Globe editorial: Why has building new infrastructure become so difficult?

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Citizens mostly do a good job of recognizing the hollowness of political stock phrases. Yet there is one bit of campaign rhetoric that still leaves many nodding their heads sagely, if not reaching for the Kleenex: the ubiquitous “infrastructure investment.”

Just about every ambitious North American pol storms to office with a promise to build, build, build. Donald Trump and Justin Trudeau are two cases in point. Both made vast infrastructure projects central to their winning platforms. So did Toronto mayor John Tory.

Nearly two, three and four years after their respective elections, these leaders have failed to deliver. The shovels, to use campaign parlance, are not in the ground.

That failure isn’t surprising. The great era of North American public works is over. Our societies are too fussy, risk-averse, fractured, bureaucratic and litigious to lay down the reams of concrete and steel that 20th-century builders like Robert Moses and Fred Gardiner were able to. The only surprise is that we keep falling for people who say otherwise.

To illustrate the point, you can consult studies showing that the West accounts for a rapidly shrinking share of the world’s infrastructure spending – or just look at Toronto.

In Canada’s biggest, richest city, the task of developing long-neglected port lands has been largely given to Alphabet Inc., the company that runs Google; a much-needed downtown subway relief line has no prospect of being built any time soon; the city’s northern subway extension opened in December, three decades

after it was proposed and hundreds of millions of dollars over budget; and the fate of transit in suburban Scarborough is in perpetual limbo.

Toronto can't even tear down public works, let alone build new ones. Virtually every serious planner who has closely studied the issue agrees the eastern stretch of the Gardiner Expressway should be razed to revitalize the area, but the mayor and his council allies kiboshed the idea in 2015.

Of course, Toronto only looks particularly dysfunctional if you ignore the rest of the continent. Remember that the saga of the Trans Mountain pipeline in British Columbia, despite recent developments, is just beginning.

Remember, too, that Ottawa is desperate to spend money on infrastructure but can't quite manage it. The Parliamentary Budget Officer reported earlier this year that the feds have only found projects for half of the $14.4-billion they've earmarked for Phase 1 of their planned infrastructure glut – a key campaign pledge.

Canada isn't an outlier in this. In the United States, Mr. Trump's promised infrastructure binge has proved as illusory as Mr. Trudeau's – so much so that "Infrastructure Week" has become a jokey shorthand for Mr. Trump's bluster.

But even there Mr. Trump is not the only U.S. leader to be stumped by the challenges of building in modern times. The recently opened Second Avenue subway in New York City cost an astounding US$2.5-billion per mile to build and was punted for generations before the tunnel borers got to work.

Continental Europe builds infrastructure – subways, in particular – much more cheaply than most of the English-speaking world, a fact highlighted by the independent journalist Alon Levy. But it's Asia, and especially authoritarian China, that is taking over as the global infrastructure powerhouse. Even the West's most skilled public-works builders have a harder time of it these days.

That can be frustrating, and certainly Canadian governments could do a much better job of building smartly and efficiently. But the cycle of promises and recrimination around infrastructure needs a dose of realism.

To read about the glory days of Western city building is to be awed and disgusted in equal measure. Flip through The Power Broker, Robert Caro's celebrated biography of New York's mid-century master builder Robert Moses, and return to a time when labour and land were far cheaper, environmental standards lax or non-existent, the concepts of heritage preservation and neighbourhood integrity just beginning to bud, and political machines were powerful enough to grease the wheels of government. We won't, and shouldn't, return to those days.

That doesn't mean we should give up trying to build useful and impressive public works. But right now we can't, at least not in a reasonable amount of time. These days, it's next to impossible to put a government shovel in the ground.

We'll look at possible solutions in an upcoming editorial.