
A World Within a Block: Negotiating Space in Toronto's St. James Town

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Abstract

St. James Town in Toronto (Toronto) was one of the biggest housing investments in so-called Canada in the 1960s. Each of the modernist high-rise buildings was named after a Canadian city, suggesting a vision of unity and coherence indicative of the country's national imaginary, while also reflecting the nation-building aspirations of the settler-colonial state. In this article, the historical development of St. James Town is analyzed using Henri Lefebvre's concept of production of space to depict how this site of nation-building and capitalism has been negotiated through an influx of im/migrant communities. Specifically, the term "cornerism" is used to convey the process by which St. James Town residents utilize spaces of interaction to facilitate exchange and foster information flows, thereby linking everyday life experiences with the formulation of a collective identity – as symbolized by the neighborhood's motto: "A World Within a Block". Two key points of discussion are considered. First, how the neoliberalized practices of urban development over the last few decades, namely the dominance of condo-towers in downtown Toronto, imperil "cornerism" as a practice of resistance by im/migrant residents in St. James Town; and second, the possible negative consequences of a large condominium investment planned in the central point of St. James Town on the socio-economic flows and rhythms of the neighborhood.

Keywords

immigration, migration, urbanism, cornerism, nation building, condofication, neoliberalism

Introduction

Racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse, St. James Town, a neighborhood in Tkaronto, Ontario, exists against the backdrop of a settler-centric Canadian identity. Originating in the 1960's as a housing project for young professionals, it was intended to reflect a straightforward vision of the young country's national subjecthood, including a deep-seated commitment to white supremacy. The largest housing development in so-called Canada at the time, with eighteen towers capable of accommodating twelve thousand inhabitants (Cori, 2018), St. James Town was intended to highlight the achievements of the growing nation by naming each of the building's towers after a major Canadian city ("The Halifax", "The Vancouver", etc.).

In many ways, the housing block reflects the ordering and confining spirit of modernist architecture (Shabazz, 2015). To demonstrate what I mean by this, I find Henri Lefebvre's (1991) theorization of space particularly relevant. According to Lefebvre, modernist architecture enforces a certain vision of the dominant group through the production of spatial arrangements, which is then mediated by the everyday lived experiences of those who navigate the space. In St. James Town, the dominant vision of the 1960s can be found not only in architectural arrangements that segregate the population in a way that determines how the space can be used (Shabazz, 2015), but also in the process of nation-building via place-naming practices: naming residential buildings after settler cities transforms the space into a carrier of a strong national vision, thereby reinforcing the white Anglo settler colonial character of Canada.

That said, St. James Town also illustrates how the production of space is conditioned, not only

by the state's colonial settler agenda, but also, if not concertedly, through the everyday experiences of the inhabitants, reflecting Lefebvre's (1991) concept of "lived space". As demonstrated in the naming practices of St. James Town, spaces of enforced vision (like official names, architectural arrangements that separate inhabitants, etc.), and the lived experiences of its inhabitants, are intertwined in a dialectical process. This dialectical process is demonstrated in the way that spatial practices become a mediated expression of space and place, such as when inhabitants use street corners and public spaces for human interaction, economic activity, and information exchange, rather than merely crossing the street (as intended by the city planner).

What is particularly interesting regarding St. James Town is the current character of the area, which has shifted from housing young professionals (assumed to be white) to a mostly immigrant,¹ eclectic, and non-white neighborhood. As a part of a larger urban ecosystem, St. James Town was immersed in the 'racial capitalism' of the Canadian settler project (Melamed, 2015; Toews, 2018). This form of capitalism relies on an exclusively racist socio-economic order that hyper-exploits and oppresses non-white people in Canada for the purpose of maximizing profit for capital (Robinson, 1983). In turn, St. James Town has, over decades, become inhabited by non-white, migrant communities who subsequently changed the culture of the space.

Through the lived experience of its new inhabitants, St. James Town has organically transformed into an alternative vision of its intended place-making practices, becoming a space that counters the state's white Anglo settler agenda. We can apply a concept that I refer to as

¹ I use the terms "immigrant" and "migrant" interchangeably following the logic that every long-term movement is a "migration", constituting either (e)migration or (im)migration depending on the direction of the movement. Accordingly, I hold that immigrants and migrants are not two distinct groups. That said, I use both terms interchangeably, instead of picking one over the other, because I acknowledge that in so-called Canada, the

public debate is largely shaped by the immigration authorities and their chosen terminology. In so-called Canada, "immigrants" is often deployed to refer to the people who came to stay ("landed immigrant status"), while "migrants" is used to refer to "temporary migrant workers", regardless of the actual realities of movement undergirding these trajectories.

“cornerism” to further illustrate this transformation: the practice of embracing and facilitating the spontaneity of urban interactions that transcends the original spatial design and constraints of a space. As a practice that facilitates interaction, exchange, and visibility, cornerism produces metaphorical and literal ‘corners’ that act as sites of resistance to the original intentions of how such a space should be used. In St. James Town, instead of solely using spaces in accordance with their designed purpose, whether residential (towers), movement (roads, paths, corridors), or leisure (parks, playgrounds), cornerism readily mixes them, actively seeking opportunities for interaction and exchange. This leads to utilizing literal street corners for *ad hoc* shops and food stalls, using benches for spontaneous social gatherings, and naming the local community centre “Corner”, reflecting the importance of spaces of interaction for the local community.

This transformation into cornerism, while welcomed, was slow and not without turmoil. Originally, the influx of non-white, low-income immigrants resulted in the neighborhood being stigmatized as “dangerous” (Cori, 2018) and “poor” (St. James Town, 2020). Indeed, immigrants settling in St. James Town often found themselves in precarious economic situations due to a blend of racism, xenophobia, and classism. Yet, while the neighborhood’s perception was shaped by the actual poverty of those who lived there, the racial prejudice of white settlers against St. James Town’s inhabitants played a larger role in the stigmatization of the community. The lack of municipal investments in the community further led to the decline in infrastructure and services (Cori, 2018), which reinforced the negative perceptions of St. James Town.

Further, the decades following the 1990s brought a rise in neoliberalism that also had major impacts on St. James Town, leading, not to it cementing as a counter public of cornerism, but to changes that now threaten the community hub that the space has become. Neoliberalism promotes the idea that individuals need to work

hard to secure their inclusion into society, while neoliberal policies, such as the neoliberal spatial fix, aim to transform spaces and urban landscapes to account for capital overaccumulation and a falling rate of profit (Harvey, 2001; Hackworth, 2007, Lehrer & Wieditz, 2009). The neoliberal spatial fix reflects the intrinsic need of capital to spread out over space to overcome its inherent crises of overaccumulation. It also means securing and deepening the presence of capital in certain locations to generate new profit-making opportunities (Harvey, 2001). By intensifying the presence of capital in urban spaces, the state is gradually pushed out as capital continues to find new sites of investment. Within this milieu, gentrification became one of the processes of ordering space by introducing residential buildings for more affluent populations, and increasing prices to push the poorer, typically non-white, inhabitants out of the city centres (Lehrer & Wieditz, 2009; Kern, 2016; August, 2018, DeVerteuil, 2018).

As regards St. James Town, gentrification has increasingly taken the form of “condofication” (Lehrer & Wieditz, 2009), with condo towers becoming the dominant mode of reshaping urban spaces. In turn, the nation-building ambitions of St. James Town no longer play a central role in the development of the neighbourhood, which means that its unintended impact of cultivating a booming community for non-white migrants is similarly waning. Like much of the surrounding area, St. James Town has been caught in a neoliberal spatial fix, which has driven recent development proposals, such as the Wellesley-Parliament Square Revitalization project (Mitani, 2020). Released in 2018, the project proposes to develop a tall glass tower at the corner of Rose Avenue and Wellesley Street, placing it exactly in (or rather, having it replace) the core area in which the informal socio-economic activities of St. James Town’s residents occur. Architecturally, the project mimics the condo developments in the surrounding area. This suggests that the heart of the St. James Town neighbourhood has already begun its shift toward “condofication”, which will reshape the space

and threaten the character of the area.

Central to my analysis is the question of “who is desired, and who is allowed, in the St. James Town of today?” Responses to this question are constantly being negotiated in the area – not in support of, but against, the neoliberal economic agenda of racial capitalism. Upon the founding of St. James Town, the exclusive and ordering elements of said agenda reflected the *racial* element of exclusion and impoverishment by highlighting the ‘otherness’ of immigrants in a space designed for white Anglo settlers. With the neoliberal turn and the introduction of official multiculturalism, however, the *capitalist* element became more pervasive with wealth determining who can belong in the space. With the state’s formal rejection of overtly racist rhetoric, access to wealth became the “justified” element of spatial exclusion, managing to more covertly marginalize the same non-white communities that were once explicitly disenfranchised. As a result, what was once negotiated in the formal access to ‘being Canadian’ (residency and economic and political rights) is now being renegotiated regarding access to space.

Nevertheless, not only is the access to space but the qualities of the space itself being negotiated by the migrant communities who live there. Communal spaces, both the official ones (such as the community centres called *Corner@200* and *Corner@240*) as well as the physical corners of the neighborhood’s transit corridors, which are utilized in everyday interactions, seem to normalize cooperation, exchange, coexistence, and non-capitalist ways of being. For instance, trade is indeed an essential part of corner-based interactions, but it doesn’t dominate the space. Existing-without-spending, deemed “loitering” in a capitalist city, doesn’t seem to bother the users of the formal and informal corners of St. James Town. Even goods exchange itself, often taking place in a form of barter, repair, and reuse, gives some rest from the deeply internalized neoliberal pressure to consume. Aside from these practicalities of everyday life and living, the symbolism of the neighborhood’s logo, “A World Within A

Block”, seems to actively embrace the values of cooperation and interaction, creating and upholding a corresponding sense of pride (for instance, via communal events organized by the Corners). Thus, in the context of Toronto, I posit that St. James Town illustrates how the dominant spatial vision of the capitalist settler state can be opposed and mitigated successfully by the everyday experiences of residents, leading to the emergence of an alternative vision that is decentralized and community oriented.

My article will be structured as follows: First, Lefebvre’s elements of space production will be explained in relation to the spatial element of St. James Town and how the everyday experiences of the residents resist exclusion from the dominant, white Anglo settler project of Canadian nationhood. Afterward, historical knowledge and numerical data will provide an overview of the current demographic makeup of St. James Town to demonstrate the strong immigrant identity of the neighbourhood. Then, the naming of St. James Town as a nation-building practice will be explained to show how the state’s vision of the community historically contradicts the lived experiences of its immigrant and non-white residents. From here, an analysis of “The Corner” community centres reveal how an alternative vision of St. James Town was initially birthed and grew from the lived experiences of residents who navigated these spaces. Following this, St. James Town, as a community of resistance to racial capitalism, will be situated in relation to the neoliberal shift, including the way neoliberalism draws on gentrification to deepen racial wealth divides along spatial lines within Canadian society. This will be further demonstrated via the example of the condo project investment proposed by *Greatwise Developments*, and the potential consequences it may have on the way the space has been used and reclaimed by the inhabitants of St. James Town.

Analysis and findings

Lefebvre’s triad of space production

Like any other location, St. James Town can be

conceptualized as an arena for space production as described by Lefebvre (1991). For Lefebvre, space is a social construct that is constantly shaped by social activity, in which he offers three types (modes) of space to understand said activity: the conceived space, the lived space, and the more general “spatial practices”. Conceived space exists within the realm of urban planners and designers, of “technocrats”, as Lefebvre calls them (p. 38). This space is depicted in maps, plans, grids, scenarios, and rules, and is the one created by dominant ideas and conveyed by institutions (p.10). Marrisfield (2000) calls conceived space repressive, and Rigg (2007) argues that it is crafted to fulfil the objectives of society. In essence, the conceived space decides what ideas are enforced, and whose visions are implemented, according to prevailing power structures.

Lived space is the space where everyday life happens, through which spontaneity and unpredictability come to shape the geography in question. Lefebvre (1991) describes lived space as follows: “[The] space is alive: it speaks. (...) It may be directional, situational or relational, because it is essentially qualitative, fluid and dynamic” (p. 42). As opposed to conceived space, lived space is the only space immersed in time, defined by the cycles of everyday activities. It is lived, which means it encompasses the sociobiological processes of growth and decay. Events, human lives, and spatial interactions are conveyed by the passing of time. Despite their differences, however, both conceived and lived spaces are intermediated by spatial practices, which consists of the material elements of space, and work to convey the patterns of flow through repetition and perpetuation, and by constructing routes and networks (Marrisfield, 2000).

When applied to St. James Town, it appears that the Lefebvrian production of space has been dominated, in part, by a strong presupposed presence of the conceived space – of a certain vision imposed around what the neighborhood ought to be. This vision is strongly connected to the history of “Canada” as a spatial entity, where the prevalence of capitalism as a socio-economic

framework is the means by which the nation constructs and seeks its identity (Toews, 2018). Capital needs exploitation to perpetuate accumulation, and racial categorization serves as an explanation for why some people are subject to hyper-exploitation for the benefit of others. This is why the identity of Canada as a capitalist project is historically linked to the dominance of white settlers – it allows them to exploit other groups for their own means.

The spatial history of St. James Town can be examined in three phases. First, it has been subject to nation-building, evident in the conceived vision of the city and its desired inhabitants being educated white professionals. Here, modernist architecture, and its formal division of spaces into work, transport, and leisure, functions to confine residents to spatial zones that are not easily transgressed and that impact how lived space can be produced. This vision, however, has clashed with the lived space of the residents, whose experiences have been predominately defined by migration, liminality, contestation, and community building. This has led to the emergence of a new conceived space produced through the practice of cornerism, which has been dominated by newcomers’ agency, sense of resilience, and their mixed used of space. However, with the global trend of gentrifying urban spaces (Smith, 2002), the new form of space production in St. James Town is likely to take place in accordance with the neoliberal principles of “privately owned public spaces” (Mitani, 2020). These privately-owned public spaces allow private actors (landlords, property managers, security) to exclude ‘undesired’ people, such as migrants and homeless persons, from St. James Town. In turn, access to ‘public’ space will be extended to the new, wealthy residents, while being selectively ‘private’ to others.

Towers in the park, im/migrants in the towers

Throughout the 19th century, St. James Town, then known as “Homewood estate”, was inhabited by Tkaronto’s middle-and-upper-

middle class (St. James Town, 2020), and consisted mainly of Victorian houses (Cori, 2018). These houses stayed in place much longer than their original inhabitants. Given increasing developments of public infrastructure, the wealthy were able to move to more secluded areas of the city, while still being able to easily access services available in the city centre (railway, banks, etc.). Emptied townhouses were then converted into boarding homes and apartments, stretching from Regent Park, through Cabbagetown, up to St. James Town (Cori, 2018). The conditions of these buildings deteriorated throughout the decades, with many having increasing maintenance issues that forced residents to share amenities. As these buildings were primarily inhabited by folk who could not afford their own apartments, they served as a temporary housing solution for many occupants. The intended temporary nature of said housing captured the inhabitants, as well as the area in general, in a prolonged state of liminality, with residents having nowhere else to move, and landlords experiencing minimal pressure to maintain housing infrastructure (Bateman, 2014; Cori, 2018).

In the 1950s, on the wave of post-war optimism, St. James Town became subject to re-zoning plans. Influenced by Le Corbusier's concept of 'towers in the park', the neighbourhood faced a complete rearrangement, with heritage buildings being leveled from Bloor Street in the North to Wellesley Street in the South (Bateman, 2014). A decade later, city planners also attempted to level Cabbagetown's heritage infrastructure but were met with fierce opposition from residents and activists, including the future mayor of the city, John Sewell. Despite this, however, there was no organized opposition to the development of St. James Town as the city of Toronto's largest urban renewal project (Bateman, 2014; Cori, 2018), which resulted in the erection of eighteen high-rise towers across thirty-two acres. In turn, the population of St. James Town rose from under 1,000 to nearly 11,500 between 1967 and 1969 (Cori, 2018). Some of the previous inhabitants were moved to

four of the newly erected public housing units built by the Ontario Housing Coalition (Cori, 2018), while others refused to be resettled and squatted in crumbling townhouses, delaying the completion of the investment (Bateman, 2014).

Eventually, between 1959 and 1967, the construction of St. James Town, in a form very similar to the one now known, was completed. Between 1959 and 1967, St. James Town became the biggest housing investment in so-called Canada, creating one of the highest-density neighbourhoods across Turtle Island (Barnes, 2011; Bateman, 2014). Each of the buildings was named after a Canadian city, purporting to represent the nation state, from Vancouver to St. John's. This not-so-subtle symbolism, mixed with the modernist separation of spaces of residence, work, and leisure, reflected the spatially deterministic conceived space of St. James Town. The development was designed for the newly graduated, single, white Torontonians, who would want to enjoy urban life during their first steps towards an inevitable suburban future (Cori, 2018).



Figure 1: Photo by Harold Whyte (1965); Toronto Public Library

But these white, professional bachelors never really arrived in St. James Town. According to Caulfield (1994), the envisioned population of the neighbourhood moved directly to the suburbs, typifying a broader trend in “North America” at that time. In contrast, St. James Town attracted lower-income populations, with many being new migrants to the country. This occurred as the Canadian state introduced official multiculturalism into its immigration policy, attracting large numbers of migrants from across the world and producing a widespread discourse of racial and cultural diversity (Kymlicka, 1995; Saunders 2017).



Figure 2: Photo by Bob Olsen (1969); Toronto Public Library

Eventually, St. James Town became an arrival city (Saunders, 2011) for newcomers from all over the world. The 2011 census of St. James Town noted that only 30% of inhabitants were born in the region known as Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011) with the 2016 census recording that 40% of residents were “Canadian-born” (Statistics Canada, 2016). The number of most recently arrived immigrants in the area (residing here for less than a year) reached almost 14% in 2016, with 7% being Toronto’s average. These statistics support Saunders (2011) notion of the arrival city and recognizes St. James Town as one of the main sites of arrival for new migrants.

In the 1980s, St. James Town went into decline due to a lack of regional investment into the neighbourhood’s infrastructure (Cori, 2018; St. James Town, 2020). In the late 1990s, however, interventions eventually took place, resulting in “a multi-service community centre,

improvements to parks, and the maintenance and repair of St. James Town buildings” (St. James Town, 2020, n.p.). In 2004, a new branch of the Toronto Public Library and a new community center were opened at the corner of Sherbourne and Wellesley. At present, the buildings in the area constitute a mix of public housing and privately-owned housing corporations.

St. James Town now has over eighteen thousand inhabitants and a population density of over forty-four thousand people per square kilometre (Statistics Canada, 2016). It is worth highlighting that the 2016 census extends the perimeter of St. James Town up to Jarvis Street in the east, thereby increasing the population accounted for. However, keeping in mind that the area between Sherbourne Street and Jarvis Street is comprised mostly of townhouses, the inclusion of this population surely lowers the density measurements of the neighbourhood. According to the 2016 census, 51.6% of St. James Town’s population is comprised of immigrants, which is Toronto’s average, but, as mentioned before, the percentage of recent immigrants is twice as high compared to the overall city. Non-permanent residents constitute 8% of St. James Town, whereas Toronto’s average is only 3.5%. Again, it is evident that over one in ten residents of St. James Town is in a precarious position of being new to the country of Canada. Only three out of four people are “Canadian citizens”, with two out of three being a “visible minority”, which is significantly higher than Toronto’s average of 52% (Statistics Canada, 2016).

Further, and relatedly, 90% of households live in rented apartments, twice as many as Toronto’s 47.2% average, with 44% claiming their housing to be unaffordable, and 23% calling their housing unsuitable. The median household income barely exceeds \$41,000 CAD with Toronto’s average being \$65,800. Surprisingly, the percentage of people without a source of income is the same as the city’s average of 4.7%, and government assistance is included in the incomes of only 13.7% (9.3% being the average). Despite unemployment rates being slightly higher than the city overall, the level of higher education

(bachelors or more) is almost 2% *higher* than the city's average (45.9% to 44.1%) (Statistics Canada, 2016).

The above statistics suggest a landscape of communities within St. James Town that are largely comprised of recent migrants living in economically precarious conditions. These communities, who are mostly non-white, live in St. James Town often without access to the full economic and political rights of "Canadian citizenship" because of their insecure and precarious migration status (e.g., foreign temporary workers, undocumented workers etc.). Quite literally housed within this complex socio-political landscape, the living conditions for the residents of the neighborhood are simultaneously poor, yet also, unaffordable.

Neighbourhood versus nationhood

The original towers erected in St James Town in the 1960s promised "a modern, functional, 'radiant city' for 'the new man'", as Zahirovic writes regarding a very similar housing investment in the Dutch neighborhood of Bijlmermeer (Zahirovic, 2007, n.p.). Both projects are perfect examples of Lefebvre's notion of conceived space, not only in architecture and the "phallic erectility" of their forms, but also in their defining and ordering role in spatial practices (Merrifield, 2000, p. 167). In the case of Bijlmermeer, residents were confined into strictly residential towers, divided by large swaths of uninviting open spaces, while being deprived of common spaces to interact with one another or to exchange information. A complementary lack of public transport, justified by the assumption that residents would own a car, also cut the communities off from access to the city centre. These are only some examples of how architecture can order the movement and everyday life of newcomers. As regards St. James Town, we can apply this same logic to explore the symbolic meaning behind the decision to name the towers erected in the park after Canadian cities.

Place-naming can be instrumental in the occupancy of colonized land (Yeoh,1996).

Studies show that symbolic representations in landscapes may "reinforce and naturalise prevailing social ideologies" (p. 298; also see Zukin, 1993). Such efforts of enacting spatial symbolism can be backed by nationalistic tendencies or aimed at enforcing a community identity. At times, they may achieve both, especially when nation-building takes place in opposition to a preceding regime. This was the case when post-independence Singapore attempted to distance itself and its collective identity from the former British colonial administration. Just as in Singapore, it can be argued that "Canada", which is still being formed as a nation-state, has "had to engage in a constrain[ed] struggle for political dominance, state power and ideological hegemony through a range of tactics" (Yeoh, 1996, p.298).



Figure 3: Nation-building by place-naming

The difference between Singapore and Canada, however, is that the latter has not radically severed its relationship to colonialism. On the contrary, it continues to perpetuate and rely on colonialism to establish itself as a country. This means that place-making for Canada works to transform the built environment "in the attempt to forge radical discontinuity with the colonial past" of a former colonial power (Yeoh, 1996, p. 298; also see Harvey, 1978). Here, nation-building and space-making continues to be constructed in opposition to the reality of Turtle Island and Indigenous communities' non-capitalist ways and traditional forms of knowledge. In other words, Canada's imperial

Anglo-Saxon legacy has, as a capitalist project, been used as a tool to justify and perpetuate its dominance over and across Turtle Island (Toews, 2018). With this in mind, we can note how naming the towers of St. James Town is a result of the Canadian nation state's project of racial capitalism; by naming each tower after a colonial city, a unified and coherent image of colonial Canada is produced and enacted (Figures 3 & 4).

The goal of such symbolism is to create the idea that Canada is one, single nation, just as such symbolism inscribes this idea into the space itself. By evoking the names of settler centres of governance, Canadian cultural production, and capital accumulation, the city of Toronto reproduced in St. James Town what the nation state wants to be understood as 'normal' – settler colonialism. In relation to this norm, everyone-and-thing either beyond or counter to the nation state (such as “foreigners”, Indigenous folk, alternative norms of governance, different relationships to land or territory, etc.) are rendered abnormal. Such a narrative facilitates further ordering around who is deemed worthy of belonging, and thus deserving of equal rights, and who is not. Consequently, but not explicitly, this ordering also delineates who can be exploited by whom, thereby laying the groundwork for racial capitalism: unequal capital accumulation.



Figure 4: Nation-building by place-naming

As Yeoh (1996) observes, colonial rule in Singapore resulted in place-naming that derived from European public figures or administrators. At the same time, non-British spaces in the Singaporean urban landscape were represented by markers that had racial connotations, demonstrating “the colonial tendency to order society by separating the colonised into distinct, recognisable containers” (p. 300). Recognizable examples of such markers are “Chinatown”, “Little India”, “Korea Town”, etc. Locally, one also finds more Mediterranean or Atlantic connotations, such as “Little Italy”, “Little Jamaica”, and “Little Portugal”.

Independent Singapore was adamant about ending the colonial practice of using British names and so they replaced them with names stemming from local languages and cultures. But where Singapore disconnected from colonial symbolism in order to build a nation, the Canadian government embraced the legacy left by its British colonizers. This legacy is now needed to reinforce Canada's settler project, which continues to deny Indigenous peoples' sovereignty over their lands, thus allowing the state to claim ownership over these lands for the purposes of resource extraction and the accumulation of capital. This has ultimately solidified the nation's discontinuity with, and abjection of, Indigenous peoples, their cultures, and their territoriality.



Figure 5: Ontario Street

Metaphorically, the consecutive scales that constitute St. James Town show this same

historical pattern of claiming colonial identifiers for the purpose of furthering the Canadian state's settler colonial project. Placed in a city with an Indigenous name (Tkaronto), formed by a Christian-colonial legacy (St. James Town), St. James Town imploded in the 1960's with the conceived space of *Canadianness*, as it commemorated every major city of the country. St. James Town could have just as well been called Little Canada – if only the colonial mindset had not reserved such ‘belittling’ name practices solely for Othered spaces.

Cornerism

How did the generations of immigrants who called St. James Town their home make sense of Canada's capitalist, colonial project? Through the everyday practices of their lived space, we can see how these communities have produced a counter-hegemonic conceived space of the neighbourhood, introducing their own vision of the place and, to some extent, making it official through the creation of self-governed community centres. I call this practice *cornerism*, and it involves the organic use of corners as mixed spaces of interaction and visibility that allow for the flow and exchange of information, goods, and networks. Saunders (2011) describes this pattern of utilizing public spaces of interaction as a typical practice of migrants, who often recreate similar spaces known from their homelands. In the case of St. James Town, these everyday practices have redefined the use of local spaces and places by introducing new forms of symbolism that have created alternative conceptions of the geography that run counter to dominant colonial constructions. Examples of this are outlined below.

In the last few decades, two Corners within St. James Town have emerged (*Corner@200* and *Corner@240*), becoming inviting spaces for meetings, bike repairs, and legal assistance, as well as acting as important hubs for “health, social services and recreational programs” (Murray, 2020, p. 3). *Corner@240* has free Wi-Fi that is easily accessible from the street, with the password “myhood240” written on the front door,

allowing open access to anyone in the nearby area. All these described elements create the atmosphere of accessibility and openness. To this effect, in a report about the community centre, entitled *Envisioning and Promoting The Corner 2.0*, Murray (2020) asks: “How [can] a place so hectic and disorienting...feel so comfortable, welcoming, and safe?” (p. 9). Despite seeming to romanticize *The Corner@200* a bit, Murray's report rightfully acknowledges ‘the virtue of cacophony’ present at St. James Town, where “everyone and everything is accessible to everyone else” (p. 21).

Just next to *Corner@240*, there is a lively space at Rose and Wellesley (Figure 6), which is placed along the entrance to Food Basics. Right outside of the store, local street vendors put out their merchandise, elderly people hangout, and the daily paths of many of the residents cross. This crossing is a crucial spatial practice of cornerism: the proximity of the bus stop, of the affordable grocery store, of local shops and services – it all makes interactions hard to avoid. Still, the vivid local dynamic isn't simply a natural consequence of such an intersection. Rather, it is actively created around it, added to it, by street vendors and residents socializing, thus shaping, but also controlling, the rhythms of the street. This “creation around”, this value added to a potential meeting spot, is the essence of cornerism.



Figure 6: The corner of Wellesley and Ontario

In writing this article, I did a walk through of St. James Town. A brief visit to the space at Rose

and Wellesley demonstrates that the place has a certain rhythm based on the errands and rituals of local community members, who all come from different cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. The 50-metre radius around the corner of Rose and Wellesley consists of a variety of stores that reflect the activity and needs of the neighbourhood and assures visitors that St. James Town is a transnational hub. However, there are some patterns that appear to be shared, whereby this space, delineated by a Food Basics on the one side, and Wellesley Fruit Market on the other, operates as a kernel, allowing informal economic exchanges, social gatherings, and information movement among the residents. Under the inconspicuous umbrella of Canadian poverty, one can observe remittance flows, ethno-entrepreneurship, and trans-locality (Levitt, 2001; 2011), as residents monetize whatever financial opportunities can be found.

A visit to the community centers located at 200 Wellesley Street and 240 Wellesley Street further demonstrates the comradery and communal intimacy of the space. The interior of *Corner@200* is filled with colourful posters, paintings made by community members, and pamphlets. Potted plants and landscaping add to the warm and welcoming atmosphere. The people working there are helpful and kind. The coordinator is welcoming and very professional, willing to describe how the place works, as they mention the multiple functions of *Corner@200*. It is a space that offers settlement assistance, connects newcomers to healthcare, cooperates with flu clinics and even has a newly established COVID-19 testing centre. Further, *Corner@200* provides many other essential resources and programs, such as a food bank, access to computers and a community kitchen, and music lessons for children. The coordinator also shows me dedicated rooms for community events and activities, the equipment reserved for said activities, and photographs of previous events.

We move onto *Corner@240* (Figure 7), another remarkable place with a humble name. Here we find more specialists and are guided by another professional and passionate coordinator.

There is an IT specialist fixing computers and an electrician working on fixing housing equipment. The person working in the bike garage waves their hand. Amongst all this, there is “the tool library”, which houses various tools that people leave behind or donate – carefully separated and stored in perfect order, so to be used later. The team is proud of the place but not nearly as proud as I am impressed. Team members describe their contributions to the space: “We fix everything that regular shops won’t fix. We store the parts. Nothing gets wasted, and we give back to the community”. I ask if they can define the ‘community’ and inquire whether someone would have to live in the area to access the space, its resources, and to receive help. They laugh and respond: “No. Recently we had someone from Scarborough come in.” The services are free.



Figure 7: *Corner@240* Community Centre

The staff members working at *Corner@240* are recruited from and by the community. There is always someone available with skills to share and, as I learned during my visit, St. James Town is blessed with a number of relevant specialists. Further, some of the staff used to be on the receiving end of the Corner. Now, they work there. The sign at the Corner’s door, the motto of the St. James Town community, sends a clear message of how the residents imagine the space and what they work for within it: *St. James Town: A World Within a Block* (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Inside Corner@200 Community Centre

The Condofication Phase

While the nation-building efforts of St. James Town were met and contested by the reality of cornerism, neoliberal interests continue to reshape state policies and thus, redefine urban landscapes. These neoliberal priorities are accompanied by the retreat of the state that was once a dominant actor in the realm of housing, public assistance, and spatial planning, and have led to an increase in corporate developers being able to redefine and reorganize space for their own profit-based interests (Lehrer & Wieditz, 2009, p. 144).

Currently, the conceived space of cohesion, imposed unity, and the preservation of settler colonialism, seems to be safe in the official framework of multiculturalism. The everyday vision of who “a Canadian” is, has become intermediate, perpetuated and secured by consecutive generations of officially welcomed newcomers with no memory of the place. Accordingly, they are not equipped to contest its colonial legitimacy or coherence. Relatedly, even when they are equipped to do so, it is unlikely that they will or want to. In the words of Brand (2005), migrants “are used to the earth beneath them shifting, and they all want it to stop – and if that means they must pretend to know nothing, well, that’s the sacrifice they make” (p. 4).

Left uncontested by newcomers, the state’s colonial imperatives (as disguised within the seemingly innocuous project of multiculturalism), leaves even more room for

racial capitalism. This is reflected in the increasing deregulation of the housing market and pervasive notions of individualism and responsibility that have resulted in new crises within the public sphere. In this case, deregulation by the state creates more opportunity for capital (re)investment, as capital aims to reconstruct space in cycles of creation and annihilation in search for a new “fix” (Harvey, 1978; Lehrer & Wieditz, 2009). In other words, capital builds the landscape “necessary for its own functioning at a certain point in its history only to have to destroy that space at a later point in order to make way for new [...] openings for fresh accumulation” (Harvey, 2001, p. 25). This mechanism described by Harvey as a “spatial fix” is caused by capital’s “drive to resolve its inner crisis tendencies by geographical expansion and geographical restructuring” (p. 24).

It can be argued that the deregulation of the housing market and the absence of the state within the public realm have resulted in the “neoliberal spatial fix” (Lehrer & Wieditz, 2009; August, 2016), where the individualization of responsibility for one’s own fate has become the new conceived space. The advent of this spatial practice, dominated by “new-build gentrification” (Lehrer & Wieditz, 2009, p. 142), has brought an omnipresence of condominium towers within Tkaronto (Figure 9).

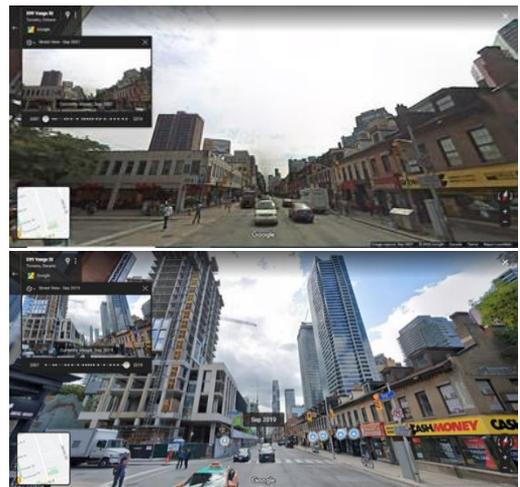


Figure 9: Yonge Street in 2007 (top) and 2019 (bottom); Google Street View

Writing about the ‘condofication’ of the Torontonion urban sphere, Lehrer and Wieditz (2009) describes the neoliberal spatial fix as: “1) Continued rapid suburban growth, 2) decline and disinvestment in the inner suburbs, and 3) considerable inner-city reinvestment, often in the form of gentrification” (p.141-142; also see Hackworth, 2007). They argue that condominium towers can be perceived as a new form of gentrification, as ‘condofication’ is generally accompanied by increasing urban poverty in surrounding spaces of accumulated wealth (p. 142). One might argue that gentrification, the spatial transformation tool employed by the new neoliberal conceived space, could bring prosperity to a run-down neighbourhood. But such an argument is misguided, as the very nature of gentrification “transform[s] working-class neighbourhoods into middle and upper-class” ones (Lehrer & Wieditz, 2009, p. 142), resulting in the displacement of low-income, mostly non-white, communities. This new reality has not yet arrived at St. James Town, but it is visible all around it. Condo towers are looming from every corner, surrounding the neighbourhood from the West to the North. The South edge seems, for now, to be defined by the townhouses of Cabbagetown, and the East border is delineated by parks and a cemetery.

While the first phase of negotiation of space described by Lefebvre has resulted in St. James Town becoming a robust and stable lived space that counters the hegemonic ideals of the city’s conceived space, the effects of gentrification around, and thus on, St. James Town are yet to be observed. Accordingly, the last section of my analysis will describe the new development project in St. James Town, including its main spatial premises, to make the argument that these new changes could lead to the neighbourhood being, at least partially, gentrified.

A great, not-so-wise development

In April 2018, *Greatwise Developments* submitted their application, proposing a new development to St. James Town as a part of the city’s call for the “comprehensive revitalization”

of Wellesley-Parliament Square (Mitani, 2020, para 1). The goal of the project was described as prompting “the introduction of new public streets, open spaces, and a range of housing typologies” (para 1). Since then, the project has been revised, but its scope remains destructive to the current social and economic constitution of St. James Town. Namely, six new buildings, designed by IBI Group, are scheduled to be added to the existing infrastructure of the neighbourhood (para 3), including a 47-storey tower (Figure 10) situated between Rose Street and Ontario Street – exactly where the novel and socially innovative *Corner@240* resides.



Figure 10: Greatwise Developments project; Urban Tkaronto

The initial project included a 51-storey tower, but this was scaled down in the newest proposal, perhaps because most of the surrounding environment, including the original “towers in the park”, do not exceed thirty floors. The five-storey podium is supposed to contain amenities and retail space. The condo tower will absorb the lower floors of the existing 240 Wellesley – the building currently containing the Food Basics shop that constitutes the spatial framework for the informal economy and the cornerism of St. James Town. It will also cut off “240” and its east-facing residents from sunlight, leaving a twenty-five-metre gap between the eastern façade of “240” and the new tower (Mitani, 2020, para 3).

According to the plans, five lower buildings

will also be squeezed in-between the existing buildings, displacing some spaces of local utility, such as an open swimming pool and a sports field. Further, instead of the existing green and leisure infrastructure, a new park is planned, including street furniture and ‘shade streets’. Three “publicly accessible private open spaces” are being proposed with a prominent “urban plaza”, designed to be a place for a variety of programmed functions and informal gatherings (Mitani, 2020, para 4) (Figure 11).

The public relations release regarding the development plan describes it as follows:

The plaza fronts the extension of Rose Avenue from the south, a new public street that would replace the porte cochères for 240 and 260 Wellesley Street East. This new roadway will link north [part of the neighborhood] to St. James Avenue, where an elongated block of four-storey back-to-back townhouses is proposed to the west (Mitani, 2020, para 5).

Not only are buildings going to be introduced, but existing networks of connections will be reshaped and redefined, influencing the possible trajectories of residents’ movements. On top of this, “a new private street between the easternmost tower blocks at 650 Parliament and 280 Wellesley would bisect two more four-storey townhouse blocks. An eleven-storey mid-rise rental building would front this new roadway to the north” (para 6).

Adding 817 residential units, 24% of which would consist of two- or three-bedroom units (Mitani, 2020), the project will completely dominate St. James Town, introducing new, wealthy residents, and new economic infrastructures that are predominantly only accessible to these new residents. Also, spatial trajectories of meaning and use will reformulate how space is being utilized, delineating *what* can happen in a space and *how* it will be policed. Community presence and horizontal, day-by-day self-regulation may be replaced by a more vertical structure of what is *desired* and what is *welcomed*

by the developers, the new residents, and the security workers employed to carry out these values. This will lead to new, imposed perceptions of what is *possible* and what is *allowed* within this space, as opposed to reflecting the perceptions and needs of the inhabitants currently living there. In other words, the rhythms of St. James Town will change, most likely to be overseen by private security and surveillance infrastructure.



Figure 11: Greatwise Developments project; Urban Toronto

Such an intervention requires skillful public relations. In a statement following the second community meeting, *Greatwise Developments* highlights its family-run history (Pooni Group, 2018, p. 2) and its devotion to the betterment of current residents’ lives. “We want you to stay in your community”, the statement exclaims (p. 14). By promising new rental opportunities and homeownership options, the developer state it “will not displace current residents from their home or change rents, and the existing tenants will have [prioritized access to] opportunities for purchasing new units” (p. 14). *Greatwise Developments* is aware of the possible consequences of their actions as evidenced in their attempt to address gentrification-related

concerns. What the developer is also likely aware of is the fact that the current annual income of the neighborhood is more than a third lower than Toronto's average. The units might be there, but neither the rental possibilities nor the mortgages will be accessible to most of the current residents. Such a situation reflects the evasive nature of neoliberal urban development and the increasing gentrification of neighbourhoods that aims to secure neoliberal interests.

The developer also promises to improve the existing buildings by installing thermal windows and new elevators (Pooni Group, 2018, p. 24). However, these developments pose many questions: Why would a private company intervene in public housing in the first place? If the company is not directly profiting from these interventions, how motivated would they be to undertake the improvements properly? Lastly, who would take care of the maintenance of this improved infrastructure? The answers to these questions remain unclear, although the program objectives include "renovating and re-purposing common areas to be used by current and future tenants" and "[improving] security around buildings" (p. 24). Much of the project seems to be concerned with, and focused on, aligning the area with its neoliberal objectives and goals of creating a condo-zone for individuals with the means to participate in a neoliberal economy.²

Regardless of how the *Greatwise Developments*' project unfolds, some of the possible negative consequences seem inevitable. For one, most of the natural corners of St. James Town will disappear and be replaced by new transport corridors and 'privately owned public spaces'. That said, the community centres will likely stay, even if *Corner@240* is relocated. Still, the natural points of path-crossing, of visibility, the informal economy, and information exchange that constitute the cornerism of St. James Town, are destined to disappear, at least in the condofied part of the neighbourhood. The

promised green spaces and street furniture sound deceptively harmless, but with the similarly promised private security and introduction of poverty-averse condo residents, the narrative of "who is allowed" within the space will likely shift. 'Privately owned public spaces' seem to be the new conceived space that puts regulatory powers in the realm of private investors, property managers, and security employees.

Next, the cost of housing and services in the neighbourhood are likely to increase because they will be aimed at the financial capacities of the new residents (Lehrer & Wieditz, 2009; Kern, 2016; August, 2016). The composition of retail is also likely to change, and the ownership of newly emerging businesses will be taken out of the hands of the current residents of St. James Town. All these changes should force some of the residents out of the neighbourhood. Further, even if not physically displaced, residents may become functionally displaced. According to Kern (2016), "displacement may include outright evictions from shared space or symbolic exclusion from a sense of place or belonging" (p. 442). Here, displacement takes the form of "symbolic exclusion", where current residents are deprived of access to the very lived space that they have been creating for decades.³ Put differently, 'publicly owned private spaces' are likely to reiterate the production of space again, ending the era of cornerism.

This rather bleak vision outlines some of the direst consequences of neoliberalism and gentrification on St. James Town. However, the history of the place shows that the dialectics of the elements that conceive space are never based on a simple conquest-and-replacement dynamic. Immigrants have created St. James Town, as we know it, based on, and despite of, Canada's capitalist, white settler project. In ongoing opposition to this project, residents of St. James Town have replied with the motto "A World Within a Block". So, while condofication will

² The document cited here was initially available at the website of Pooni Group, "an urban planning and communications company" (2020), but it has been removed while this text was being prepared.

³ The city of Toronto is rich with examples of such practices, just to mention developmental interventions in Downtown West (Mazer & Rankin, 2011) or Regent Park (Lehrer et al., 2012).

inevitably change St. James Town, we must not underestimate the potential of the lived space of that “World” to respond, adapt, and resist to new spatial conditions.

Conclusions

The historical development of St. James Town illustrates a trajectory of how the Canadian state has imposed its white-Anglo, settler vision and capitalist project onto the landscape. This vision, evident in the naming practices of the built environment, quickly became reshaped by the residents of the neighbourhood, who brought their own stories, experiences, and struggles into the environment, developing an alternative and robust conceived space that can be understood through cornerism. Cornerism regards spaces as comprised of interactions and exchange, with spatial inclusion being fundamental to its framework. What is exchanged in these spaces is not only goods and financial assets, but also information, knowledge, networks, and access. This prevailing narrative, summarised in the motto of St. James Town being “A World Within a Block”, reaches outside the borders of the neighbourhood; it acknowledges the strong transnational and trans-local ties of the area and its residents, providing the infrastructure of this transnational existence, making St. James Town a hub within Tkaronto’s migration reality.

The project proposed by *Greatwise Developments* threatens this. What is at stake can be summarised with a reformulated version of the question I posed at the beginning of my analysis: “who is desired, and who is allowed, in the St. James town of the *future*?” At first, St. James Town was meant to attract educated, white Canadian men who never really moved in. Then, St. James Town became a space for newcomers, who created new homes in Tkaronto and beyond, while keeping strong ties to their homelands. The spaces that these newcomers created replaced Canada’s grand visions of settler colonialism with everyday inclusion, demonstrated in the functionalism of physical and metaphorical corners. The introduction of condo-towers, new townhouses, and “privately owned public spaces”

will most likely cause us to reflect on the question of “who is allowed?”. But in thinking about this question, we must consider who will have the agency and resilience to answer and respond.

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