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Verticality, Public Space and the Role of Resident Participation in Revitalizing Suburban High-rise Buildings

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Abstract

In this paper, we look at the role that public space may take on in the redevelopment of suburban high-rise buildings in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA). We are interested in what role public space plays in the imaginary and how different forms of public participation in planning processes are beneficial to the outcome of the redesign of high-rise buildings who are in need of repair and retrofitting due to their age and their social stigmatization. These suburban high-rises offer insight into newly proliferating forms of public space, and speak to the need for more diverse and specific physical, social and political articulations of public space. We find that by examining public space through the lens of verticality we are able to see how different planning interventions, urban development processes, spatial contexts and competing imaginaries produce very different and often hybrid forms. We base our findings upon selected planning and policy documents, media reports and discourse, and input from interviews with several locals involved in planning processes.

Keywords: public space, high rise, verticality, suburbia, tower renewal, Toronto

Résumé

Dans ce papier, nous examinons des changements dans le forme de l'espace public dans les tours d'habitation de grande hauteur qui sont en procès de renouvellement dans la region du Grand Toronto et de Hamilton. Nous nous intéressons au rôle que joue l'espace public dans l'imaginaire et aux avantages des différentes formes de participation du public aux processus de planification pour la restructuration des immeubles de grande hauteur qui ont besoin de réparations et de réaménagements en raison de leur âge et de leur stigmatisation sociale. Nous soutenons que ces tours d'habitation nous donnent de la perspicacité aux formes d'espace public de plus en plus répandues, et expriment un besoin pour plus de diversité et spécificité dans nos articulations théoriques. Nous trouvons qu'en utilisant une perspective de verticalité, nous pouvons observer comment les diverses interventions de planification, les processus de développement urbaine, les contextes spatiaux et les imaginaires divergentes peuvent produire des formes diverses et fréquemment hybrides. Nous fondons nos conclusions sur les documents de politiques et planification sélectionnés, les rapports et discours de médias, et des entretiens avec des résidents locaux engagés dans le processus de planification.

Mots clés: espace public, tour d'habitation, "verticalité", banlieue, renouvellement des tours d'habitation, Toronto

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Introduction

We see a proliferation of high-rise residential buildings not only in cities, but also within peripheral areas and throughout entire urban regions. In this paper we are interested in the role of public space in peripheral tower neighbourhoods and high-rise buildings that were created in the era between 1945 and 1984 in the Greater Toronto-Hamilton Area (GTHA), Canada's largest urban region located in the south of the province around Lake Ontario (Figure 1). These high-rise buildings have now become part of a revitalization strategy under the name of Tower Renewal (Stewart 2007).

We explore the relationship between revitalization and public space through two case studies. The first one is located at Kipling Avenue in Etobicoke, one of Toronto's old suburbs, and it was an experiment on how to engage residents in the reimagination of public space in a meaningful way. And the second one is the Ken Soble Tower, which currently is undergoing an intense and high-profile makeover in the North End neighbourhood of Hamilton, Ontario, and can be situated within a broader context of gentrification and waterfront redevelopment. They exemplify two different approaches: the former is an example where public participation of inhabitants was front and centre and the latter one is a case where the focus was to retrofit the building without consultation of inhabitants.

Public space is socially constructed and takes on a variety of hybrid and shifting forms, which emerge out of particular local histories, political contexts, development trajectories, struggles over space, and imaginaries within suburban high-rises. Therefore, we begin with a discussion of public space, and posit verticality as a useful conceptual lens through which to analyze public space and its unique forms and configurations in high-rises. We then delve into a genealogy of inner suburban residential high-rises in the GTHA, and how public space has been understood and produced in the past. We explore how it is formulated in and impacted by current urban revitalization initiatives, in particular through the program that is called Tower Renewal and the potential role of public participation in defining the outcome of the redevelopment projects. Our case studies reveal how public space in such high-rises can be understood, prioritized, articulated, and constituted in very different ways that are always place- and context-specific, and speak to the ways in which public participation in Tower Renewal plays out differently on a case-by-case basis.

Methodology

We situate our study within the literature on public space, revitalization, suburbanisms, and verticality, noting that suburban high-rises offer important insights for each of these areas. The methods for the two case studies are critical media analysis, document analysis, participant observations, and interviews. For the first case study (the Kipling Towers), we rely on notes we took during events related to the reimagination process of the community's common spaces inside and outside of the building in 2011 as well as on a film that was one of the outcomes of the community engagement exercises (<http://suburbs.info.yorku.ca/highrise-out-my-window/>). For the Hamilton case, we conducted a detailed analysis of relevant planning documents, including current policies on urban renewal, redevelopment, and regeneration and how the Tower Renewal initiative fits into these frameworks, particularly in regard to the waterfront redevelopment plan. Further, we conducted a media analysis of local, regional and national news outlets as well as blog posts, seeking out news articles from 2005 to 2017 on high-rise, tower revitalization, and urban revitalization in Hamilton as well as the city's North End, including the Ken Soble Tower revitalization proposal. Numerous site visits in Hamilton and at the Ken Soble Tower were conducted in the spring of 2017, while plans for retrofitting still hung in the balance and residents of the tower were being relocated. During this process we evaluated the planning documents for its proposed revitalization. In addition, we conducted semi-structured interviews with several local North End residents involved in the planning processes for the tower and the waterfront area, in order to establish a sense of local social and political contexts, as well as how the tower renewal fits into the broader neighbourhood revitalization strategy. In this context, we interviewed a representative of CityHousing Hamilton involved in the tower's redevelopment and the community engagement process. Our data is analyzed through the lens of verticality. Approaching the tower via these various avenues allowed us to examine diverse ways in which the vertical space of the high-rise is intertwined with horizontal geographies of revitalization in the North End neighbourhood, producing what we understand to be hybrid forms of public space both within and around the tower.

Public Space in a Vertical Context

In order to understand public space in suburban high-rises, we posit that it is necessary to put aside traditional conceptualizations of public space that root it in an idealized agora, or the street, and to similarly discard the notion of a spatial dichotomy that places it in opposition to ‘private’ space. The unique contexts of the largely privately-owned suburban landscape, the vertical built form of the high-rise tower, and the uncertain question of ownership of shared interior spaces all trouble such understandings. Furthermore, increased privatization and the rollout of unique neoliberal urban spatial forms and mechanisms of spatial control and regulation (Lazzarato, 2009; Lehrer, 1998; Németh, 2009) which characterize urban space more generally complicate previous conceptualizations and experiences of public space. Through such processes, public space is said to be losing its core qualities of being a space with “(relatively) open access, unmediated deliberation, and shared participation” (Németh, 2012: 812). Instead we see the formation of new spatialities and landscapes that require us to reconsider exactly what constitutes public space in newly emerging contexts.

The predominant understanding of public space throughout much of the planning literature is that of an accessible designated physical place that is a ‘good’ in public ownership, designed for the public use and supported by public funds (Haas & Olsson, 2014; Madanipour, 2010; Shaftoe, 2008). But public space is not something just out there, with a label on it that states its purpose (Lehrer, 1998). From a Lefebvrian perspective, public space, like any other space, is socially produced through practice, symbols, and actions, and may thus include a *range* of locations (Jenlink, 2007; Lehrer & Winkler, 2006; Smith & Low, 2006), thus complicating our understandings of it. The political implications inherent in public space are therefore not only limited to an imagined inclusive and accessible public sphere (Fraser, 1990; Mitchell, 1995). Such a conceptualization of space as dynamic allows us to understand the unique and context-specific ways in which public space emerges, exists, and changes, as well as how this is connected to seemingly minute spatial practices, broad social processes, struggle, and a variety of different publics.

Following the work of Henri Lefebvre (1991), we emphasize that public space is socially produced, composed of overlapping realms: the physical, the social, and the symbolic. This understanding stands in contrast with the assumption that form of ownership or imposed designation is the only determining factor, and lets us to see how space encompasses the built environment, but also social practice, collective memory and imagination. Lefebvre allows us to see how public space plays a role in politics and the constitution of different social and group identities (Fraser, 1992; Iveson, 1998; Young, 1990), suggesting that as we produce space, space also produces us.

Notions of a public/private dichotomy must become similarly unsettled, with essentialist definitions no longer able to capture the complexity of the spaces we construct (Bondi, 1998; Bondi & Domosh, 1998; Nissen, 2008; Smith & Low, 2006). A binary characterization of space fails to explain zones or phenomena that blur these divides, such as transitional spaces, virtual spaces, or publicly owned private spaces (POPS)—all of which we might find relevant to the form of the residential high-rise tower—leading us to believe that it is necessary to both conceive of public-private “hybridity” (Nissen, 2008), and to explore the ways in which the public may be present within spaces commonly understood to be private. Just as some have theorized the erosion of public space by the private (Banerjee, 2001), we might also speak to the possibility of new forms of public space emerging within privately owned space, with the potential to be sites of what John Friedmann would call the “good society” (Lehrer, 2016). It is in these ways that we have found it possible to conceive of public space existing within and around the often-presumed private space of the high-rise tower.

What we mean by public space in the context of high-rise buildings in a most conventional way are the entrance door to the building (sometimes with a lobby, sometimes just a quick and short way to the elevators and stair cases), the hallways, the elevators, and the various forms of common areas (such as party room, workout place, etc.) as well as outdoor feature such as sitting areas, playgrounds, tennis courts, parking lots and so on. While the legal structure of the high-rise building might be different—rental apartments versus privately owned units—the usage of these common areas allow social practices that have the potential to turn these areas into public space.

Despite the increasing presence of residential high-rise buildings around the globe (A. Harris, 2015; McNeill, 2005), there is relatively little written about the function of public space in and around them that goes beyond themes of isolation, abandonment, safety, security, and crime (Adey, 2010; Amick & Kviz, 1975; Fumia, 2010; Gifford, 2007; Kern, 2010a; Lees & Baxter, 2011; Power, 1997). Vertical urbanism, however, is an area of

increasing interest for scholars seeking to understand the practices of everyday life within high-rise buildings, and offers a starting point for examining such questions. A perspective of verticality renders visible unique forms of spatial production, materiality, lived practice and imaginary, and unsettles typical horizontal approaches to urbanization and suburbanization (Baxter, 2017; Graham, 2016; Graham & Hewith, 2012; A. Harris, 2015). Peering through a lens of verticality, we might see how public space takes on unique and hybridized forms in suburban high-rise towers, tied to tendencies towards internalization and privatization, particular practices of dwelling, and to public imaginaries and discourse.

High-rise Towers in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area

The Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) is an 8422 km² large urban region in southern Ontario and home to close to 7 million people. High-rise towers in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Region appeared in the postwar period, with most of them built as clusters in the years between the 1960s and 1984, creating a “pattern of urbanization [that] is unique in North America” (E.R.A architects, et al, 2010, p. i). Today, these high-rise towers house about one million people, predominantly as renters, in close to 2000 towers. Units were provided through the private rental sector and to a lesser extent through the public, non-profit sector. Major development firms were able to construct thousands of rental units in large-scale towers due to new technologies and easily accessible government financing (August & Walks, 2018). Their construction prevailed as the most popular housing type in development for nearly twenty years (Stewart, 2007).

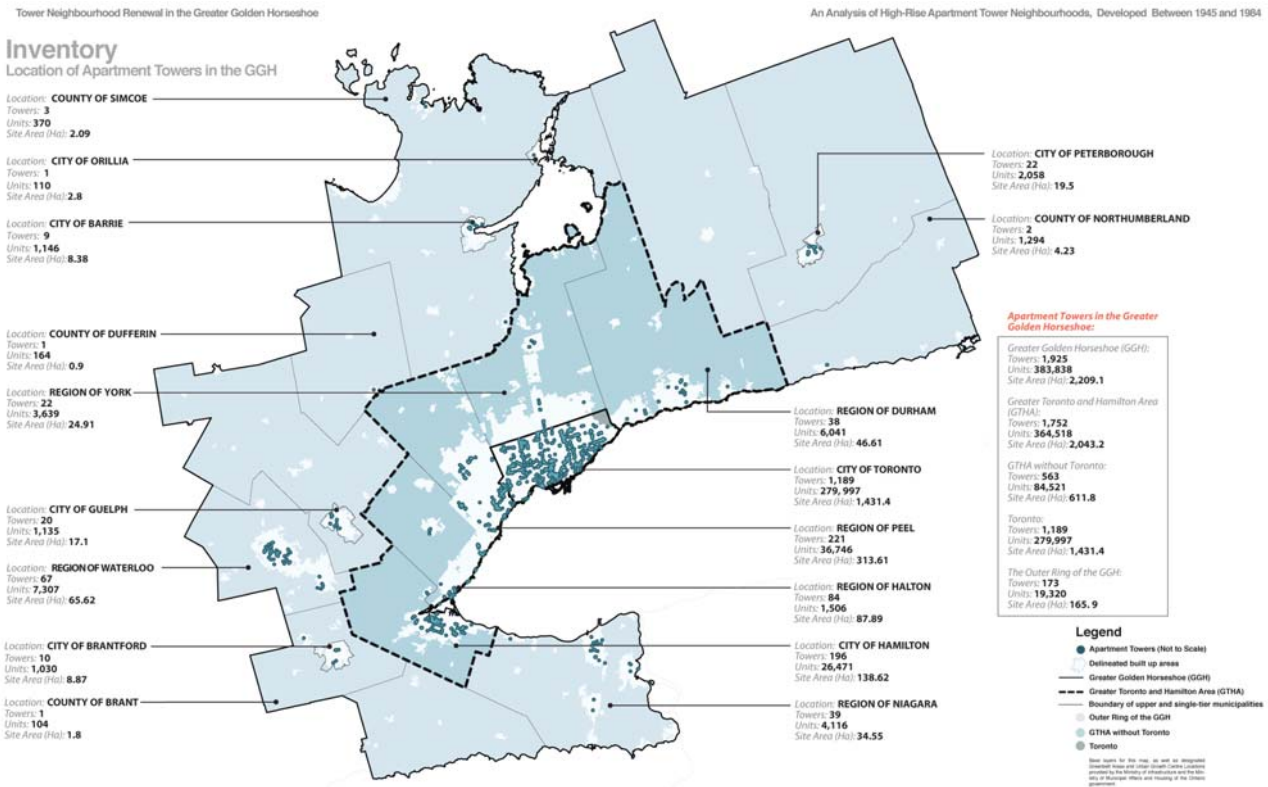


Figure 1: Inventory of high-rise buildings that were built between 1945 and 1984 in the Greater Golden Horseshoe (Source: E.R.A. architects et al. 2010).

Most of the post-war high-rises built in this period within the GTHA following an enlightened Modernist planning vision that sought to put forward “bold planning interventions” to “ensure harmonious urban growth and minimize social and economic hardship” (Filion, 1999: 428). As a built form, the Modernist high-rise had a strong design rationale, seeking to increase standardization and functionality, and a strong economic one that emphasized raising densities and lowering housing costs (Mumford, 1995).

These buildings not only served to meet a mounting need for rental units in the region, but also initially

offered a 'modern' alternative to downtown living, providing a variety of luxury lifestyle amenities (Saleff, 2007; Stewart, 2007). Legacies of disinvestment and the sustained lack of proper maintenance and management, however, gradually led to a degradation in high-rise rental housing. Through the 1970s and 1980s, increased costs of construction combined with unravelling of structures of economic and state support which had previously sustained these buildings, lead to their gradual deterioration (August & Walks, 2018). In Ontario, while federal and provincial financing had allowed for the construction of these high-rise rental apartment towers around the GTHA until the mid 1980s, attention shifted dramatically away from the provision of affordable rental housing towards the much more profitable model of condominium development and has since the 2000s has become a dominant form of urban development both in the GTHA and across other urban areas in Canada (Kern, 2007; Lehrer & Wieditz, 2009; Lehrer, Keil & Kipfer, 2010; Rosen & Walks, 2013; Rosen & Walks, 2015; August & Walks, 2018;).

There has been a pervasive perception in urban planning discourse that high-rise towers themselves, as a built form, were responsible for many of the crisis-like problems, providing a convenient scapegoat obscuring the lack of proper care, management and maintenance in many buildings. This was particularly the case for the common areas, with elevators that broke down on a regular basis, hallways that most of the time were dirty, light fixtures not properly working and where common rooms for the inhabitants had been before, they often were closed down because of maintenance costs. The same is true for outdoor common areas such as a tennis court and playgrounds. Fairly early on, high-rise towers became stigmatized as sites of social isolation, crime and reduced social cohesion (Henderson-Wilson, 2009) and were associated with "unfavourable influences" (Metropolitan Toronto Planning Board, 1959: 96) from which single-family dwellings needed to be protected, leading to many towers being designed so as to be segregated from their surrounding neighbourhoods.

The physical design of many suburban tower neighbourhoods can actually be problematic for a variety of reasons. In the GTHA, many follow 'tower in the park' design, featuring tall buildings, surrounded by shared, open green spaces, plazas and parking lots. Many were planned for a middle-class, car-owning demographic who no longer live in them due to the deterioration of the buildings (Hess & Farrow, 2011). Their inhospitable and disconnected landscapes can present a daunting challenge for the low-income residents who now predominantly call these buildings home, many of whom do not own cars and rely on walking or transit (*ibid.*). The lawns and parking lots intended to serve as residents' common areas create or act as barriers between towers and the neighbourhoods they are situated in. In the course of deterioration, shared spaces such as lounges were closed down, elevators are often malfunctioning and staircases show clear signs of poor maintenance.

Currently, many of the high-rise towers managed by social housing providers such as Toronto Community Housing Corporation and CityHousing Hamilton are faced with enormous repair backlogs that seem to grow much more quickly than the organizations' abilities to keep up (City of Hamilton, 2012). Disinvestment worsens the pressure placed upon the aging infrastructure of these buildings. Many older high-rise neighbourhoods are denied their "fair share" (Centre for Urban Growth and Renewal, 2012) of targeted government funding or policy focus. Meanwhile, many individual private landlords limit maintenance of buildings to gradual repairs, allowing deterioration to compound, especially in regards to shared amenities. Many common areas in older buildings become unusable, or where this is not the case, they are often too expensive for tenants to afford (United Way, 2011: 51).

The use of common spaces is also limited by concerns around safety, which have led to the securitization of many buildings through the use of cameras, security guards, and sometimes policing by residents themselves (United Way, 2011: 95). While security may be a valid residential concern, many of these measures are deemed ineffective (*ibid.*). Furthermore, discrimination by higher-income, property-owning, usually-white neighbours against lower-income and racialized tenants who frequently become concentrated in aging towers also leads to policing from outside, potentially making residents feel unwelcome in the surrounding neighbourhood (Fumia, 2010; Hess & Farrow 2011; see also the work of Fennell, 2014; Henderson-Wilson, 2009).

Hamilton is interesting here for a number of reasons. As one of Canada's most industrialized cities through the twentieth century, it is currently one of the most rapidly changing cities in the GTHA, experiencing a significant property boom, and sits reputedly on the verge of a major condominium boom (Paddon, 2017). Its geographical proximity to Toronto exposes the city to outwardly rippling impacts from the burgeoning property market that now grip the entire GTHA and Niagara region, prompting a rise in real estate prices (CMHC, 2016, 2017; Royal LePage, 2017).

Gentrification has become a major issue in the city's downtown and increasingly in areas beyond, and major shifts in the affordability of housing in various parts of the city are contributing to large migrations of people who are either drawn in or pushed out by neighbourhood change. The city's suburbs have historically been characterized by spatialized inequality, initially between the working class East End and the middle class West End, but in the mid-twentieth century, with the deterioration of older districts, between the lower-income inner suburbs and the middle class outer suburbs (Harris & Forrester, 2003). Hamilton's North End neighbourhoods, where our case study is located, is a historically low-income, older working class suburb along the waterfront, where the city's steel plants were largely responsible for their emergence (Harris & Sendbuehler, 1992).

Through the post-war period, suburbs throughout the GTHA were developed with great intensity to accommodate rapid population growth, taking a variety of diverse forms which have not only included the often-stereotyped horizontal expansion of single family dwellings, but also numerous high-density tower neighbourhoods (R. Harris, 2015). In Hamilton, rapid suburban development was largely generated by real estate interests and speculation, and facilitated through federal funding, but also shaped by discriminatory lending practices which refused mortgages in many underserved suburbs, and only reluctantly provided them in older neighbourhoods where homes were largely owner-built (Harris & Forrester, 2003; Harris & Sendbuehler, 1992). Financing tended to favour the West End and districts along the base of the Niagara Escarpment, contributing to inequality between suburbs (Harris & Forrester, 2003).

In Hamilton the unliveable conditions of the shared spaces of many high-rise apartment buildings are well-documented in both the media and in policy reports. Many buildings are infested with pests, and fail to meet fire codes or public health standards. Accounts given by residents in one extreme case in Hamilton's Gibson/Lansdale neighbourhood, described stairwells being used as bathrooms, squatters living in vacant units, malfunctioning elevators, and garbage chutes clogged several floors deep (Craggs, 2015a; Craggs, 2015b).

With an increasing tendency towards financialization in rental housing throughout the GTHA (see August & Walks, 2018), a growing trend both in Hamilton and Toronto has been for property managers to allow buildings to deteriorate, and then offer residents payment in exchange for their departure. Examples of this in two Hamilton high-rise towers managed by Greenwin Incorporated, on John Street North and Hughson Street North, led many residents in the North End of Hamilton to believe that renters were intentionally being pushed out of these buildings by landlords seeking to upgrade them and bring in higher paying tenants.

Tower Renewal and Public Space

a) *A place for public participation?*

A rather different response to conditions in these ailing suburban high-rise buildings has emerged in the form of Tower Renewal, which is posited as a "bold and innovative venture" operating across the GTHA (Centre for Urban Growth and Renewal, 2015), seeking to retrofit and renovate older apartment towers, and to make them into "vibrant" and "socially and economically viable" communities (Evergreen, 2017). Initiated by Graeme Stewart and officially launched by Stewart and Michael McClelland of E.R.A Architects in 2007, the project has grown into a partnership of various consulting groups, firms, foundations, academic institutions and organizations across different sectors. What began as a largely research-focused initiative, examining everyday life, levels of need, and potential for change in tower neighbourhoods, quickly evolved into an elaborate redevelopment program with international potential after it was presented to then-mayor of Toronto, David Miller (Hood, 2018). It was also taken up as a regional strategy for dealing with the condition of the almost 2000 high-rise towers that were built between 1945 and 1984 (E.R.A et al., 2010). The initiative has resulted in the creation of a program which is devoted to working with tower residents to improve their communities through partnerships, new zoning initiatives, and assistance to building operators. The goal is to rehabilitate the old high-rise stock, focusing on six impact areas: carbon reduction, improved building quality, affordability, growth, complete communities, and culture. Tower neighbourhoods are herein identified as a "tremendous housing resource" with enormous potential (E.R.A. Architects et al., 2010: 118), and it is understood that renovating, redeveloping and rebranding these buildings should be considered a best practice in planning (Centre for Urban Growth and Renewal, 2012). The Ken Soble Tower in Hamilton, which is discussed further down, is a particular example of this redevelopment strategy.

But before we get to that case, we need to mention the role of public participation in the redesign of high-rise buildings within the Tower Renewal strategy. In 2010/11, a collaboration between E.R.A Architects, the Centre for Urban Growth and Renewal (CUG+R) and the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) explored new ways of integrating the inhabitants in redefining common space around a high-rise tower on Kipling Avenue, which is located in Etobicoke, a so-called old suburb of Toronto (Cizek, 2011).

What evolved as a collaboration between residents, architects, animators and film makers is a unique way of approaching some of the key problems that high-rise buildings within the Tower Renewal strategy face. This moment presented a scenario of public participation in the re-appropriation of space, and with it, it exemplified a social production of public space along Henri Lefebvre's triad of space: the lived experiences of inhabitants combined with the imaginary that comes out of a discursive practice between inhabitants, architects, mediators and planners:

Over the course of two years, residents of a Toronto highrise worked with Cizek and her team to re-imagine the space around their development. First they walked around the property, talking about the hallmark problems of their highrise; afterward, they brainstormed new ideas for the space with the help of architects and animators. What if there was a playground here, instead of an abandoned tennis court? What if we had a garden, or a shared space that connected the residential buildings? Finally, a web developer turned the documentary into a 3-D virtual space online—making it one of the world's first interactive HTML5 documentaries, allowing viewers to scroll around, explore on their own, and control the narrative themselves. This choose-your-own-adventure navigation, Cizek says, is part of the storytelling experience. (Tsui, 2011)

What is called here a documentary is in fact a tool of community participation: it allows the viewer to access the various stories of people and places and issues in a non-prescribed way and with it contributes directly to public participation in the planning process. In other words, *One Millionth Tower* is NOT a straight forward documentary but rather a tool for seeking public input and stands in contrast to a regular documentary because it appeals to the possibilities instead of the realities. It asks “what if?”

In the interactive documentary that was produced by Kat Cizek, an award winning NFB film maker, we hear a female voice saying that “If you drive by, you may just see a building that is ugly, but for us this is our home.” And another male voice states that “vertical living keeps you inside your house. This brought us out and got us to interact.” (both cited in Flahive and Cizek, 2011). Cizek mirrors this statement of a resident by stating that “We have a lot of place-less places. But people live here. How do we make [these buildings] more humane, both inside and outside?” (quoted in Tsui, 2011).

The focus in this cooperation was all about communal spaces. There was, for example, a defunct tennis court—a sign from a time when these towers were dreamed of as homes for the upper middle class—but it had fallen into disrepair over the years. The stairs were broken and the surface of the court was a patchwork of half fixed holes. A fence around the premise disallowed people to use it at all. “Beside the building that I live in, there is a tennis court that is very dangerous” a male voice says in the film. He then proposes to have this space turned into an open one, with a “nice, shallow wide stair case” that then would change the circulation with people using it constantly “so you always would have people going to school, going to the mall.” (voice in Flahive, G. and Cizek, K. 2010; see figures 2, 3, and 4)

The transformation of the former tennis court is just one example of several ideas that came out of the many meetings and workshops that inhabitants had with the architects and animators (see figure 5) and that were translated into a visual experience by the film makers. In this process the bland and dangerous space around the foot of the buildings turned into a public space, created by the imagination of the inhabitants. Outside of the building one would find a multipurpose space for playing, dancing and just hanging out while at the same time it was a space of transition between the buildings and the outside world. A community garden that would respect and respond to both the climate in Canada and the various cultural backgrounds of the users was imagined. And the common rooms on the main floor, which had been locked up for years so nobody could use them, were envisaged for all kinds of different community purposes.

One Millionth Tower depicts the participatory process through which residents reimagine the public spaces of their neighbourhoods, playing a major role in redesigning their shared spaces to meet their needs.



Figure 2: View of the outdoor space around the tennis court, as existing.



Figure 3: View of the outdoor space around the tennis court, as imagined by the inhabitants in collaboration with the architects.



Figure 4: View of the tennis court towards the buildings with sketched up version of possibilities.



Figure 5: Residents participation in visioning study (source for figures 2 to 5: screen shot from Flahive and Cizek, 2011).

Efforts have been made on the part of planners to increase community participation, inclusivity and input, and to foster consensus-building among groups with different interests. The Tower Renewal initiative here envisions a more participatory planning process that goes further than most, drawing upon local knowledges and input regarding the current dynamics of public space, in order to determine what kinds of interventions are most appropriate to change it for the better. In the collaborative process, residents participate in a design process by identifying places that are not accessible, are neglected or abandoned, and then helping to produce designs that would transform these spaces (Flahive & Cizek, 2011). Here public spaces tend to be identified in a somewhat traditional way, as shared leisure spaces outside of buildings, designated as public, understood as a good held in common ownership, and, importantly, remaining primarily on a horizontal plane. Public space also becomes a mechanism in the planning process that brings residents together in creative practices, allowing them to overcome challenges posed by uninviting, unsafe, underutilized and securitized public space by making it their own. The experiences of the inhabitants with being part of redefining public space stands in contrast to our next case.

b) *A place for retrofitting for new users?*

Tower Renewal initiatives are not one-size-fits-all, and are seldom undertaken in the exact same way. As a result, we suggest that public space in these revitalized suburban high-rises takes on a variety of different forms and plays different roles depending on the building, the unique assemblage of actors, and the broader political context and the imaginaries at play. In our second case study, the Ken Soble Tower in Hamilton, an altogether different process was undertaken by a local configuration of city-builders, and a different geographical and political context, combined with the force of broader local revitalization strategies. The Ken Soble Tower at 500 MacNab Street, a social housing building in Hamilton's North End, is being advanced as a test project for how Tower Renewal might be undertaken not only in one city, but nationwide.

Hamilton's North End neighbourhood is a historically working class suburb, once filled with factories and heavy industry, with its residential space marked by environmental inequality and intense social stigma, long considered to be one of the city's "least desirable" places to live (Harris & Forrester, 2003: 2664). The location of the Ken Soble high-rise is beside a site that was once home to the Burlington Glassworks, and the ground is, as a result, highly contaminated with mercury. Similar environmental degradation can be seen at the North End waterfront, which is mostly infill made up of construction waste materials, and has served for industrial purposes for many years. It has been considered peripheral not only in a geographical sense, cut off from the downtown by railroad tracks, but also in a social one: marginalized and framed in public discourse as a kind of undesirable "non-place" (Lehrer, 2006).

Recent efforts to revitalize the neighbourhood are by no means the first. It has undergone multiple waves of redevelopment through its history, which have often involved the clearing of houses for larger development projects, and seen varying levels of community opposition. The neighbourhood has experienced visible changes in the past few years as numerous previously undesirable areas of the city have become attractive to prospective homebuyers seeking more affordable property ownership. Gentrification is palpable, while the gradual implementation of *Setting Sail*, the secondary plan for redevelopment in the West Harbour, has mounted a considerable effort to more closely link the neighbourhood with the geography of the city centre.

The Secondary Plan for the West Harbour, which was finally approved by the Ontario Municipal Board in 2012, revolves around the intensification and revitalization of the North End through commercial, recreational and residential development along its waterfront. The plan, known as *Setting Sail* (City of Hamilton Planning and Economic Development Department, 2005), and the numerous development proposals that have been put forward in its wake, reframe the North End as the 'West Harbour' in an effort to rebrand the area, draw it together with downtown regeneration, and separate it from its unsavoury past (City of Hamilton, 2005). Advertisement signs are speaking of this transformation: "live in the West Harbour" or "coming to Hamilton's West Harbour!" and names for the condo developments entice a new clientele with names such as "Villa at Tiffany Square" or "Harbour Condos on the Bay".

While perhaps seeming small in comparison with some of the major projects undertaken in nearby Toronto, *Setting Sail* is actually a high-profile mega-project by Hamilton standards, and has generated hype, controversy and opposition through its gradual roll-out (Crawford, 2015; McNeil, 2016; Van Dongen, 2016). The City began to devise the secondary plan for redevelopment and intensification in the West Harbour in 2000

(City of Hamilton Planning and Economic Development Department, 2005), following the development of its *Putting People First* land use plan for downtown (City of Hamilton, 2001), and its broad *Vision 2020* plan (Regional Municipality of Hamilton-Wentworth, 1997).

Setting Sail involves the major redevelopment of the Barton-Tiffany lands and formerly industrial lands along the Ferguson-Wellington Corridor to enhance the waterfront for tourism. Much of the plan revolves around the provision of a network of connected public open spaces on the waterfront, as well as a variety of commercial, recreational and residential spaces, drawing in both new residents and visitors (City of Hamilton, 2005). While the plan does not recommend any significant physical alterations to the interior of the existing North End neighbourhood, it does encourage the replacement of “inappropriate” industrial or commercial uses with residential development (City of Hamilton, 2005: 49). It specifically identifies high-rise apartment buildings as permitted uses, but suggests that where the redevelopment of any such buildings is proposed, the City shall adhere to future design objectives and principles laid out in the secondary plan.



Figure 6: Masterplan for West Harbour, Pier 8 redevelopment plan in the foreground and the Ken Soble Tower indicated by a circle (Source: E.R.A. Architects).

The Ken Soble Tower at 500 MacNab Street is one of the only high-rise towers located within the geography of the *Setting Sail* secondary plan. It is included in neighbourhood planning assessments and is listed among important local assets. We therefore find it necessary to consider the revitalization strategies of the tower within the context of the redevelopment of the entire waterfront, and within the broader geography of its elaborate leisure space.

In its most recent form as social housing, the Ken Soble Tower did not exactly fit into the vision proposed for the broader neighbourhood. Its reputation as a problem within the neighbourhood (its nickname to local residents was once “crack tower”), and the strong stigma held by developers, real estate agents and many locals in the community against its prior low-income residents and its demographic of low-income singles, clashed with the imagined new community of the North End. The building was framed in interviews with local residents as an isolated silo of vertically concentrated ‘issues’ including violence, bedbugs, and poverty. The discursive concentration of social issues inside of one building made the high-rise incompatible with the imaginaries of the neighbourhood, and rendered its interiors into spaces of deviance.



Figure 7: The Ken Soble Tower within its low-rise neighborhood. (Photograph by Loren March, 2017).

The building is a sixteen-storey concrete social housing high-rise, constructed in 1967, owned and operated by CityHousing Hamilton, named after Kenneth D. Soble, the Chairman of Hamilton’s Urban Renewal Committee and a famous Hamilton broadcasting executive of those times (Rockwell, 2004). It is the oldest multi-residential high-rise in the organization’s portfolio, and it is the only building of its type and scale in the immediate surrounding neighbourhood, which is mostly made up of two or three-storey single family dwellings. Containing 146 suits, it has long been considered “in decline” (CityHousing Hamilton, 2017: 9), largely due to CityHousing Hamilton’s budgetary deficits, and at the time of this research, was more than 70% vacant. Its residents, who were largely mental health survivors needing supportive living services that were not offered on-site, have been relocated progressively by the housing corporation since at least 2012. In 2016, decisions were made to renovate the building rather than to sell it. The tower’s location, and its view of the now desirable waterfront, make it a potentially valuable building at a strategic site of the City’s plans to revitalize. CityHousing Hamilton has brought in several members of the Tower Renewal coalition to put together an ambitious plan to renovate the building, with E.R.A. Architects spearheading the project. The building has been recommended for an innovative “Passive House retrofit,” a “fabric-first rehabilitation” that focuses upon energy efficiency and reducing environmental impacts by up to 94% greenhouse gas emission (E.R.A. n.d.; CityHousing Hamilton, 2017: 4).

The City’s goals in regards to the West Harbour also involve investing in and improving existing local buildings where it is financially sustainable, and the Passive Housing retrofit will be a high-profile experiment in doing so. The plan to undertake this kind of retrofit is described by consultants as “groundbreaking,” “the first of its kind,” and “best in class” (CityHousing Hamilton et al., 2017: 1-5). It is argued that this is the first Passive House retrofit of a high-rise tower in North America, and with it, there are high hopes to promote this as a replicable model throughout Ontario and Canada (Bozikovic, 2019; CMHC, 2019). While it would rehabilitate 146 rental units, including improving common areas within the building, it was redesigned without the input of the few inhabitants who were still around. This stands in stark contrast to the experience at the

Kipling Towers in Toronto, where the same architects engaged a wide variety of inhabitants.

Currently, common areas in the building include shared laundry facilities on the top floor, a lounge area on the ground floor, two elevators, a large entrance foyer, hallways and stairwells. There is a small paved parking area outside to the east, as well as a green space surrounding the building on all other sides. Each unit also has windows looking out over the surrounding neighbourhood, offering a unique one-sided “vertical encounter”—to use a concept described by Baxter (2017: 349)—between residents and the landscape around them. According to a 2016 building condition assessment, many of the common elements had reached the end of their usability, and required repair or complete replacement in order to provide quality of life for residents (Effective Building Engineering, 2016). The building’s 2017 feasibility study recommends common area modifications including the creation of accessible paths, seating areas and patio space, the renovation of the lounge, and the creation of an accessible rooftop amenity space. In the words of the architects “The building’s rehabilitation will modernize 146 units of affordable seniors’ housing, while reinvigorating community spaces and outdoor gathering areas, planning for aging-in-place and barrier-free living, and a changing climate” (E.R.A. Architects, n.d.)

The tower’s transformation plan posits the creation of “new community spaces” in the building and “partnerships with outside organizations” in order to “strengthen relationships between residents and the surrounding neighbourhood” (CityHousing Hamilton, 2017: 21). Accessibility is to be improved significantly, through the replacement of the existing traction elevators. According to estimates in the assessment, basic improvements and structural fixes to the property’s common areas are estimated to cost \$421,000 (Effective Building Engineering, 2016).

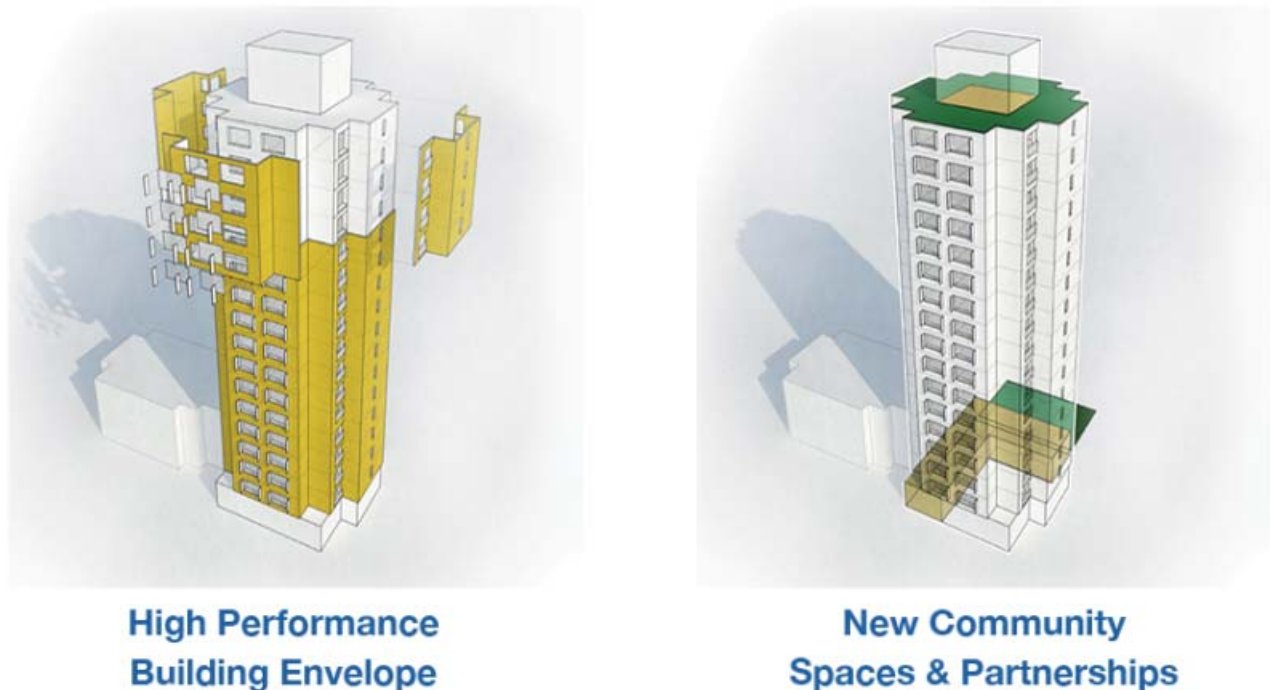


Figure 8: Schematic proposal by E.R.A. architects for retrofitting the Ken Soble Tower, (Source: E.R.A. Architects).

When the renovation is completed, CityHousing Hamilton plans to reposition the building as affordable housing for seniors, and thus much of the renovation and language of revitalization is focused upon accessibility and creating a supportive environment for elderly people with limited mobility. Public space both in and around the building will be an important issue if and when the building becomes seniors’ housing.

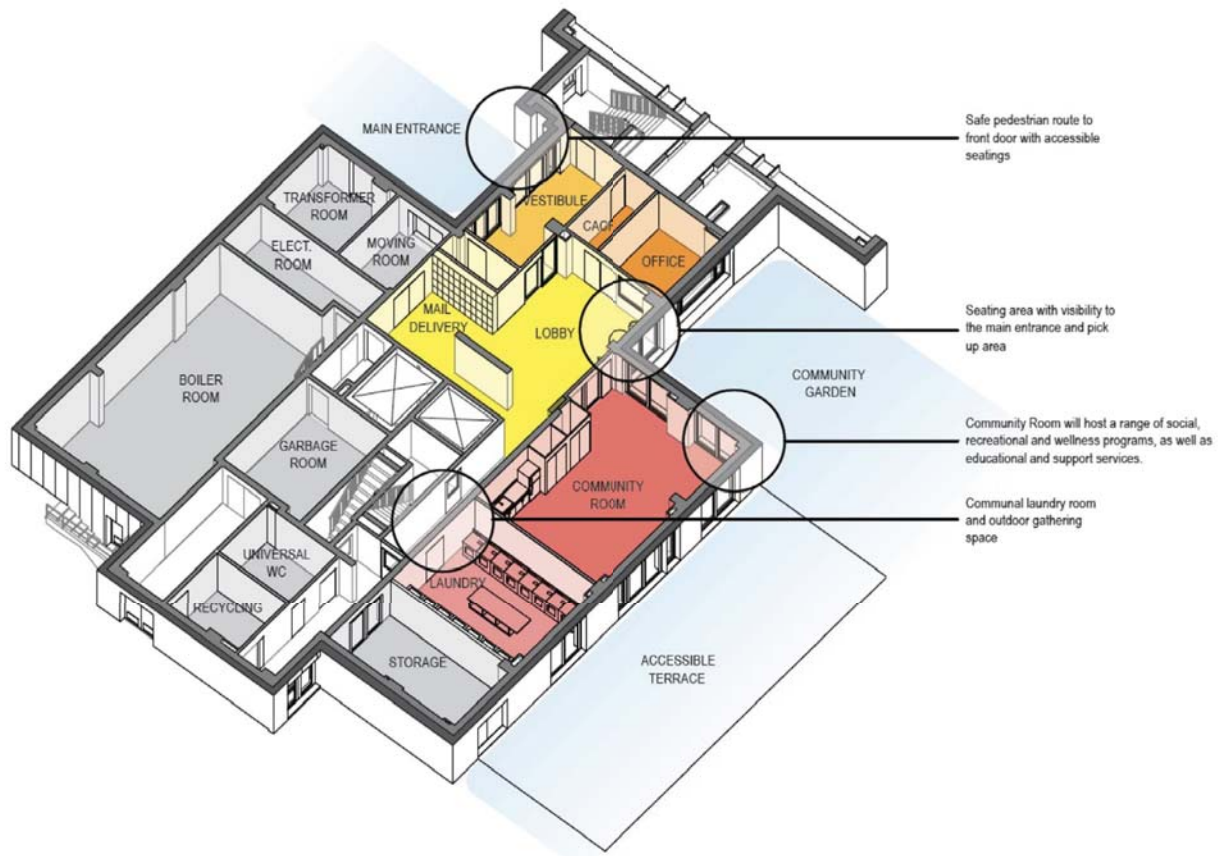


Figure 9: Proposed improvements to the interior common spaces of the high-rise on the ground floor. (Source: E.R.A. Architects).

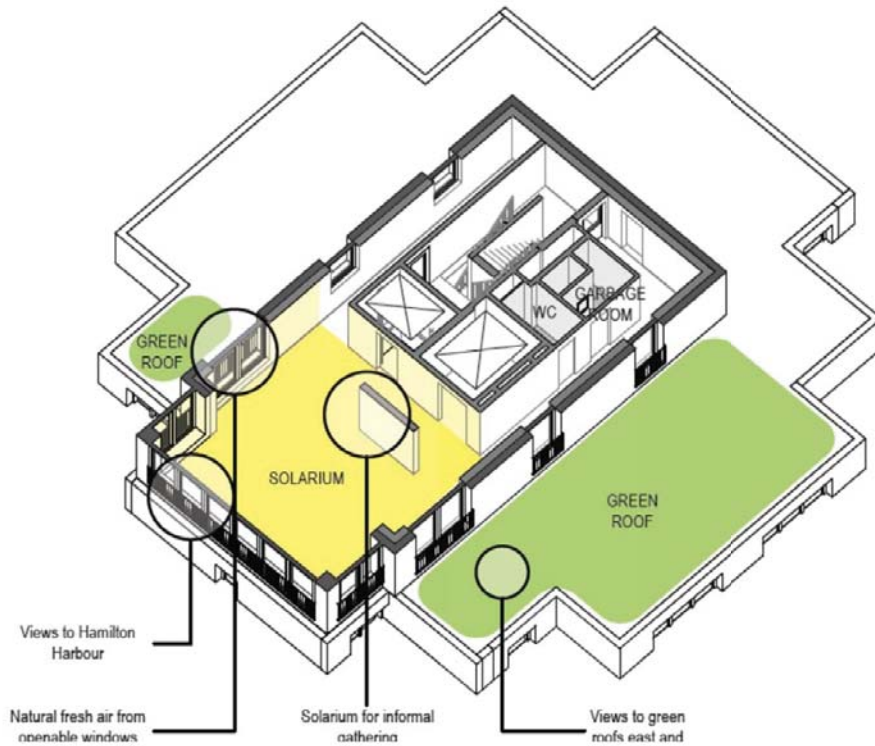


Figure 10: Proposed improvements to the interior common spaces of the high-rise on the roof top; of particular interest is that the “view to Hamilton Harbour” is explicitly mentioned. (Source: E.R.A. Architects).

As we know from the literature, shared spaces and participation in decision-making processes are priorities for seniors who wish to age in place (Leviten-Reid & Lake, 2016; Shiner et al., 2010; Weeks & LeBlanc, 2010). Common areas are considered by seniors to be important features in their homes, facilitating social life, physical activity, and adding an element of the unexpected to everyday life (Leviten-Reid & Lake, 2016). In the case of the Ken Soble Tower, special attention is being paid by developers to the fact that future residents are likely to spend a considerable amount of time within the building, or within close proximity, and therefore attempts to “bring the outdoors indoors” is being made (Interview, May 4, 2017). This can be achieved through providing access to views of the surrounding area from individual units as well as through a shared rooftop penthouse cooling room. It is the hope that special service providers partnering with the project are to be located in parts of the building’s main floor.

We find that this case of Tower Renewal merits particular attention in the ways that its treatment of public space diverges considerably from cases such as the Kipling Towers in Toronto. Tower Renewal, as a program of revitalization, focuses upon rehabilitating physical buildings, investing in local amenities and fostering mixed-use growth, recognizing that not all towers are the same, and that a variety of approaches might be needed to achieve these goals (Tower Renewal Partnership, 2016). Under the program’s formal definitions, the Ken Soble Tower is considered an “isolated site,” located outside of what is traditionally recognized as a tower neighbourhood, on a smaller plot of land that does not allow for much infill and thus fails to provide potential development capital through intensification. Most of the revitalization focus has been placed upon the innovative retrofitting, and upon improving elements of the tower itself.

As the tower also plays a role within the broader neighbourhood renewal, however, this case brings up the question of integration which features prominently in Tower Renewal ideals. The vision of integration posits the high-rise tower as a crucial part of the broader neighbourhood, foregrounding ways in which local initiatives and community leadership can potentially serve to transform these isolated dormitories into vertical villages (Tower Renewal Partnership 2018). Through such constructions of place, the previously siloed verticality of the tower becomes entangled with the horizontal geography of the suburban neighbourhood, serving as an extension of broader, interconnected networks.

In terms of its built form, the Ken Soble high-rise of course comprises a number of explicitly designated common areas in addition to a variety of less distinctly shared elements, including hallways, elevators, the parking lot, and similar locales. Such spaces act both as extensions of the private dwelling unit, but also as a substitute for public spaces outside the building. They “shift” and “stretch” boundaries between private and public in significant ways (Kern, 2010b: 105), giving rise to potential socialization and encounter which might seem to contradict notions of the high-rise tower as a private space. The redevelopment of the tower as seniors’ housing also adds the feature of service delivery in-house, further complicating this space of encounter, and distorting notions of public-private boundaries. These encounters and opportunities for social engagement are shaped by the enclosed and private nature of the vertical tower, by limited access, and selective tenancy. Designated common areas within the high-rise become complex hybrids of private and public space, an in-between which entangles the seemingly private dwelling-space of ‘home’ with what are almost vertical and enclosed versions of traditionally recognized public space (the hallway substituting for the street, or the lounge for the square).

Verticality, Horizontality, and Public Space

Public space in and around suburban high-rise towers is complex and influenced by a range of different context-specific factors. Approaching it through the notion of verticality allows us to become aware of a range of unique forms it may take, and a variety of ways in which these may be produced and lived. We observe that these forms and experiences of public space are divergent from the ways in which it is frequently defined. As noted previously, through the conceptual tool of verticality, we might conceive of public and private space in high-rises as being complex and layered and want to elaborate on this perspective with using the example of the the Ken Soble Tower in Hamilton.

In the case of the Ken Soble Tower, its high-rise form, its upscaling and repositioning as seniors’ housing, its new discursive framing, and its particular geographical location and placement within broader policy and planning initiatives all produce unique forms and networks of public space. We might locate these along a spectrum, ranging from more traditionally recognizable forms, such as the adjacent public leisure and recreation

spaces and parks of the waterfront, to more complicated and hybridized forms, such as the interior amenity spaces of the tower itself. We would like to suggest that unique practices, experiences and spatial configurations of public space here emerge out of the verticality of the high-rise's built form but also out of its implications in horizontal imperatives and spaces of neighbourhood revitalization. Therefore, it would be useful to see a participation of residents in redesigning these spaces.

We might use verticality to consider how the space of the high-rise is in a unique relationship with the areas around it, including, importantly, such elements as airspace and skyline. Beyond the obvious materiality of the building, the view is an important aspect of public space for this particular tower. A planning study conducted for the adjacent high-profile Pier 7 and 8 revitalization, which is a part of the waterfront renewal, highlights the excellent views afforded by the location, especially noting the absence of many other high-rise towers in the nearby landscape (Brook McIlroy, 2015).

As underlined in the literature, the view is an important element of verticality as a lived practice, and in this case where residents are likely to have various levels of more limited mobility, it might play a key role in how they access space. Baxter (2017) underlines this in his work on high-rise living, suggesting that the view provides a very unique everyday experience of landscape and space that allows residents to inhabit urban space in a very particular way. In taking seriously this relationship, we can conceive of the enclosed space of the tower, and indeed even the individual private units, being interconnected with the surrounding public realm through the everyday spatial practices of residents.

It is impossible to regard the Ken Soble Tower without keeping in mind its rapidly transforming surrounding social and geographical milieu. Media discourse and interviews with local North End residents revealed that the Ken Soble Tower is no longer simply framed as an isolated silo, but has been drawn into local political narratives around neighbourhood renewal, revitalization and the future. The tower, which has long been constructed in the public imaginary as a stigmatized thing separate from the rest of the neighbourhood, has, through the displacement of former residents, become a kind of clean slate (Van Dongen, 2015). In contrast to the above discussed case of the Kipling Towers in Toronto, public participation of the inhabitants therefore was not present.

The public community consultations around the broader neighbourhood revitalization, have been divisive sites of struggle around collective identity and access, with the tower fitting uncomfortably into discussions around who will get to live along and use the rebranded and rediscovered waterfront. These conversations are distinctively future-oriented. One North End resident described a complicated, shifting “structural relationship” between the building and the neighbourhood (Interview, May 10, 2017). As the demographics of stigmatized and socially isolated tower residents are strategically removed from the landscape, the built form becomes less of an “island” (ibid.). Furthermore, in the revitalization process a notable discursive shift in the place-identity from being located in a temporal past (“crack tower”) to an imagined future (“integrated community”) not only changes the social relationship between the high-rise and the surrounding suburban neighbourhood, but also underlines heightened spatial connectivity between vertical and horizontal dimensions.

Spatially, it is increasingly difficult to analytically separate the high-rise from the landscape of revitalization in which it is situated. Policy and planning documents imagine the West Harbour as a highly integrated geography of leisure, commerce and recreation, and the Ken Soble Tower finds itself directly connected to the space of this imaginary. Through the West Harbour redevelopment, the tower will be gradually drawn into a network of outdoor activity and consumption spaces along the waterfront—forms of public space which are more commonly recognized as such. Rather than being located in a high-density suburban tower neighbourhood, the tower at 500 MacNab Street increasingly finds itself in a touristic landscape which the City of Hamilton seeks to link to landscapes of desire (Lehrer, 2006) as far off as the downtown. Both, this shift and the connection will likely increase in intensity as local planning imperatives striving for more mixed use spaces to the neighbourhood, are implemented. Hamilton's destination green spaces like Bayfront Park, Bayview Park and Pier 4 Park are all major elements in the interconnected geography of public space being developed throughout the North End and along the waterfront, soon to be joined by the high-profile mixed-use spaces of Pier 7 and Pier 8. The location of the tower within this rapidly changing space cannot be ignored, and forces us to consider the ways in which the building is connected to forms of public space outside of its property lines.

Conclusion

The initiatives of Tower Renewal, the program to rehabilitate high-rise buildings in the GTHA, allows us to focus on the role of public space in multi-storey buildings. With its verticality it has a number of spaces that can be called public, if public space is understood as something that is socially constructed.

In the case of the Kipling Towers in Toronto, we see that the revitalization strategies focused mainly on the classical aspects of how public space is thought of. However, it also demonstrated the great merit that the involvement of the existing population warrants. With the participation of the inhabitants, a plan was proposed that would see the re-appropriation of outdoor space and some of the ground floor space for uses that can be described as public. It was also an attempt to reconnect the isolated towers into the wider urban fabric, both through the connectivity on the ground as well as vertically by creating visually attractive places to look at.

Likewise, the Ken Soble Tower in Hamilton reveals that revitalization has an impact on public space overall. However, in the absence of its inhabitants the reconfiguration of amenities inside of the building and its connection to the public space network outside was a result of the so-called professionals, whose main interest is to upgrade an entire neighborhood. In this case, the vertical renewal of the tower interacts with the horizontal renewal of the neighbourhood at large, layering separate imperatives in a way that may result in various distortions and hybridities that public space may take on over time. This case also defies the notion in the Tower Renewal literature that isolated sites surrounded by low-rise residential neighbourhoods have a limited capacity for extensive renewal (Tower Renewal Partnership, 2016: 8), underlining the importance of place and context.

Our examination also reveals the ways in which the vertical geography of the tower is not separate or isolated from the horizontal environment, but might instead be thought of as in a complex relationship with it. We emphasize the unique topographical entanglements (A. Harris, 2015) between these dimensions, and suggest that to examine public space in high-rises requires a strong consideration of both.

The verticalization of public space might indeed be perceived as the erosion or privatization of an idealized public realm, but it might also very well produce new spaces of encounter that hold political potential (Lehrer, 2016). We encourage further investigation around the lived experiences and political implications of these entanglements, and what forms of public space might possibly emerge from social interactions and encounter in vertical spatial practices. Returning to the socially produced nature of public space in the city, these spaces of practice are essential. As vertical urban spaces proliferate throughout the world, we would like to emphasize the importance of further researching the implications of verticality in everyday life, and the variety of unique ways in which public space might manifest within this built form.

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