in this Mid-Canada Corridor, be no better than the Canada of yesterday or today for my people, or will we be invited as equal partners to participate in determining our futures?” he said.

“This may be the last asking.”

A theme that keeps coming up in Mid-Canada literature is the need for a “national purpose” to buck up the 100-year-old nation.

With the country being ripped apart by Quebec nationalism and Western alienation, optimists hope to stir the hearts of the dominion with an inspiring feat of continental engineering.

“Wouldn’t it be satisfying to know that we had a national goal, a national purpose for Canada? Such a goal exists in the creation of a second Canada” wrote Rohmer in *The Green North*, his 150-page paperback pitch for the plan.

The final report warned, “to be strong a nation needs a common cause.”

Ultimately, though, Mid-Canada were kept intentionally vague, with the idea that the region would ultimately be shaped by committees of planners, locals and engineers

“We weren’t setting out to create plans, we stressed the need to have plans,” said Rohmer.

But an initial planning report did provide some clues as to how a developed Mid-Canada might have taken shape.

There would be diagonal trans-continental railroad connecting Labrador ports to the Yukon. A highway to the Arctic. New growth centres; Flin Flon, Whitehorse, Labrador City, Thunder Bay and High Level were all pegged as settlements that could reach Calgary-esque levels of size and influence by the year 2000.



Neil Simmons for National Post Bunk houses in Labrador City, one of the would-be economic powerhouses of Mid-Canada.

Strangely, Waterways, the precursor to Fort McMurray, was left off the list. It remains one of the few Mid-Canada cities that achieved any semblance of the growth envisioned by Rohmer.

Final infrastructure cost for a full-blown 1970s incursion into Mid-Canada? Four to five billion dollars, about \$35 billion in 2016 dollars.

Governor General Roland Michener, a friend of Rohmer, arranged a meeting with Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. The idea was that Rohmer

would show up, present the report, screen some slides and get the ball rolling on a Ministry of Mid-Canada or the like.

Instead, he met the disinterested eyes of the Prime Minister, who couldn't seem to escape Rideau Hall fast enough.

"The message was 'don't even bother,' but in any event we did our best," he said.

Rohmer has long chalked up the failure to partisan considerations. The airman reeked of Tory blue, and whatever Trudeau planned to do with Canada in the 1970s, settling the North was not on the list.



Courtesy Richard Rohmer
Richard Rohmer, Governor General Roland Michener and Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau pose for a photo after the presentation of the Mid-Canada final report at Rideau Hall.

But to skeptics, even the most well-intentioned Mid-Canada plan could have become a disaster of abandoned rail grades and planned communities turned into drug-ridden ghost towns.

"If you just took a blank cheque of building communities and hoping that the population would follow, the best you could end up with would be a patchwork of poverty and incompleteness," said Northern historian Ken Coates.

“There’s very few places in the North where local resources will sustain a 30 or 50 year project.”

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On Northern development, Coates is more of an incrementalist: Build a university here, a military base there and slowly Canada pushes settlers towards the tree line.

But the persistent problem, he notes, is that Canadians are notoriously wussy in cold.

They buy vacation houses in Florida. They spend Christmas in Puerto Vallarta. They build downtowns filled with underground tunnels just to avoid going outside.

“If we had the Norwegian love of winter, it would be a different story,” he said.

The Mid-Canada plan was hatched in an era of unprecedented hubris. And six decades later, there’s no shortage of similar postwar utopian visions that went careening off the rails.

Montreal’s city-sized Mirabel Airport never came close to becoming the critical air gateway that its planners envisioned in the 1970s.

Brazil built an entirely new capital, Brasilia, from scratch in the 1950s. But while the city’s modernist design looks good on postcards, it is notorious for its lifeless streets and inhuman scale.

“Its monumental dimension seems to have prepared it better for authoritarianism than democracy, as if political power were something to be admired rather than shared,” wrote the New York Times in 1988.

And in the United States, it was the rare city that entered the 1970s without having at least one historic district leveled in the service of an elevated freeway or brutalist housing complex.

But Rohmer holds firm to the original concept, and can even flirt with thoughts of “I told you so” whenever he looks at an overcrowded Toronto freeway or gazes at a warming north that is home to new tracts of farmable land each year.



Mark Prins/Inanda Images The Olympic torch makes its way through Whitehorse in 2009. Now one of the largest cities in Mid-Canada, the Yukon capital was pegged to become a major metropolis in a developed boreal forest.

“My view of what should be done with Canada in terms of policies and plans ... hasn’t changed at all,” he said.

Meanwhile, a modern-day group of planners have picked up the Mid-Canada torch.

Earlier this year, Thunder Bay's Northern Policy Institute tried to reboot the Rohmer plan with a report decrying the anarchy of 21st century development in the region.

“Activity along the corridor continues to grow at a rapid pace, pretty much ad hoc, with nothing and no one to determine how best to proceed,” [read the paper by John van Nostrand](#).

Kent Fellows, a researcher with the University of Calgary, is part of a separate team working out the planning and surveying on a northern transportation corridor designed to connect boreal forest communities to the “South.”

Currently, most Mid-Canadians live in places accessible only by air or — like Fort McMurray — reached only by long, deadly highways.

This is a large part of why Northern Alberta oil is some of the world's most expensive to extract. Anybody looking to set up a Mid-Canada resource project, meanwhile, needs to factor in the exorbitant costs of work camps, private air strips and private power plants.

As he's said in previous interviews, the first step to filling Mid-Canada is “lowering the cost of everything in the North.”

Like all economists, Fellows naturally a bit more skeptical on grandiose nation-building schemes than your average nonagenarian WWII fighter pilot.

But for anyone doubting the potential of giant, hare-brained mega schemes, the Calgary-based Fellows need only point out his window to a gleaming metropolis built in the middle of nowhere.

“We wouldn’t have a post office here if it hadn’t been for the Canadian Pacific main line coming through town,” he said.

Source:<http://www.nationalpost.com/m/wp/news/canada/blog.html?b=news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/the-grandiose-but-failed-1960s-plan-by-an-ontario-war-hero-to-settle-a-second-canada-below-the-arctic>