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Hans Ibelings ...Toronto



1 'L' Building, 2013

On the corner of Bathurst and Fort York stands Toronto's ninety-ninth public library, which opened its doors in May 2014. Designed by one of the city's most prominent offices, KPMB, it is a very contemporary version of the good old public library, containing not only real books but much of the latest digital technology as well, including 3-D printers, which are apparently necessary to keep a library afloat these days.

Under the cantilevered upper floor of the elegant building runs a fragment of a Margaret Atwood poem, written more than forty years ago. The text starts on the northern elevation of the building with: 'Look, look down; there is no city. This is the center of a forest. Your place is empty.' On the west elevation, you can read: 'They deny the ground they stand on, pretend this dirt is the future and they are right.' Not only have Atwood's words from *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (originally published in 1970) been used here, but also images from a 1980 limited edition illustrated by artist Charles Pachter, a friend of Atwood. These images are subtly integrated in the vertical louvres of the library's upper floor.

Atwood found inspiration for her poems in the journals of Moodie, a nineteenth-century pioneer struggling in an inhospitable environment, and Pachter on his part was inspired by Atwood's poems. By appropriating Atwood's words and Pachter's images, KPMB has added another layer to this inspirational cumulation. For the architects the words and images offer a tool to metaphorically anchor the building to its site, next to the historic Fort York, where once there was indeed no city. Now the area is defined by a forest of high-rises between railway tracks to the north, and the elevated Gardiner Expressway to the south.

Atwood's words are not only allusions to a past, but can be applied to the present and future of this place as well. It is almost impossible to read the text on the building without simultaneously seeing the skyline of Toronto, which is impressive both for its present dimensions, and for the

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2 CityPlace, 2012



3 The Berczy under construction, 2013



4 Adelaide Street West at Spadina Avenue looking East, 2012

numerous cranes on many huge construction sites that hint at an even more impressive future. This makes Atwood's 'there is no city' a Magritte-like paradox. Closer by, the area around the library is still pretty much unfinished but given the building pace here it is obvious that 'this dirt is the future'.

The district the library is part of is one of the brand new areas of densification, which has changed the character of much of downtown Toronto since the turn of the century. Until the late 1990s there was an impressive number of vacant lots that were exploited as parking. Nowadays there are hardly any of those plots left. Although a significant number of office towers have been built, currently the main driver of this densification is a demand for inner-city housing. The new condominium towers are like bar graphs of the changing nature of the city. According to a study by construction data organisation Emporis, there were 147 high-rises under construction by the end of 2012, nine out of ten being residential. This includes a number of conversions of tall office buildings into condos as well. (To get an idea of the vast scale of this whole operation, a look at all the dots on the map of www.urbantoronto.ca will suffice.)

Even though a slowdown has been expected and announced in the housing market for quite some time now, this real-estate rush, with a robust market and a continuous rise of prices, hasn't ended. The output of 20,000 condo units per year meets an apparently stable demand.

There are several explanations for Toronto's condo upsurge which are not really satisfying separately, but together paint a picture of a city that has morphed from a place large in size but which didn't really feel like a big city, into a place that is a big city in both respects. Yet, it remains a big city *Canadian style,* which means it is lively but relaxed, vibrant but not electrifying, busy but not hectic let alone chaotic. First, there is the economic explanation. Toronto's economy is relatively strong, even though median income in Toronto is lower than in boomtownish places like Calgary, or real boomtowns such as Fort McMurray (still way too small to be named a city). However, Toronto has now the benefit of the self-reinforcing magnetism that is working in most cities that are doing well.

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Second, there are demographic factors. If it is not a real boomtown, then part of the success story of Toronto's downtown area is that it is at least a 'boomer' town. Even though it is difficult to sustain it with hard numbers, it seems that the demand for condos is partly driven by empty-nesters and retirees moving from large homes in the suburbs to more compact apartments in the city. Yet, anecdotal evidence shows that many condos have rather young inhabitants, who are happy to live with the constraints of the single-bedroom units and even smaller studios. For Generation X and millenials this is often the only affordable, albeit still pricey solution that allows them to go around without owning a car. Third, mobility seems to be an important force behind the popularity of downtown condos anyway, because experts have identified a correlation between traffic jams and the demand for housing in city centres. Toronto happens to be in the top ten of North American cities with the worst traffic, and living downtown is one sure way to escape the suffering of the daily commute.

There is a lot of high-rise and mid-rise building going up in Toronto, but it is unlikely the city will become an open-air museum of exquisite architecture any time soon. Most of the towers aren't great buildings. There are some very nice projects, like several by KPMB, the same architects who made the library near Fort York, and there is at least one highly anticipated project in the works by Toronto's own Frank Gehry. He has designed three mixed-use towers for David Mirvish, an art dealer who took over and expanded the theatre business of his father, and later ventured into project development as well. The current design for the three towers, on the premises of one of his theatres on King Street West, is a toned-down version of the much more exuberant initial proposal. In this case less is more and the new version that has received approval from the city council promises to be a greater contribution to the city than the first one. There is also a not-so-great Daniel Libeskind in the making, the L Tower, a reference to the L-shaped section of this building and maybe also the first letter of the architect's surname. But otherwise high-profile design is virtually absent in Toronto's high-rises. Most office towers reflect the usual universal corporate blandness; many residential towers are advertised as unique and iconic but are quite interchangeable. Aside from the very high end of the condo market, where the aesthetics of corporate architecture meets the token luxury of expensive hotel lobbies, most projects offer not much more than a rather formulaic synthesis of market efficiency and cheap chic that is rarely more than skin deep. Still even those cheaper condos have a discreet charm. They boast high ceilings, with ten feet being the golden standard. Often those ceilings are bare concrete, marketed as loft-like, but coincidentally it is also cheaper to leave it unfinished. Most of them have so-called open concepts, promoted as contemporary but also a way for the developer to economise on walls and doors. Moreover it allows for making the most out of the constraints of small floor plans and single-sided orientation. Windows tend to be large, and are potentially offering great city views, although quite often views are blocked by the next condo tower. This leaves a substantial part of the units at a substandard level. Many condo dwellers could hence justifiably hum Ray Charles' 'Lonely Avenue' ('Now my room has got two windows / But the sunshine never



5 Distillery District, 2007



6 Maple Leaf Square North Tower, 2013

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7 CityPlace Towers under construction, 2008



8 Charlie Condos, King Street West, 2011

comes through'). A large number of dwellers do not even have two windows but only one, albeit large. And those units that only have a north orientation or are in the shadow of a neighbour indeed never see any sunshine (to churn the last profitable square metre out of a building, most towers even have units at ground-floor level, adding little or nothing to street life).

Despite all of these limitations and constraints, the Toronto condo has an undeniable attraction. It proves that many not-so-great buildings can add up to a great place. Hardly any of those buildings manage to wow the passerby, but collectively they make an impression. Part of that is how the cheap chic of the condominiums expresses a contagious optimism. Despite a probably justified concern about how all that cheap and swiftly built architecture will look in twenty years time, for the moment they are showing an enthusiasm for city life that compensates for whatever architectural shortcomings will surface in the years to come.

Just like other places that have had a concentrated period of change – say Chicago after the Great Fire of 1871, Miami Beach after the 1926 hurricane, Napier after the earthquake of 1931 – Toronto is having a defining moment now, but without a natural or manmade disaster.

All the ongoing building activities emphasise Toronto isn't finished yet, but in many ways is becoming a monument of its own ambitions. Despite their size, the condominiums are too light to be considered monumental or visionary by themselves; but together they add up to a vision of the future of the city, and collectively they have an unmistakably monumental power. They form not a singular monument as a product of one mind or one masterplan, however. Their monumentality is the outcome of a Venn diagram that is composed of all the individual sets of ideas, ambitions, wishes and hopes and expectations of architects and developers, buyers and sellers, landlords and tenants, politicians and planners, of everybody who makes the city, everybody who lives in the city. And looking up, the undeniable truth is that there is only city now.

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