“The Cost to Build Per Square Foot”

Planning for Direct Action for Citizenship in Toronto’s Downtown East

by

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Abstract

This paper attempts to discuss the role planning plays at recognizing or denying citizenship within Toronto's downtown east. Currently, housing is analyzed and addressed through a lens of crisis, which justifies supply side rationale through planning process and political decisions ideologically rooted in the classical economics of supply and demand. Crisis urbanism greatly benefits private capital and its political enablers while exacerbating existing urban social inequalities. The case study focuses on a nearly two-decade long struggle between community activists, developers, and Toronto city council in deciding the best use of the land at 214-230 Sherbourne Street in Toronto's downtown east. The paper historically situates a community driven development plan for social housing at 214-230 Sherbourne St., a proposal based on community desires and needs that runs counter and disparate to surrounding profit-based market development. The paper closes with a discussion on 230 Fightback's campaign to continue the struggle for social housing at that location.

Key Words: *Direct Action, Citizenship, Land, Planning, Affordable Housing, Toronto's Downtown East*

Foreword

This submitted major paper reflects the learning components and objectives outlined in my plan of study.

Through the case study presented in this paper, I have come to understand that the role of the state has shifted from a role of direct responsibility to one of supporting housing production through methods of land leverage (or land banking) in conjunction with financial incentives as resultant of a systematic shift in the socio-political ideology. My learning objective 1.2 (Develop an understanding of how urban development effects public space and the everyday experience of inhabitants through processes of exclusion and alienation within Toronto's municipal and provincial planning process) has been met with my conceptual understanding that planning plays a direct participatory role in the ontological production of urban space, which consequently recognizes or denies claims of citizenship within Toronto's downtown east.

I approach planning and housing in general, as a capital driven endeavour where social housing, a foundational act of centering human need and production of Lefebvre's notion of social space, is dialectically counter to current methods and best practices driven by speculation and the pursuit of profit. Learning objective 2.1 (Gain a greater understanding of the urban development process within Toronto's downtown, and what these processes mean for community, notions of citizenship, and core-housing needs) has been explicitly addressed through my theoretical development and provided case study. Land-use planning practice in Toronto emphatically aids the capitalist production of space for its pursuit of profit, which contingently reduces the citizenship rights of a growing tenant class within Toronto's downtown east. Private property rights are violently upheld as community activists struggle to gain deeply affordable housing for Toronto's working-class, precarious, and poor.

The relationship between global capital and Toronto's urban formation has produced an exacerbation of systemic social inequalities through the process of extractive financialization. Recent Ontario provincial legislation has further placed landlords and developers on a pedestal, and has conversely eroded basic tenant protections, public funding, and access to democratic process. My learning objective 3.2 (Gain an understanding of political theory and processes such as democracy, capitalism, anarchy, hegemony, and social capitalism, and what these various ideologies mean for community participation within the planning process, and the provision of social housing) has been met through my case study which examines the development and outcome of a community driven development plan for a privately owned abandoned lot, a process which places community need squarely disparate to the powers of speculative real estate, and what this means for claims of citizenship.

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Figure 1: Anti-poverty protesters march through the snow to City Hall in 2016. Photo OCAP archives

Introduction

"Because Dundas and Sherbourne is a very particular place, if you want to understand class, if you want to understand capitalism, you come to Dundas and Sherbourne and you see the effects"

- *Gaétan Héroux (excerpt from David Simard forthcoming)*

"If a given space is needed for the construction of an efficient built environment or for the residential needs of the affluent people, then the poor are denied – they are dispossessed of – access to that space"

- *Raju Das 2024, p.55*

"The definition of the city for each society is what historical actors struggling in such a society try to make it"

- *Manuel Castells 1983, p.71*

"So ideas can matter, but they have to be made to matter"

- *Vivek Chibber (Nascheck 2025)*

"Social justice in the city cannot be attained without ontological justice in the city, and ontological justice in the city is dependent upon the right to assert the order of things in the city"

- *Luke R. Barnesmoore 2018, p. 197*

Essentially this paper is about land, and the role planning plays in recognizing or denying claims of citizenship.

The paper speaks to how situated powers and socially constructed regulatory methods control land, its use and users, and how communities (un)successfully confront and navigate the consequences of these socially constructed urban landscapes. That the working-class and poor must continually (re)assert their citizenship within the communities they live against a mechanism of financial capitalism striving to drastically alter the urban for capital's benefit. In concert with capital's ability to procedurally reduce the public's democratic ability to participate in their own urban future through the drastic abstraction and alienation of the public from the state, who regularly serves capital's agenda. Or put alternatively: urban specific social relationships must produce, confront, and disrupt globalized processes of urbanization and capital extraction through actions of citizenship renewal and production of a political will to act against extraction.

Specifically, this paper is about 2,812 square metres of land enclosed from the surrounding community for 18 years within Tkaronto's core, and the decades long battle between community activists, landowners, and municipal council and staff over how the land should best be used. In early 2022, after several unsuccessful attempts to acquire the land at 214-230 Sherbourne Street for much needed social housing, the City of Toronto was outbid by KingSett Capital: a self-proclaimed leading private equity real estate investment firm in Canada. KingSett snatched up the land with a bid of $53 million on the open market after the previous owners made clear they had no intention of selling the land to the City, who had themselves made a bid of $51 million (interview participant 04282026-07). Purchased during the height of a red-hot real estate market, KingSett must now wait out an economic downturn to see their speculative investment turn a profit, a luxury of time not afforded upon the area's poor.



Figure 2: 230 Fightback's Community Block Party, October 2025, beneath the impending wave of tower development. Photo Ian Weir

The paper looks to be a contribution to an evolving narrative of a community's struggle to fight displacement and strengthen their collective claims to citizenship through direct action and advocacy with state and non-state entities. A struggle for the much-used 'Right To the City' (Lefebvre 1996/1968, Harvey 2008), but contextually a collective thunder of 'We Won't Be Pushed Out'. Direct action moves outside the traditional understanding of democratic participation within the frame of the ballot box and directly challenges state and non-state actors on issues of social injustice. Direct action is an act of collective citizenship, and a method of social protest which allows marginalized and disenfranchised groups and communities to be seen, heard, and understood by institutions (state and corporate) and actors who possess the power to delegitimize the communities' claim(s). An active social worker within Toronto's downtown east, in conversation, concisely argued that direct action is "taking action that will confront whatever the target might be or lead to some kind of challenge that will work to further our demands. These actions force the issue and a response. *These measures are often needed to match the seriousness of the issue" (Interview participant* 04242026-04, my emphasis).

The paper is theoretically founded upon Lefebvre's notion of the social construction of space with a particular interest in the relationship between spatial abstraction (exchange value) and social space (use value). The abstraction of space is a profitable conceptualization of land as it is able to geographically reduce the city into exchangeable slices of a conceived whole (Lefebvre 2009/1973). Further, spatial abstraction is able to decontextualize (Holston 1995) the lived experiences and common practices within space and (re)produce the urban form through the lens and imagination of exchange and capital profit. A reimagination which attempts to cleanse the heterogeneous urban of its chaos and disorder for homogeneity, predictability, and romanticized bourgeoise lifestyles of leisure. The urban is decanted of chaos through projects and actions of displacement (Porter 2014) and (re)development which simultaneously solidify the position of private interest above common need, and places importance for the lifestyles of the middle-class above the poor, precarious and working-class. Planning, and especially land-use planning, is a political act that reproduces the recognition of property rights as inviolable, while failing to equitably distribute public resources in a manner which produces social and environmental justice. Novel planning procedure and methods of best practice fail to prevent the disruption of inhabitants' "active participation in the political life, management, and administration of the city" (Dikeç 2001, p.1790).

In addition, the latent political interposition through which planning in Toronto works, promoted as objective and systematic, reproduces and congeals an approach to spatial development and spatial production prioritized upon the rights of ownership. An approach which pushes common use, local culture, and traditional notions of rights and citizenship to the shadows while further assimilating and naturalizing the abstraction of land through private property. Property rights and the control of land have become the prime configuration of citizenship rights and means for understanding planning and development. The reduction of the city for purposes of exchange and profit abstracts and decontextualizes space of its ethnographic reality (Holston 1995) and produces a detrimental effect upon notions of citizenship: as 'rights' have solidified around

politically legitimized perceptions of property. The exclusive *rights to* attached to property disrupts and erases the previous cultural and social spatial *use as*.

Toronto's current planning process of technocratic 'best practice' has come to define the form of the 'urban' through spatial productions of investment that have mirrored and enabled the needs, flows, and speculation of capital (Harvey 1975), a process which completely omits legitimate community participation. Pre-designed development abstractions (proposals) are presented to City staff for audit of compatibility with zoning requirements, thereafter, only presented to community members for comment. Noted in the work by Valzania (2022) on the redevelopment of tower in the park green spaces in Toronto's North York, public consultation events saw the "transition of consultations into a strategy for consensus building" (p. 239) between City staff and the developer, through the recognition of what was serious community concerns and perceived as superficial. These current methods of public consultation within Toronto reduce community concern(s) to a check-box procedure and place community desires and needs as a summary within city planning staff's recommendations for development. Technocratic best practices are framed as politically neutral solutions (Wald 2014) to a politically motivated housing crisis which acts as justification for a reterritorialization of land through Official Plan and Zoning-Bylaw amendments. Provincial and federal policy incentivising municipal up-zoning in residential areas further supports property rights, aids in maintaining financial securities tied to mortgages and housing values, increases concentration of wealth to property owners, and fails to seriously address affordable housing issues (Buckley and Brauen 2023). Procedurally efficient planning methods contribute to the rejection and dismissal of alternative methods and means of knowledge creation and any potential planning enrichment through democratic participation.

But even the best planned cities will present gaps and lacunas for the illumination of the exploitative and violent realities that the working-poor and unhoused inhabitants experience. Barnesmoore (2018) speaking to the ontological nature of the city states: "Cities are far more than an inert backdrop for or reflection of human society - cities are ... the living embodiment of humanity's collective social evolution and thus play a causal role in human social processes" (p.191). Toronto's central Dundas Corridor, the focus of my case study, is one such social process as an area of extreme poverty and the services needed for survival confront and contest the approach of 'mixed-use' market condominium development and leftover scars of land speculation. Toronto's pernicious observance of land title, not community need, discernably contributes to economic cycles of deterioration as land is allowed to sit vacant for decades, and fails to address the needs of community and its residents.

Misusing Wilson and Keil's (2008) conception of the real urban creative class, neighbourhoods which offer safe haven and needed services for Toronto's poor, such as the Dundas Corridor within Toronto's central Garden District, are exploited for the perceived devaluation in land-value caused by political and media portrayals of neighbourhood crime, drug-use, and social depravity. The devaluation of land's exchange value, a relational and contextual conception, is the first point in Smith's (1979) cycle of potential ground rent. Potential ground rent, for Smith, is the cyclical process of situated and relational land value determined through built form and inhabitants' ability to pay perceived speculated rent. I argue that speculation through the creation of a potential rent

gap, and the subsequent exercise of gentrification and redevelopment is contingent upon neighbourhoods of precarity and poverty. As Raju Das (2024, p.49) states, “the poverty of the working-class and affluence of the bourgeoisie are internally linked [...] They are, in fact, two sides of the same coin: ‘in the selfsame relations in which wealth is produced, poverty is produced also’ (Marx 1887: 496)”.

The paper then also strongly suggests that the political reliance upon methods of housing provision through private market development has skewed previous conceptions of citizenship and state responsibility, while perpetuating an individualized financial approach to one obtaining shelter. An approach that leaves tenants and inhabitants vulnerable to political whims and economic cycles while concurrently experiencing a heightened sense of anxiety and precarity. For Staeheli et al (2012) ideas of citizenship are contained in a dialectic of status and practice, a conception which places local practices and experiences in contrast to a state delineated “bundle of rights and responsibilities” (p.630) shrouded in customs, statute, and arbitrary policing. The authors importantly state: “opportunities afforded by citizenship are opened and closed for particular individuals at particular moments” (ibid).

I move forward with the understanding that citizenship is not a result of rational benevolence and moral superiority laid onto the public from a power above, but the result of numerous contentious confrontations between a disenfranchised group and state powers to define social responsibilities. Holsten (1995) argues that the state is engaged in not only matters of state-building, but also in the process of citizenship-building, a coercive process which seeks to shape citizenship to the form which is needed for the state’s survival. Constitutional and nationalistic conceptions of citizenship within a liberal democracy, and the rights that citizenship pertains, are malleable to the needs and whims of powerful organizations and capital. But this also necessitates the possibility and potential for collective claims of citizenship by counter-hegemonic and subaltern organizations to bend rights and entitlements to their needs and desires, through acts of protest, direct action, and insurgency. Holston (1995) defines the concept of insurgent citizenship as “forms of the social not yet liquidated by or absorbed into the old. As such, they embody possible alternative futures” (p.37). Insurgent citizenship are acts and claims of opposition to political and spatial practices which renew status-based conceptions of citizenship, for example, property rights. Acts of insurgent citizenship illuminate social and political lacuna produced through normative cultural practices such as the naturalization of capitalism and its inherent division, exploitation, and socialization. In Toronto’s downtown east, community activism and direct-action protest looks to confront and disrupt speculative development and the consequences it produces for citizenship, social responsibility, and one’s right to the city.

The socio-political effects of capital upon the city are by no means new. As Castells’ (1983) discusses in *The City and The Grassroots,* processes of exploitation and suppression of social reproduction have impacted citizens even in the pre-capitalist period of the 1500s. But the city, or urban, offers inhabitants a compact conception of the commons and a collective consciousness which potentially produces movements that can confront, disrupt, and redistribute consciously recognized socio-political inequalities while producing opportunities of citizenship. The city offers space for these moments of contentious politics (Tilly and Wood 2018), political displays that

challenge existing political institutions and relationships in an attempt to produce alternative futures. I argue that collective displays of contentious politics force the state, and all its bodies, to decide whose rights and citizenship they will uphold, the rights of capital and abstraction, or the needs of the working-class, precarious, and poor.

Previous studies and works on social movements (Castells 1983, and Tilly, Castañeda, and Wood 2018), new municipalism (Beveridge and Koch 2024, and Roth, Russell and Thompson 2023) and practices of insurgent planning (García-Lamarca 2017, Caneda and Silva Andrade 2024, and Juraev and Ahn 2025) have made clear, the urban presents itself as a location of socialization and struggle for alternative futures, a place for collective knowledge creation and sharing, and space to contest socio-political inequalities, at a variety of scales, temporalities, and ambitions. Dikeç and Swyngedouw (2017) in the paper *Theorizing the Politicizing City* explain that the urban provides location for socially explosive moments, such as protest or riots, where "[d]isruptive politics invites a reflexive withdrawal from the accepted givens, from normalized and repetitive practices, and from ordering principles of political communities by interrupting such structures and practices" (p.15). This paper's case study provides an example of how a conceived and lived societal wrong can produce a grassroots collective action which pressures agents and mechanisms of the state to act (or ignore) in the deliverance and production of a more equitable resource distribution.

Ultimately this paper suggests that professionalized planning and current forms of urbanization have been cowed along as a means of legitimizing private interest in the form of a politically whimsical common good. As Marx (1982/1867) states in Volume One of *Das Kapital*, "Deer-forests and the people cannot co-exist" (p. 893), that is, complete privatized interests and the people cannot co-exist as capitalism foundationally divides society along class interests. A division which prescribes a need for the continual struggle in confronting, (re)claiming, and reproduction of state responsibility in the working-class, working-poor, and precarious' best interest; an on-going (re)production of political will.

The paper, and research greater, seeks to contribute to an evolving narrative by attempting to answer these guiding questions: what role does community activism play in the provision of social housing in Toronto's downtown east? And, what role, if any, can direct action play in the City of Toronto's procurement of 214-230 Sherbourne St for the purpose of social housing and community good? Toronto's downtown east has long felt the consequences of funding cuts through neo-liberal policy, cycles of gentrification and speculation, and state led reurbanization projects which have contingently displaced and dispossessed residents of the area. These processes of collective erasure and social cleansing sit squarely in the realm of colonial activities and the private appropriation of the commons for private interest; or put much differently, the production of a city of deer-forests. Toronto's City Hall and council members have the power to confront recolonialization, and any attempt to counteract the deterioration and minimization of housing which meets the needs of all Toronto residents must begin within their offices'. Critical housing needs will not be solved through the recommendations of planning staff, mandated density bonusing for affordable market rate units, or the fanciful benevolence of private philanthropy, but only through the state recognition of housing as a human right. It has become painfully apparent that the housing needs of the poor have been left to community members, and contingent upon

their consistent activism to (re)produce a political will to act, either through political recall, advocacy or direct action. To paraphrase longtime Toronto anti-poverty activist John Clarke, the role of activism is to maximize community pressure upon council (or representatives) to act in the community's favour. This "favour" in the case of 214-230 Sherbourne St. is social housing and community services.

The paper's title, *The Cost Per Square Foot,* comes from a question asked to the authors of the *Expropriate 214-230 Sherbourne! Community-Driven Development Proposal For Public Housing* during their presentation and deputation at Toronto's Planning and Housing Committee in July 2019. The question was asked by the councilor with an air that the suffocating practicality of cost must anchor any debate on social responsibility or be included into any potential diversions beyond planning's established best methods. The social housing of Toronto's poor, or even recognition of housing as a basic universal right, is approached with a similar political attitude as environmental concerns of air quality and climate change, this would be nice to do, but at what cost and is it practical, and is this even the state's responsibility anymore? The question of cost per square foot dissolves any thought of Toronto as a socially constructed totality and returns the housing question squarely within the realm of bureaucratic fiscal apologist neoliberalism. What the councilor failed to ask was: what is the cost not to build? and what is the social benefit to building? It is my opinion, in conjunction to acting on a state's core responsibility to provide for the well-being of its inhabitants, such as providing basic housing for Toronto's working class, poor and homeless, the social benefit of community driven housing would be an act of socio-political resistance to the current slide towards profit driven state authoritarianism (here experienced at the provincial and federal levels), as well as a state recognition of a claim to citizenship for Toronto's disenfranchised.

Planning for direct action for citizenship in Toronto's downtown east is a co-option of the term planning, which is predominantly monopolized and associated with the state and professional corporate planning entities. But here, the term planning is returned to all the community organizers who spend hours in church basements, coffee shops, and in virtual meetings planning claims to citizenship and creative means to challenge oppressive processes violently reproducing Toronto's downtown east in an arrangement which benefits profit at the expense of the area's working-class, poor, and homeless, and the services and networks of care they depend upon for survival.

Planning for direct action is also a play on words as popular understandings of planning and the role it plays within land-use and exclusion is binary to the resistance and counter claim for the right to the city resultant of official plan and zoning amendments, reterritorialization, and the transfer of the public commons to private interest.

This paper will first discuss its theoretical foundations, followed by methodology. The third section will discuss and review the paper's case study and will finish with analysis and concluding thoughts.

Chapter 1 - Theoretical Development

Crisis and Development

'Crisis' has become normalized and predominantly justified as motivation for political and economic action by the state, as much so in Ontario as elsewhere in Canada. Narratives of crisis provide the state opportunity to decentralize responsibility and the distribution of resources through policy and solutions shouldered upon a neo-liberal ideology.

Peck (2013) suggests that neo-liberalism is a utopian vision of minimal state interference in economic processes and social reproduction, or the romanticized view of a free market in which economic processes of supply and demand will produce pure representations of value through classical supply and demand theories. A belief which ignores and discredits the role the state plays in maintaining and violently supressing alternative claims to social production. Hayek (1944) proclaims that the state, within a pure neo-liberal society, would only engage in market interventions that were beyond private corporations' means (such as armed conflicts locally and globally) and areas of interest (or profit) for private corporations to pursue (such as dealing with the poor and infirm). An admittance that even within its pure form places neo-liberal capitalism dependent upon state power. Critically from a Marxist conception, Harvey (2016) argues that neo-liberalism is a capitalist political and economic project which looks to erode and disassemble gains of social and political equity hard won by the working-class and poor in the century prior, gains such as housing assistance, social services, and political representation.

Neo-liberalism as an ideology and means for social reproduction only took hold when political opportunity allowed. Vivek Chibber, in an interview with the *Jacobin*, argued that the idea of neo-liberalism had floated around for decades prior to its interest and acceptance by the powers of state in the 1970s-80s, where the "halls of power … became interested in them because the constituency that really matters to politicians saw *that* as the moment when they could push their agenda, and that constituency was the business class. And it pushed the agenda because its interests enabled them to do so" (Nascheck 2025, n/p, emphasis in original). Springer (2012) suggests that the neo-liberal ideology facilitates the abuse and violence upon those who fall outside normative activity of the market, such as those who rely on public support for housing. Springer states, one must "recognize that neoliberalisation – inasmuch as it claims a global domain – implicates all of humanity in a particular 'moment', a *moment of abandonment* wherein the social relations that afford privilege to the few and privation to the many are the very same social relations that occasion violence" (p.137, emphasis in original). Echoing the Marx quote above, the privilege produced and secured by the neo-liberal project is the same coin which violently abandons those unable or unwilling to engage within this dominate 'moment' of surplus distribution and social organization. The poor, unhoused, and underhoused are left to produce individualized solutions to socially constructed housing inequalities (Malenfant and Brais 2024), a contingent social inequality which must be addressed expeditiously. Importantly, Peck (2013) states: "[e]ven where neoliberalism is demonstrably hegemonic, it is never the entire story, never the only causal presence; it never acts alone" (p.150). This suggests a need for a deft understanding of the social processes which act counter and below hegemonic powers and

actions of urban spatial production (Wilson and Keil 2008), and how these actions and social movements produce claims of citizenship within counter-spaces that disrupt and challenge crisis, structural neo-liberalism, and hegemonic political motivation (Purcell 2009).

The effects of the neo-liberal project are very visible in Canada. Beginning in the early 1970s but coming into full force in the 1990s, federal and provincial state responsibility and resources have been methodically defunded, down-loaded, reduced, and redistributed in favour of tax-breaks for the wealthy and programs of incentivization for private corporations to now provide services previously supplied by the state (Keil 2002, Abbruzzese 2016, Palmer and Héroux 2016). A systematic and politically driven desertion of the working-poor, homeless, and migrants, and the services they need and depend upon for survival. The neo-liberal redistribution of the public commons has resulted in a new conception of citizenship and who is granted opportunities of access to basic rights. Or to reiterate Springer (2012): the neo-liberal project has implicated the inhabitants of Tkaronto into a violent moment which systematically individualizes and others those unable to obtain commodified housing and survive growing economic precarity.

Politically and economically motivated solutions for 'crisis' act as justification for state policy and legislation focused on inducing and incentivising economic 'growth'. Mitchell (2026) argues that growth acts as an alibi for capitalist extraction, as "capital is not something saved up from the past … it is a capture from the future" (n/p). One cannot but think of Smith's (1979) notions of rent gap and potential ground rent, or Harvey's (1978) notions of capital fix, and the consequences that processes of reurbanization, recolonization, gentrification (Lehrer, Keil, and Kipfer 2010), and infrastructure expansion presents to future urban form, movement, and inhabitants when framing growth through this lens. In this sense, growth is an action which robs existing inhabitants of their future and participation in producing that future. The crisis becomes less an existential threat to processes of nature and human reproduction, but more a crisis of capital growth, profit, and social acquiesce.

It has become discernible that 'crisis' is now a permanent methodological lens of analysis for processes of urbanization, or processes of world building. In their recent work, Beveridge, Keil, and Lashkari (2025) define crisis urbanism as "an emergent social-political situation, shaped and conditioned by crisis discourse, arising from the interweaving and intensification of crisis with urban ways of life" (p.2). Crisis urbanism has situated itself as a defining mechanism and means of exacerbating pre-existing socio-political divisions, and effects and outcomes of the previous several decades of the neo-liberal project and the ever-present structural inequalities that are flouted as cause for the further dismantling and defunding of public resources and responsibility. Processes of downloading and cuts to public housing to balance federal and provincial budgets in the 1990s and the effects this had on local public housing organizations and residents are used as recourse for the state to push private development and policy supporting supply side residential intensification. Leffers (2015) argues that intensification becomes a discourse, or "a particular form of knowledge that is legitimated by particular claims to truth" (p.132). And it is these claims to truth which stabilize into rational policy choices that aid and drive political and economic motivated solutions. Wald (2014) speaking to imperialized global south development, but relevant to

processes of national and international financial extraction through housing, states, "[d]evelopment is essentially a 'knowledge industry' and knowledge is implicit in the values, purposes and power of those involved in development planning and practice" (p.624). Crisis urbanism is a production of knowledge and value which is disseminated as a justification and excuse for deregulation, decentralization, and a transfer of the public commons to private interest.

Processes of urbanism, urbanization, and urbanity become contingently caught in crisis analysis which guides professional knowledge, policy, and 'rational' next steps in thwarting or combating a myriad of issues. One's daily life becomes further conditional to processes and political discussion addressing abstract crisis' instead of conditions shaping and exacerbating lived realties. If the state's idealized role was to address the need of inhabitants, then a need, such as public housing, would be addressed at all means necessary publicly, and not through an indifference of financial incentives and conviction towards the fanciful benevolence of private actors. This apologist market method, in my opinion, tips the hat to the fallacy of 'crisis' and 'rational' solutions which amount nothing more than a transfer of social resources and the public commons to private means and interest.

Canada's housing crisis becomes less about the need to control consumer prices (such as rent or mortgage costs), as much as the need to reterritorialize relative land for processes of (re)development and growth. As any substantive measure addressing affordability would need to call for a return to universal rent-controls in conjunction with funding protecting and maintaining Toronto's existing stock of public housing. These needed protections have come under repeated attack by provincial powers. The 1997 Ontario *Tenant Protection Act* provided landlords with financially rewarding tools such as vacancy decontrol and exemptions on rent control, two huge stipulations which historically had maintained 'affordable' rent levels. Then, under the current Ford government's first term, 2018's Bill 57, *Restoring Trust, Transparency and Accountability Act* time-stamped rent control to units occupied prior to November 15, 2018, again incentivising and rewarding small-landlord investment into condominiums as a means of privately providing much needed rental units. Rental homes constructed and occupied after November 2018 are eligible for, or susceptible to capricious rent increases with little to no due cause. These two previous pieces of legislation have been recently complimented with 2025's Bill 60, *Fighting Delays and Building Faster Act*, which streamlined the eviction process for landlords while decreasing tenant rights in front of Ontario's Landlord Tenant Board, a binding dispute tribunal. Taken altogether, these three pieces of legislation promote new privately invested condominium development, increase recourse for landlords to increase rents, while minimizing tenant entitlements and means of preserving general rental affordability. These rational crisis solutions have not brought relief to affordability but instead have proliferated the financialization and abstraction of housing as condominium housing units have manifested less as social spaces for living but as investment opportunities and literal vertical safety deposit boxes (Nethercote 2018).

Indignantly, throughout this 'crisis', land, buildings, and residential units in Toronto and the GTHA have sat vacant. Specifically, the strategically identified land by Toronto planning staff at 214-230 Sherbourne St. has sat empty and removed from a community in need of housing, not only for those currently experiencing homelessness, but for resident's currently residing in nearby deteriorating

Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) public housing. Crisis analysis has not diverted or alleviated this very real approaching crisis of deteriorating conditions within the existing stock of public housing in Toronto (McGillivray 2026), a crisis which will need real attention and public investment, not projects of private capital investment.

Ricardo Tranjan (2023), in an excerpt from his book reproduced for *The Walrus,* simply states that there is no housing crisis. That within Canada the concept of a housing crisis is a politically driven framing of an issue which carries very real consequences and experiences of deprivation and precarity for Canada's working-class and poor. Tranjan states, "A "housing crisis" suggests the need for a technical solution and coordination between various stakeholders, all of whom desire the same outcome: the end of the crisis" (n/p). An end that can only be comprehended through a constant, and seemingly endless, construction and development of housing units, or supply-sided solutions. Kipfer and Sotomayor (2024) argue that supply-side solutions to a 'housing crisis' do not address issues such as affordability but only produces an increase in the stock of privately owned market housing. Hardwick (2025) argues that the interconnection between Canada's housing supply, private mortgages, interest rates, and investments (such as retirement funds or insurance companies) has forced a situation where housing prices must be maintained to preserve and service public and private debt and investment; with potentially huge detrimental effects to social safety nets, such as Old Age Pension Plans, if Canadian housing values experienced a dramatic decrease. Braun-Woodbury (2026), speaking to Canada's embedded financialization of housing states, any "genuine attempt to restore housing affordability would likely put hundreds of thousands of households underwater on their mortgages, make retirement impossible for millions, and plunge this country into a recession that would last years" (n/p). Housing has become drastically abstracted from its human need to a material possession for investment and exchange purposes, a metamorphosis which must be maintained for economic and social stability, as the dominate narrative assures there is no alternative.

In Ontario, conservative Priemer Doug Ford has methodically framed crisis, and specifically housing and economic crisis in many socially hurtful pieces of legislation over his current eight year reign: 2018's *Bill 66* (Restoring Ontario's Competitiveness Act) made alterations to the *Ontario Planning Act* (1997) for greater business investment; 2022's *Bill 3* (Strong Mayors Building Homes Act) produced measures to circumvent municipal councils and provide mayors with budgetary and policy powers for housing and housing related development; 2023's *Bill 23* (More Homes Build Faster Act) mandated growth plans and quotas on housing development for all Ontario municipalities; 2024's *Bill 185* (Cutting Red Tape to Build More Homes Act) looked to accelerate housing construction with the reduction of red-tape, but also removed third party appeals at the Ontario Land Tribunal, an action which reduced public access and participation in land-use planning; 2025's *Bill 5* (Protect Ontario by Unleashing Our Economy) an omnibus act which mandated the creation of Special Economic Zones which could potentially avoid environmental impact studies, void recognition of certain endangered species, reduce labour regulations within SEZs, and trample on Indigenous Land Rights and Claims in the name of economic growth; *Bill 6* (Safer Municipalities Act) criminalized encampments and realigned notions of public space with middle-class economic and leisure activities; *Bill 60* (Fighting Delays and Building Faster Act) was introduced to streamline the development process and eviction process while producing

restrictions and requirements on tenant rights and representation at the Tenant Landlord Tribunal; and 2026's *Bill 98* (Building Homes and Improving Transportation Infrastructure) will restructure municipal development charges and introduces a publicly funded grant system for Ontario cities, and limits municipal planning department's ability to restrict development based upon utility capacity (such as water usage). These selected bills, among others, have all been enacted as measures to excite solutions to the housing crisis, but in reality, have reduced protocol and bureaucracy for market investment, systematically reduced tenant rights, exacerbated real housing affordability, and has promoted displacement through development. Rosenthal and Vilchis (2024) perceptively aver, "[i]f rent is a power relation, then the price of rent is also an index of state regulation and deregulation, its refusals and incentives" (p. 35). The financialization of housing has grossly accelerated housing inequalities, the cost of rent and affordability, and has strained social and physical infrastructures through poor planning and unchecked horizontal and vertical growth. The privatization and individualization of housing provision (in the form of privately individually owned condominium units for rent) in Ontario has only exacerbated the power relation between landlord and tenant.

Growth aided by crisis dialogue perpetuates further crisis as this form of civic and urban production feeds fodder to economic cycles of speculation, displacement, and reurbanization. Crisis has become a veneer for processes of recolonialization and the subsequent reduction of legally recognized moments of public participation in the production of urban space. Crisis mitigation through development and growth have solidified as rational solutions in which this knowledge chokes and muzzles alternative methods and solutions. Planning in Toronto has aided in this recolonization through complicit objectivity and an ideological absorption of neo-liberal technocratic 'best-practices'. As a former Toronto executive planning staff member expounded in conversation, "I don't think the city understands its role in how it creates value for the development industry" (interview participant 04272026-06).

Planning

I move forward with the notion that planning is a political action which produces and institutes potentially serious consequences where implemented. Recalling Barnesmoore (2018), the city is *not* an innate backdrop for social relations, but rather both a socially constructed product and producer of ontological and pedagogical spatialities which greatly dictate social relations and opportunities of citizenship. Porter (2014) argues that the political nature of planning has "tendencies that dissociate, hierarchise and fragment the social under the conditions of neoliberal political economy and most importantly under a framework of liberally conceived rights" (p. 388). Plainly, planning is a complicit actor in the exacerbation of existing social divisions through its compliance and observation of sacrosanct property rights.

Davoudi (2015) suggests that when planners confront a problem concerning the public will, or common good, it has been approached through an established positionality and theoretical conception, or method of best practice. Where personal prejudices approach planning issues through an objectivity defined politically subjective policy and statute, or a dominate ideology such as neo-liberalism. The outcomes of this de-politicized objectivity of professionalized planning are framed as rational. Flyvbjerg (2003) warns that rationality is a product of power and that modern

democracies are reliant upon rationality to work. He states, “[d]emocratic government of the modern Western variety [are] formally and legally based on rational argument and [are] constrained to operate within the framework of stable power relations, even when dealing with antagonistic interest groups” (p.324). This means ideological dominate planning methods, such as rational solutions to housing produced from lenses of crisis are more productive and efficient in periods of stability, even when facing challenges of social protest and claims of citizenship. Flyvbjerg argues that this stability can only be disrupted through real challenges to power, or what could be called moments of exceptionality and violence. It is then assuredly argued that planning stability within Ontario is produced through legislative statute and cultural practice.

Normative planning practices within Toronto have been very successful in depoliticizing the rationale and approach taken to the housing question. The lens of analysis founded in crisis, shrouds community need and common practices around conceptions of citizenship, ownership, and land-use. This is plainly obvious in the case study of 214-230 Sherbourne Street, where centrally situated land, contextually located within one of Toronto’s poorest and most under serviced neighbourhoods, has remained and remains enclosed from the community during the height of a supposed housing crisis. Where speculative financial real estate can patiently wait-out a financial cycle and return of profitable conditions, while community members continue to experience the harsh realities of homelessness, precarity, and death on the street. But these concerns of wellbeing reverberating from the community are continually lost to deaf ears within Toronto’s city hall.

Challenges to rational democratic practice and planning processes are based upon access to rights, or established conceptions of citizenship. Libby Porter (2014) speaking to dispossession, an inherit product of planning, argues that there are two important components of rights, property and procedural, or rights in and rights to. Porter explains that *rights in* positions “different social subjects on a horizon of differentiated claims to space and place”, while *rights to* “articulate the modes of social expression that become possible in any given planning system” (p.389), which are discernibly unevenly distributed amongst inhabitants. Continuing, Porter states: “It is clear that rights as currently practised in planning spring from a field of recognition that already defines their limits” (p.393). Limits held to moments of government stability to provide for efficient processes of capitalism. Historically and currently, democratic process and structural legal customs and process have primarily functioned as a means to strengthen capital’s position in society (against royalty/state or labouring classes) and produce a common good which is commensurate with capital’s goals and objectives. For Porter, it is these clearly defined limits upon rights which must constantly be critiqued and challenged as they are a prime barrier to the social reproduction of violent inequalities, oppressions, and narrowing conceptions of citizenship many confront today.

One such producer of narrowing conceptions is property rights. Using MacPherson’s notion of the ownership model (found in Porter 2014), land is reduced to either privately owned or publicly owned, a division with substantial consequences for displacement and those who are neither property owner nor the state, as ownership places claims by community for a common or social good as subordinate to those of either private ownership or the state. A paternalistic urban reality. Dualistic notions of property also categorize inhabitants who are not private property owners as

either a tenant, of the state or private citizen, or a trespasser/squatter upon state (such as an encampment with a city park) and private property. This hierarchization of property rights above the common or community further tilts conceptions of citizenship dialectically towards the legal understanding of property and procedural rights as discussed by Porter. Further, this binary of ownership increases the power and the ability for the state to displace and dispossess inhabitants for 'common good' projects such as urban renewal or major infrastructure, but conversely, become extremely reluctant to dispossess private property and procedural rights for a 'social good', such as expropriation of enclosed and unused land for social housing.

The ability of property owners, and their *right to* act on impulse through entitlements and rights redistributes the conception of citizenship to those who own, or have the financial means to stay in place, while diminishing rights to those who rent, or as Rosenthal and Vilchis (2024) argue, pay tribute. In Ontario, provincial policy concerning tenant rights and landlord entitlements become the "invisible hand" (p.35) which shapes affordability and by result, one's citizenship, through a process of uploading state power and resources while downloading responsibility to the municipality. Planning potentially confronts these socio-political effects of privatization, but political and legal process has humbled the role of planning to objective knowledge within due process. For Rosenthal and Vilchis the unaffordability of rent is a direct reflection of power inequalities between the state, landlord, and tenants.

Leffers (2015), speaking to increased residential densification in Ottawa, argued that growth, or models of intensification, become a discourse and a means for knowledge production which excludes, or limits, the ability for alternative practices and knowledge. A means which reproduces technocratic best practices and is easily influenced through inequitable political power distributions, privileged access, and impulsive state actors. Taking an anarchist approach to urbanism, Juraev and Ahn (2025) argue urban planning is "often judged by what it builds—housing, transit, economic growth. But it may be more revealing to assess what it suppresses: dissent, rupture, and the possibility of living otherwise" (p.5). A professional approach to planning discounts, limits, or ignores means of collective knowledge, such as lived experience and collective need. Merrifield (2015) calls these "collective enunciations" (p.760), or an amateur, bottom up, collaborative approach to social issues, such as planning. Professional discourse is maintained and moulded through the local and regional political customs and practices, a process which aims to minimize the conflictual nature of democracy, control a monopoly of knowledge, and to maintain the culture of growth (Leffers 2015), which Mitchell (2026) warns, as noted above, is an alibi for capitalist extraction and extremely limiting for future generations.

Planning in Toronto is latently political and embedded within a procedural exercise which maintains public intervention to a legally defined minimum. This prevalence of constitutional points of public intervention in the planning process is championed for merits of efficiency, growth, and the 'common good'. But most consequential, as property ownership remains the dominate factor defining planning in Toronto, the rights and futures of non-owning populations are made precarious and open to economic cycles and political whims. When community organizations and housing justice advocates argue for housing rights, they are confronted municipally by a systemic institutionalized notion of property and procedural rights, responses of apology for a lack of fiscal

resources, and the promotion of affordability established and authorized through one's ability to consume. A former City of Toronto housing executive expounded in interview, Toronto's "city hall, unfortunately, is a mystery to people [which it] shouldn't be, and the processes that city hall uses are mystifying" (interview participant 04272026-06). Shepard (2024), speaking to housing in the United States, but easily applicable to Ontario or Toronto, argues, "[h]ousing policy has become a clunky thicket of tax incentives, zoning codes, and financing tools, almost impossible for non-experts to navigate. That complexity makes organizing and activism both more difficult and more necessary" (n/p).

Specifically in Ontario, all matters of land-use planning, master plans (official/secondary/area), and zoning by-laws must speak to matters of provincial interest as laid out in the Provincial Policy Statement (2024) and navigate an ever transitioning and changing labyrinth of state policy, bills, and directives subjectivity laundered as objective, evolving and 'rationally' confronting 'crisis'. Toronto's urban landscape, as we have come to know it, is an imbrication of parcelled single best and highest uses, an atomized urban figure which reflects private interest(s) and the needs of mobility for capital (Harvey 1975). Planning, as a legal process, reduces democratic intervention and reproduces inhabitants' rights upon access to procedure, such as appeals to Ontario's Land-use Tribunal, or ability to attend a council meeting and make an oral deputation. Conventions and common practices of lived experience (Fawaz 2023) are rejected in favour of predictability, ownership, and financial interest. The urban becomes home to a myriad of projects of growth, renewal, gentrification, reterritorialization, and cycles of potential ground rent.

Recent reurbanization projects at major social housing communities within Toronto's core provide example. Where redevelopment, a process which systematically dispossessed and dispersed existing residents, proceeded with little consideration to alternative methods or plans, such as refurbishment of existing buildings, a rational decision which conscientiously transferred the public commons into private control and into private wealth (Lehrer, Keil, and Kipfer 2010, Careless 2024). Regent Park and Lawrence Heights reurbanization projects are sold to the public and political actors, needed to support these projects, as the only viable means at revitalizing these communities left to depreciate on their own. Growth and revitalization can proceed but systematically needs to account for existing communities and their needs, not just those of abstract non-existent inhabitants.

Careless (2024) in a passage comparing Toronto's near completed Regent Park reurbanization to Lawrence Height's upcoming revitalization succinctly summarizes the process:

> Urban revitalization sees the government joining forces with capital to alter Regent Park under the idea that public housing tenants living in a newly marketized environment will adopt the ethics of self-reliance and the middle-class sensibilities of those living in the new adjacent housing. *This strategy is put forward in lieu of alternatives that might avoid destroying and rebuilding the existing community while also addressing the systemic problems that afflict it* (p.8, my emphasis).

Importantly, echoing Kipfer and Petrunia (2009) and Wolfe's (2006) work on the damages of colonial projects on existing and Indigenous relationships with land, Careless equates

revitalization projects to a process of recolonization that is an ongoing and "enduring structure" (Careless 2024, p. 9) of racial and economic hierarchy which synchronously reterritorializes and privatizes the public commons. Processes of reurbanization and reterritorialization enact what Holston (1995) called the decontextualization of an ethnographic reality for a detached utopian vision, in the sense that this vision, a pedagogical urban environment which teaches and promotes middle-class lifestyles, does not exist anywhere in a concrete reality. Schmid (2012), speaking to Lefebvre's thoughts on reurbanization as a process and production of an urban crisis, argues that projects of urban renewal, or reurbanization, amount to attempts at the "homogenization of lifestyles and an engineering and colonization of daily life" (p.43). Benjamin's arcade of conspicuousness is extended to the city as a whole, as branded lifestyles trump basic need and care.

Fawaz, Krijnen, and El Samad (2018) argue that "politically and socially produced forces", such as provincial policy limiting rent control and vacancy de-control, as well as a lingering social disposition towards ownership over renting, greatly affects processes of gentrification and private market development. Urbanization through private development reinforces notions of private ownership and the ability for single property owners to substantially alter the character of a neighbourhood. Residents then frame their housing situation through these frames of property ownership and subsume to notions of fatalism or inevitability; that there is nothing to be done as I only rent and hold no claim. Planning reinforces this as City councils and planners approve zoning amendments and reterritorialize land for future growth (or common in the Toronto example, the rezoning of land into 'mixed-use' which allows for higher density and height limits than residential). Conceptions of the right to the city are co-opted to ideals of property rights and 'land' ownership, not established neighbourhood connection and long-term residency. A collective common, or collective memory understanding of land and community is repressed under state sanctioned legal understandings and strict regulations, a fact which undermines tenant rights and fosters conditions of displacement through processes of development and gentrification. (See Smith 1979).

With Smith's (1979) ideas on rent gap in mind, the role that provincial planning of the new Metrolinx Ontario Line subway through central Toronto has had on creating an inflated *potential ground rent*, combined with provincial policy and mandated zoning which streamlines municipal zoning within Protected Major Transit Station Areas (unchallengeable predetermined densities and heights within either 200m or 500m of a designated Major Transit Station). This results in the land at 214-230 Sherbourne remaining vacant and enclosed from the community as a large national financial corporation waits out market cycles for the realization of projected ground rent returns. This inflated potential ground rent evaluation also reduces the municipalities potential acquirement of the land for much needed deeply affordable social housing and community services. Specifically, as Toronto council and staff members remain staunch to the ideology of budgetary limitations, prioritization of private property rights, and uncreative process which dissipates the city's focus, vision, strategy, and priority of the lands in future plans.

As mentioned in Fawaz, Krijnen, and El Samad (2018), from a municipal perspective, private property owners can view their parcels as a singular slice of the whole, whereas master planned areas, or public housing and services in this instance, must be approached as a city wide whole.

For example, in recent talks with high ranking members of Toronto's planning staff, members of 230 Fightback discussed the importance of 214-230 Sherbourne St to the community and what the loss of that land to private condominium development would symbolize for Toronto, planning staff reminded them that the City must look at the neighbourhood (ward or city) as a whole and not specific sites and intersections. This approach to planning by the city, discounts a 'collective commons' approach to ownership as well as a right to remain for tenants and other non-owning inhabitants while prioritizing a delineated understanding of property rights. An approach and understanding of planning which systematically reproduces property rights while undermining collective memory, collective commons, and lived experience.

This erasure of collective memory amounts to an economic induced disconnect from one's community, and a state sanctioned deterioration of citizenship: democratic process is boiled down to scheduled October elections, check-box community consultations, and one's ability to access decision makers: an access determined by capital and one's ability to pay to play. Point in case, a recent business lobby's annual lunch where the guest speaker was Toronto's current mayor who was outlining her vision of Toronto's future for investment, infrastructure, and economic growth. To attend one had to pay upwards of $400cdn a plate: well beyond the pocket of the working-class, poor, and precarious.

Planning must escape status quo processes which streamline urbanization, development, and spatial practices along lines of capital efficacy, and must "look for emergent citizenship" (Holston 1995), or contextualized historicist experiences, that can collaboratively contribute to the creation of knowledge used to guide planning and development; an invitation and platform for the creation of collective enunciations, and opportunity at universal citizenship and exercise of *rights*.

Heather Dorries (2022) asks the simple yet provocative question, "what is planning without property?" What this gedankenexperiment illuminates is planning's fundamental rootedness in property and the consequential effects of property in reproducing racism, socio-political inequalities, and ongoing acts of violence to protect and preserve property rights. Dorries asks one to imagine planning without property, a process that would "support practices of being and belonging rather than practices of exclusion and domination" (p.315). Planning without property places emphasis on the commons, or land shared in a manner of collective interest, such as access to core housing needs.

James Holston (1995) argued that modernist planning and urbanism "attempts to be a plan without contradiction, without conflict. It assumes a rational domination of the future in which its total and totalising plan dissolves any conflict between the imagined and the existing society in the imposed coherence of its order" (p.42). Planning and (re)development's utopian abstractions detach from the situated realities, social conditions, and structural inequalities experienced by existing inhabitants, a process long understood within Toronto's downtown east. Experienced during the development and expansion of St. James Town's high-rise towers in the late 1950s and 1960s and subsequent community resistance, and during the ongoing effects and consequences experienced by Toronto's poor and homeless through speculative condominium development along the Dundas Corridor, Moss Park, and areas within Toronto's Garden District. Projects of (re)development and reurbanization challenge the rights and citizenship of non-property-owning inhabitants as their

claims are seconded to property rights, while official channels for claims of citizenship have been greatly reduced through provincial legislation. Projects of abstracting space directly challenge non-owning tenants' future through the eraser of their present. But as projects of spatial abstraction produce contradictions which exacerbate existing social conditions and inherent inequalities, abstraction also gives rise to moments and processes of insurgent citizenship.

Paramount to community focused planning is Friedmann's (1987) notion that the planner is a link between knowledge and action, as theory can only become transformative through direct action. Friedmann argues that radical planning (direct planning, or a dealienated planning) is a direct challenge to the state and capital, as "radical practice ... will make people less dependent on global capital, increase their social power, and expose them to the lessons of political practice" (p. 409-410). Radical planning is congruent with community activism, as it foundationally resides within direct community involvement, as long as state planners are willing to participate and listen. Caneda and Silva Andrade (2025), in a wonderful recent work on insurgent urbanism and collective knowledge creation, state, "Radical and insurgent planning discourse understands that everyday forms of resistance performed by marginalised communities produce other forms of spatialities and social-spatial dynamics that have the potential to contest and confront hegemonic power relations" (p.124).

What this section has set out to demonstrate is the role that planning plays in the suppression of collective citizenship through planning's complicit consent to property rights. This total observance towards a binary conception of public and private property is exacerbated through the socio-political alignment with neo-liberal ideology. An alignment which replaces state social responsibility with fiscal responsibility, a transition which results in the downloading of social responsibilities onto municipalities, but also the uploading and concentration of resources in higher levels of government (Beveridge, Keil, and Lashkari 2025). The neo-liberal destruction and abandonment of public social services, such as social housing programs, has proliferated in Ontario under a number of pieces of legislation introduced over the past 30 years, but has seen a marked acceleration under the current premier Doug Ford and his Conservative Party, as Ford continues to introduce legislation that favours conditions of development, landlords, and elitism, at the detriment of renters. Moving forward planners must resist complacent observance of processes of capital and look for moments and locations of emergent citizenship while framing policy and legislation through the lens of community-need(s).

Urban Social Movements

With current housing policies and practices of housing provision within Ontario framed through the lens of crisis, collaboratively written legislation by the state for the benefit of private equity promotes growth regimes (the collaboration between capital and the state in shaping policy and reforms to influence capital beneficial growth) as rational and legitimate solutions. Not only does a capital driven vision of urban spatial construction provide short-sighted supply side solutions, but it also regularizes an efficiency which alienates democratic process and produces a state's "capacity to ignore" (Lambelet 2019), that is, the current housing solutions for an affordability crisis produces conditions of democratic apathy, social injustice, and a lack of political will to provide alternative

methods and outcomes. Integral to overcoming these contingent effects of financialized housing is to mount social protest in collective claims to citizenship and force the halls of power to act in the interest of the working-class, precarious, and poor.

A community social movement is a socially constructed collective imagination of an alternative future, or contestation of a perceived socio-political injustice within a localized boundary. Hall (1995), with a softer definition considers a social movement "a collection of people who organize to change their environment, improve conditions, or resist change in their environment and who act collectively to achieve organizational goals" (p.2). For Hall, the reason individuals participate in social movements is due to their alienation from traditional streams of politics, or in attempts "at least, to influence the primary actors" (p.7). Tilly and Wood (2018) contend that social movements are acts of contentious politics: contentious due to the nature of a collective claim conflicting and contesting alternative claims, and political as the state is always involved in some aspect of these claims to alternative futures. Tilly and Wood explain that over the last several centuries in which western social movements have developed, they have "emerged from an innovative, consequential syntheses of three elements": campaign, repertoire, and WUNC displays (p.6). The campaign is a temporal element which distinguishes itself from a singular event, such as a statement or petition. For the authors a campaign always "links at least three parties: a group of self-designated claimants, some object(s) of claims, and a public of some kind" (ibid). The state, formal religion, property owners and others whose actions directly oppress and constrain the welfare of a people or community are all potential targets of claims made by a social movement. Repertoire implies locally understood performances, associations, and acts of demonstration and contestation, such as protest marches or leafleting a contentious event, which support and propel claims of justice, rights, or citizenship. WUNC displays are acts and representations of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment. In a sense, elements which distinguish and unify a social movement from a singular moment or event. Castañeda (2018) reminds us that this definition of a social movement, campaign, repertoire, and WUNC displays, are "better suited for historical examples … because we can only know the duration of sustained campaigns after the fact" (p.169) and cannot predict which and what claims for alternative futures will take hold or ignite popular indignation.

But Castañeda (2018), working with Tilly's previous writings, considers the role of the state as to create cultural and educational institutions to produce a common cohesive identity while providing services for purposes of collective consumption and protection for citizens within the state in "exchange for levies and allegiance to the state" (p.169). Holsten (1995), speaking to the American Constitution, argued that the constitution's bifurcated role was "one of state-building and one of citizenship-building" (p.443), a methodical procedure to produce citizens in the form which complements a liberal democracy. That said, then for Tilly and Castañeda, rights are not the result of enlightenment, benevolent rule, or a rational understanding of human need, but "the result of contentious politics where excluded groups make their collective voices heard publicly while demanding inclusion and successfully challenge the authorities, forcing them to concede" (ibid). Through this statment one understands rights as the product of previous contention(s) but also gains an understanding **that individual and collective rights need to be consistently renewed and socially reproduced through acts of contentious politics**. In Ontario, as state policy and legislation pushes analysis and solutions for a politically motivated narrative of crisis which

contingently produces a narrowed understanding of rights based upon property ownership (right to build, right to sell, right to leave land abandoned, etc.), new and established social justice groups must work in solidarity, or what Laclau and Mouffe (2001, found in Purcell 2009) have called chains of equivalence, that is a bond through common forms of oppression, to press the state for concession and observance towards claims on social injustice, such as the universal need for housing, and recognition of tenant and unhoused rights.

Piven and Cloward (1979), argue that the protest movement "entails a transformation both of consciousness and of behavior" (p.3). According to Piven and Cloward the change in consciousness has three aspects: 1) the system loses legitimacy through a perception or belief in a societal wrong or injustice, 2) a transition from acceptance and fatalism to assertions of citizenship and, 3) a belief one can alter history, or one has "some capacity to alter their lot" (p.4). The authors argue that behaviour also exhibits two "distinguishing elements" (ibid): 1) that individuals and masses who ordinarily could be considered obedient become defiant and volatile, and 2) this "defiance is acted out collectively, as members of a group, and not as isolated individuals" (ibid). Piven and Cloward stress the importance of 'collective defiance' while cautioning the fallacy that protest movements need structured leadership, as this association of protest movements with organization "divert[s] attention from many forms of political unrest and to consign them by definition to the more shadowy realms of social problems and deviant behavior" (p.5). Many direct-action groups in Toronto, such as 230 Fightback or the Parkdale Housing Justice Network, carry no defined form of leadership and rely on voluntary participation and the internal democratic process of debate and discussion to identify, determine, and participation in moments of collective defiance. Whereas most tenant unions follow structure similar to labour unions with an identifiable hierarchical organization. Both are effective means at making claims of contentious politics and reducing real experiences of suffering, but neither are more legitimate than the other as both strive for similar results: a redress to resource inequality and a more equitable means to collective consumption (such as housing, education, well-being and care networks). To Piven and Cloward's point though, the state and capital's acceptance of the tenant association (or union) is an act of minimal difference (see Kipfer 2002), as the tenant union stays within the bounds and parameters of the tenant-landlord relationship, an avenue to reduce the inherit power imbalances within tenant-landlord binary, but remain within the scaffold of legal procedure and state definitions of citizenship. Whereas, potentially, a de-structured democratic grassroots direct-action organization protesting and organizing outside the bounds of the state and cultural norms of politics, legality, and citizenship can produce the necessary transformation of minimal difference into an act of maximal difference. Or to use Kipfer's (2002) elucidation, to move from a component of hegemony (minimal) to an element of counter-hegemony (maximal), a potential post-capitalist revolutionary force and claim to the use-value of space (p.144).

Barnesmoore (2018), discussing the legitimacy of protest produced within the liberal-democratic worldview as a safety valve to release social pressure, reminds us that dissent sanctioned by the state can achieve "outcomes that lessen the suffering of marginalized communities, but sanctioned dissent cannot by its nature lead to the destabilization of Worldview and the order of things established therein upon which a true revolution is dependent" (p.193). This is an echo of

Lorde's (1983) succinctly put, *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house* (p.99, italics in original). Lefebvre (2009/1966) critiquing reformism and its consideration as a revolutionary ideology for "radical transformation of social relations", argues that political advocacy or sanctioned political process within the established limits of liberal democracy, such as union labour movements in industrialized nations, has "only obtained measures that are compatible with capitalist relations of production and, likewise, with bourgeois ownership and management of the means of production" (p.140). In an excellent article on Neil Smith's notion of rent gap, Two Toronto Members (2003) discuss the dialectic of advocacy and direct action as important approaches for anarchists to confront and disrupt gentrification, or political and environmental alienation. Again, the method of advocacy remains with the limits of the state, while methods of direct action transcend these state parameters and gain their legitimacy through popular participation and support. Pairing nicely with the anarchist dialectic of advocacy and direct action is Wright's (2016) two logics for advancing anti-capitalist resistance, eroding capitalism or taming capitalism. Wright, similar to Barnesmoore, argues that actions of taming capitalism, such as advocacy and incremental co-option of liberal democratic systems through sanctioned elections (social democratic), is a strategy of "neutralizing the worst harms of capitalism" (Wright 2016, p.7), but do not result in the toppling of capitalism. Whereas eroding the state is an act of implementing emancipatory and democratic practices within the cracks (lacuna) or outside of the capitalist system with the vision that these "alternatives have the potential, in the long run, of expanding to the point where capitalism is displaced" (p.15) from its position of dominance. Wright argues that a combination of both anarchist direct action and social democratic advocacy is needed to systematically implant counter-hegemonic practices and visions of alternative futures. In line with Friedmann (1987), Miraftab (2009), and Holsten (1995), Wirght finishes his discussion with the perception that utopias are detached from reality and profess nothing experienced on earth, and argues that the "no-where of utopia" should be transformed into the real utopia, or the "now-here of creating emancipatory alternatives of the world as it could be in the world as it is" (p.18). For Wright, and an important point for social democratic planners, "Real utopias can be found *wherever emancipatory ideals are embodied in existing institutions* and proposals for new institutional designs" (ibid, my emphasis).

Importantly to the case study, and my personal process of thinking through the role of a social movement is Castells (1983) use of the notion of urban social movements: "the collective actions consciously aimed at fundamentally modifying the city's role in society, or redefining the historical meaning of 'urban'" (p.71). For Castells, the urban is location to a concentration of collective consumption, or the collective needs for social reproduction, such as housing, education, care and wellness. As capital looks for locations and places to expand (such as the further privatization of healthcare or the monopolization and financialization of housing), needs and social services, once the responsibility of the state, through privatization become the moment and topic of contention between community (human) need and capital profit. Castells provides many pertinent examples of collective defiance and movements of contentious politics: such as Paris prior to the 1871 commune, Glasgow in 1915, and Veracruz, Mexico 1922, all with similar precursors of deteriorating conditions of collective consumption, large inequalities of power and distribution of resources, alienation from the political and urban process, and fears of gentrification.

These contributing factors of social injustices leading to collective claims to citizenship and rights have been well written about, especially Melissa García-Lamarca's work (García-Lamarca and Kaika 2016, García-Lamarca 2017a, and García-Lamarca 2017b) on mortgage effected peoples in Barcelona, Spain and the resulting collative actions preventing evictions, or negotiating mortgage restructuring to allow residents to stay in their homes. Or Perrin (2023) and their discussion on Save Montreal, an activist group founded to fight for community housing and greater public participation in municipal planning but often mislabelled as founders of Montreal's heritage preservation movement. Save Montreal was "equally, if not predominantly, concerned with issues facing Montreal's residents" (p.123), not just the preservation of a historical urban form. Reflecting upon Save Montreal's legacy, Perrin states "this movement initially reflected a desire to democratize civic planning and alter land ownership models to better protect both residents and the structures that housed them" (p.137). By citing and linking Save Montreal as a heritage preservation movement, the City of Montreal was able to neutralize Save Montreal's capitalist eroding elements and position the organization within the parameters of the state, and, importantly for the municipality, co-opt their push for housing's use-value into one based upon urban aesthetic within the bounds and rights of property and exchange-value. And Palmer and Héroux's (2016) discussion on Toronto's Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) and their method of direct-action case work, where OCAP would transfer methods of direct action reducing the harms of neo-liberal capitalism on an individual level, such as improving shelter conditions, helping attain a welfare payment, or securing housing assistance, into large displays of support for protests, marches, and acts of direct-action producing opportunities for claims on citizenship for Toronto's poor.

Similar to capitalism's mode of production producing the social relations needed for surplus creation that contradictorily produces the very socialism which could potentially lead to its demise through revolution, the urban has long provided location to these contradictorily social connections and relations through the assembly of capital's labour force. The social and class division principle to the capitalist mode of social reproduction has been exacerbated through the neoliberal project and state bend to aid the financialization (and abstraction) of one's daily life. It is ever more apparent today that only a collective enunciation of citizenship and democratic right through a mass social movement will challenge centuries of exploitative ontological oppression.

Social Space and Collective Memory

Cedric J. Robinson (2020/1983), discussing the early foundations of European bourgeoise society, capitalism, and the societal transition from parochialism to absolute statism affirms: "European society is not the product of capitalism. On the contrary, the character of capitalism can only be understood in the social and historical context of its appearance" (p.24). What Robinson is arguing is that the administrative fabrication of European nation states moulded and formed capitalism into a process of localized competition amongst the burgeoning bourgeoise class in service of the state's regional ambitions. An insight which asks one not to place processes of capital as inaugural to the ontological and pedagogical property of the urban but place the urban as inaugural to capital's ontological and pedagogical property: growth, extraction, domination and exploitation

within a limited socially constructed geographical boundary. The urban was co-opted by processes of capital to aid in the reproduction of the capitalist society and its pursuit of profit.

Co-option has resulted in urban spatial production, and all the contingent processes involved, aiding the mechanisms of capitalist production; or what could be called an abstraction of space. Wilson (2013), engaging with Lefebvre, argues that abstract space is "an alienated space to the extent that it deprives human beings of the ability to dwell" (p.374), or that abstraction displaces the individual's relationship with space. Abstraction confronts and disrupts collective actions of spatial production, erases (or displaces) collective memory, and disables collective enunciations (Merrifield 2015). Abstraction, and its contingent actions of privatization and securitization, disposes the ethnographic realities (Holston 1995) and detaches the social, human focused properties of spatial production for places of homogeneity and defined use. Schmid (2022), also engaging Lefebvre, states, "[s]ince representations of space [abstraction] are permeated with knowledge, they can become strategic instruments for the reduction of spatial practice and the imposition of an order on it" (p. 279). Abstraction provides for a spatial phoenix in the image of capital's best interest (either as a location of profit or infrastructure aiding in capital flows), and is utilized ontologically and pedagogically by the state to redefine use and user within those confines (think Toronto's post amalgamation (1998) post-industrial redevelopment of inner industrial land(s) into residential condominium communities, such as at King and Spadina, Liberty Village, City Place/Canoe Landing, west Don Lands, etc. etc.)

Abstraction, both physically and socially, individualizes and spatially distances users, a fact Kipfer (2020) discusses in his pamphlet *The Naked City.* Kipfer asks: how does Covid-19 precautions differentiate from Toronto's long-established practices of social-distancing which reproduce violent segregations of race, gender, and cultural practices? Space's historical and social context are vital for its use and users' ability to dwell (one's relationship with land), while abstraction and projects of reurbanization seek to erase the past and produce detached utopias (Holston 1995). Lehrer (1998) argues that "urban design can create physical and psychological barriers around public space" when material and spatial renovation and renewal transform public space to places of "control, regulation and exclusion to certain groups of people" (p.203). Inspired by Lefebvre, Lehrer explains that public space is not a fixed entity with a transcendent and reproducible composition but is constantly in flux and in need of social renewal or challenge. Space, especially public space, carries various ways of conceiving it, and other than a physical concrete conception, for Lehrer, social space and symbolic space are transformative and restorative, as social space has the "potential to transform and redefine ownership and can give new meanings to urban space", while symbolic space is a space of "remembrance and imagination" (p.205). This notion of space places it squarely on the dialectic of, in Holston's terms of contextual or decontextualized, or in Lefebvrian terms of exchange value or social value, abstract or lived. It is exactly these social and symbolic connections to space (and land) which abstraction and projects of redevelopment look to erase. Where a centrally located green space, long historically rife as an important location for social contentions, is rebranded and revitalized as a marque selling feature for future condominium developments (see Palmer 2025 and his discussion on Toronto's Allan Gardens).

Projects of reurbanization, recolonization (Lehrer, Keil, and Kipfer 2010), or growth disrupts and erases social and symbolic space through processes of abstraction, displacement, and detachment. The urban, therefore, is very much ontological and pedagogical and socially constructs human behaviour and the relationships that build and maintain local custom and practice. Tubridy (2023) discusses how the dispersal of public housing tenants within Dublin has produced a political decomposition and loss of memory and knowledge of struggle (p. 1030). By political decomposition, Tubridy refers to the idea of the erosion of collective identity by concerted class action. Tubridy's militant research project looks to collectively organize Dublin's class conscience and memory of successful political action, or the production of a history from below which celebrates past successful collective actions for fodder and foundation towards future actions.

Recently in Toronto the collective knowledge and understanding that rent strikes are an effective tool has gained traction, with several tenant unions and buildings across the city successfully winning rent protections, building repairs, and stronger tenant representation (Yao 2025). In addition, in an attempt to preserve not only affordability but also community character, a growing awareness and utilization of land trusts, a form of housing commons that removes land, and buildings upon that land, from the private property market, has prospered in Toronto, with the municipal funded program Multi-Unit Residential Acquisition (MURA) ten-folding its budget within 4 years of operating (Kasonga 2026). MURA is a program which attempts to produce real utopias through the recognition and emancipation of active community participation in its own future but squarely renews the municipality's (state) role as financier towards housing production, a method which further downloads responsibility towards non-state corporations and community benevolence. An active member of 230 Fightback argued in conversation, that placing social housing into non-state care, is a process that "takes the responsibility out of the hands of the state, downloading out of the hands of the state, and ends up completely, demobilizing social agencies as any agents of progressive change" (interview participant 032526-02), as state financial subsidies begin to take precedent over individual housing needs. The provision of social housing in Toronto has become standardized, while individuals in need of subsidized housing are categorized as housed, in-need of housing, or hard to house.

Tubridy's conception of a working-class memory returns us to Lefebvre's use (in Wilson 2013) of Heidegger's conception of dwell, or one's relationship with space, and the fact that colonial practices of private property disrupt and displace individual and collective relationships with land, space, and networks of collective care. That one's relationship with space, and their active ability to participate in its use is foundational in perpetuating social and symbolic space(s) that promote inclusive relationships, connections, and permanency. But the erasure of social space through abstraction and processes of growth, development, and gentrification is foundationally an act of alienation for the working-class and poor, as the commodification of space replaces bottom-up spatial practices with top-down securitized customs. The importance of public space and social claims within space is succinctly described by Springer (2010): "Democratic struggle grounded in public space offers a chance not only for those most oppressed by neoliberalism to demand social justice, but for the integral totality of human society to seek a new way forward through agonistic politics" (p. 528).

Social space and collective memory are important components of a community's connection with space. But a community's connection is disrupted through the abstraction of space for economic purposes, and the transformation of space's use value to exchange value, from economic cycles of potential ground rent (gentrification and speculation), the revalorization of central lands for the return of middle-class residents (projects of reurbanization), or a reterritorialization of land through up-zoning. This process of decontextualizing and abstracting space of existing human experience for an alternative future human experience (utopian?) is justified through political narratives of crisis and the need to remedy this crisis through growth, development, and projects of creative destruction (Harvey 2006) in lieu of alternatives which would potentially minimize displacement, and foster the contribution to existing space, not its total erasure. Abstraction of space, in this sense, is a reduction of the rights and citizenship of non-property-owning residents and produces the requirement, and need of, consistent community pressure and claims of citizenship through practices and acts of contentious politics and urban social movements targeting the state, capital, and private property.

Chapter 2 – Methodology

Situated histories and lived experiences have given rise to a growing concern about the conditions, attainment, and affordability of housing within Toronto. Continually, as all levels of Canadian government continue to align state ideology and planning processes commensurate to private capital's best interests, community participation and claims of citizenship are being minimized or flatly ignored. Fundamental to Lefebvre's call for the right to the city is the right to the political process, or put another way, the dealienation of inhabitants from the planning process (Dikeç 2001). Much literature (Purcell 2009, Springer 2010, Castells 1983) speaks to the role that democratic counter-hegemonic community activism has in the role of challenging dominate political and planning processes, which continue to play an oversized role in creating current ontological urban conditions and spatial realities.

Predominantly based in my cynical skepticism that municipal and provincial governments fundamentally cannot betray capitalism and the neo-liberal project, the state must, therefore, be actively pressured and disrupted to obtain social change in order to provide for the needs of the community which lay outside state and capitalist planning and politics. It is plainly evident that only through a concerted collective claim of citizenship by marginalized individuals and communities a political will be produced to address systemic socio-political urban inequalities.

The research for this paper is guided by two questions:

1) What role can community activism play in the planning and provision of social housing in the City of Toronto's downtown east?
2) Can direct community action impulse municipal or provincial action to provide deeply affordable housing at 214-230 Sherbourne Street, in Toronto's downtown east?

I have attempted to answer these questions through the theoretical and empirical documentation and chronicling of past, current, and ongoing actions taken by 230 Fightback in their struggle for the municipal acquisition of 214-230 Sherbourne Street for community purpose and deeply affordable housing. An attempt by community and anti-poverty activists to tame the state and reify a miscellany of collective memories. Salient to this research is the *Expropriate 214-230 Sherbourne!* community driven development proposal from 2019, co-authored by the anti-poverty militant group Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) and the architectural collective Open Architecture Toronto (OACTo). This proposal combines community knowledge with professional insight, a process which, Caneda and Silva Andrade (2024, p.138) in line with Friedmann's ideas on radical planning, argue "highlights the role of scientific knowledge [...] to expand the social learning processes that arise from action-based experiences to produce effective transformation knowledge beyond local contexts".

Research for this paper was obtained through a qualitative mixed method of active participation and semi-structured interviews. I've kept in mind Roberts (2020) discussion on the importance of focusing on the co-creation of knowledge through the subjective reality of the participant (p. 3187). An important aspect of qualitative research is the continual reinterpretation of the research, and a

consistent reflection of my understanding and conception of the research. What started as a curious inquiry into a grassroot fight for social housing quickly took shape as a community's struggle to claim citizenship within a procedurally legislated planning process founded upon colonization and exclusionary property rights. Potentially flipping the research from what is the state's responsibility towards providing for the well-being of its inhabitants to what is the role of community and grassroots organizations in producing claims of citizenship for the marginalized and under-represented that pressure political actors to work in those group's best-interest. Understandably we all live within a subjective ontological reality, but social complicity produces political rationality which accompanies capitalist crisis and state violence, or reproduction of the status-quo. A daily experience which aids in the further alienation of the working-class and poor from democratic participation in the process of urbanization and urbanism, ultimately what 230 Fightback's contentious political action is rooted and aimed against: the marginalization and abolishment of the poor's citizenship and right to basic human need. My research and analysis has evolved to include or contend to this understanding of citizenship, planning, and direct action.

The research comprised of semi-structured interviews conducted over several months, in conjunction with nearly two years of active participation with the grassroots community organization 230 Fightback, as well as participation in 230 Fightback's attempt to produce a Toronto wide solidarity of housing justice, anti-poverty, and tenant unions through the collaborative body the People's Assembly for Housing Justice.

Participants for interviews were identified and solicited through three criteria: 1) their continuous active participation with 230 Fightback; 2) their direct participation in the development and writing of the *Expropriate 214-230 Sherbourne!* community directed development plan; and 3) was or currently a member of the City of Toronto's planning staff or city council. To date I have conducted and completed 3 interviews with the first group, one of three was through written correspondence due to travel; I had solicited 3 listed authors of the community plan, and have interviewed 2 as I received no reply from the third; and lastly, I have conducted 3 interviews within the third group, but in addition reached out to the City of Toronto's current Director of the Housing Secretariat with no reply. I was able to speak with a former councillor, the current ward 13 councillor, and a former executive city planning staff member. In total I have conducted and completed 8 interviews to develop a qualitative narrative conveyed through the voices of the participants.

The interview questions sought to explore the varied understanding of whose responsibility the provision of housing rested with generally, but specifically what role could, or did, community activism play in producing a political will for social housing at the vacant 214-230 Sherbourne Street site. It is recognized that these questions were developed and delivered with a pre-established position towards the research topic and thus, could be interpreted one-sided as there are apparent gaps in representation from certain research participants, such as area homeowners, developers, and business associations, who might have provided a disparate view on the research topic. But, due to time restrictions, this paper looked to focus on the continuous and evolving narrative related to the community struggle for the municipal attainment of the land at 214-230 Sherbourne St. My research and final paper are foundationally positioned critical to current planning best practices and financialized methods towards housing provision in Toronto, a practice

which produces great consequences for understanding and conceptions towards citizenship and state responsibilities.

In combination with the interview process I have continuously been active with the direct-action group 230 Fightback as they have engaged with state and non-state institutions. Without ideologically framing themselves, discernibly 230 Fightback approaches engagements through an anarchist dialectic of direct action and advocacy (Two Toronto Members 2003), or in E.O. Wright's (2016) anti-capitalist terms, transcending structures, which challenge the states legitimacy, and neutralizing harms, or attempts to re-center state responsibility. Both methods are important contributions for producing claims of citizenship and disrupting normalized practices which concentrate and limit democratic participation to property ownership and capital elite. The on-going direct actions by 230 Fightback seek to replace capitalist processes of spatial abstraction, with contextual recognitions of use-value and community need. Importantly, individual members and 230 Fightback as an organization, is committed to maintaining 214-230 Sherbourne's social and symbolic spatial connection through a combination of postering campaigns which link the land to social struggles, hardships, and victories for the community's poor and homeless; the regular publishing of material related to Toronto's downtown east and the need for the social investment into the area, along with a historical knowledge of the area; and finally, the continual acts of advocacy and direct action with the state and non-state actors directly obstructing their goal of social housing at 214-230 Sherbourne St. My participation with 230 Fightback has developed my understanding of urban social movements, community organization, campaigns of direct action, processes of solidarity building, and a greater understanding of the political and planning process within Toronto and the downtown east.



Figure 3: Members 230 Fightback, including the author, and T.T.U. have an impromptu conversation with Ward 13 councillor Chris Moise outside a Toronto Regional Board of Trade lunch event, in May 2026, where Toronto Mayor Oliva Chow was the keynote speaker. Photo Colin Perkel.

My personal involvement and membership with 230 Fightback came from a chance introduction through a field trip with an urban development planning class in my graduate studies at York University. This personal anecdote explains the need for planners to immerse themselves in (or at least visit) the communities that their planning work is impacting. Desk planning is an abstraction which removes the ethnographic realities for clean white pages. The research for this paper in conjunction with my active participation with 230 Fightback has made clear Friedmann's notion of the planner being a link between knowledge and action, a link which must embed emancipatory ideals at any chance possible.

Analysis of interview responses have established two key themes from members of 230 Fightback: first, that housing is the responsibility of the state, and that it is apparent it has fallen upon the need for community activism to reestablish the political will to exercise this vital state responsibility through methods of sustained social pressure, and direct action. And second, that recent actions and attempts by 230 Fightback and other local Toronto housing justice, anti-poverty organizations, tenant unions, land trust organizations, and participating individuals to build networks of solidarity was a positive step towards the attempt to re-center state responsibility and to overcome perceived and experienced injustices. Laclau and Mouffe (2000, found in Purcell 2009) call this process of solidarity creation a *chain of equivalence*, or a collectivization of Toronto's grassroot, counter-hegemonic organizations to confront a common hegemonic oppression while remaining distinct with their goals and visions of alternative futures.

Chapter 3 - Case Study

"Instead of a tower of exclusive residential units for the wealthy and a podium of private retail spaces, this proposal illustrates, at a schematic level, a vision for how housing in the [Downtown East] could be more inviting, inclusive, and of service to the neighbourhood it stands on"

- *Expropriate 214-230 Sherbourne! 2019, p. 24*

"Just looking at the cost to build per square foot, if you've determined that for this, I'm sure you have, as you know that is number one, to know how much your building will cost"

- *Councilor Paula Fletcher's question in response to the Expropriate 214-230 Sherbourne! presentation at the Toronto Planning and Housing Committee, July 2019*

"[230 Sherbourne] has remained empty; this building remains empty laughing at the homeless people as they pass it. This building should be made for us, for us ordinary people in this city"

- *Beric German, anti-poverty activist, deputation at the Toronto Planning and Housing Committee, July 2019*

"We are committed in this fight to make sure those properties will be part of the future of poor and working-class people at Dundas and Sherbourne"

- *Yogi Acharya, former OCAP organizer, deputation at the Toronto Planning and Housing Committee, July 2019*

214-230 Sherbourne St and Toronto's Downtown East



Figure 4: Ariel image and map locating 230 Sherbourne St. in Toronto's downtown east. (Dundas Corridor is bolded)

On June 13th, 2026, members of 230 Fightback, who were joined in solidarity with other Toronto housing and anti-poverty justice organizations, and members of the community, marched south several blocks from Allan Gardens to 214-230 Sherbourne to try and attempt entry onto a section of land that for nearly 20 years has sat empty, enclosed, and removed from the community. The sole remaining building, boarded up and unused, sits as a speculative scar and symbol of the battle to define who belongs and who doesn't.

As activists began to cut an entrance through the chain-link fence members of the Toronto Police Service (TPS), assigned to monitor the protest, intervened with force and pushed back the group of protesters. A brief period of verbal assault directed by the protesters toward the police ensued, and as concerns of police escalation heightened, longtime activist John Clarke took the mega-phone and calmed the crowd by stating:

> we thought there was some kind of possibility we would not get through the fence today. We gave it a fairly spirited attempt, but that's the way it goes. But we came here to drive home the message that this community is not going to accept the obscenity which unfortunately isn't illegal, but it should be, of leaving a property standing empty *when people are literally dying on the street*.
> [...] but I hope our gesture today brings home the fact that there's going to be resistance in this community. That people are not going to bow to a situation where developers buy up properties, leave them sitting empty, or build yet more luxury housing on them (Regent Park TV 2026, 39:39, my emphasis).

After a short negotiation with the police for the crowd to remain at the site, on condition of no additional attempts at the fence, organizers screened an abbreviated portion of the scheduled FIFA World Cup Match. Afterwards the remaining protestors and police lingered before dispersing their separate ways.

The police's interjection into the community's claim of citizenship, need, and call for state intervention into the worsening levels of poverty is synonymous to the on-going reality at 214-230 Sherbourne and community greater. Long identified by community members and local activists as an important site for the provision of deeply affordable social housing, the land has sat enclosed since 2008 (save for short moments of squatting within the sole remaining house). Beric German, a longtime community activist in Toronto's downtown east, in a deputation to the Planning and Housing Committee in July of 2019, argued that during this time of enclosure the "building has remained empty, this building remains empty laughing at the homeless people as they pass it. This building should be made for us, for us ordinary people in this city" (Toronto City Council 2019a, 2:59:27). This speaks to private property and the speculative aspect that property carries, as a single individual (or corporation in this case) can withhold from the community a latent asset while patiently waiting through a market cycle for financial gain. Processes of financial real estate speculation detach land from its ethnographic reality (Holston 1995) and place the rights of invisible investors and financial capital above the real suffering and needs of community. And human suffering the boarded-up rooming house at 230 Sherbourne has helplessly witnessed.



Figure 5: John Clarke speaks to protesters following their confrontation with the police during the June 13, 2026, FIFA community watch party. Photo - Ian Weir

Toronto's downtown east has long welcomed and acted as refuge for Toronto's working-class and poor. The area's large Victorian mansions had been gradually transformed from single occupancy into rooming houses, flop houses and hostels, to accommodate the growing need for cheap housing as Toronto's twentieth century population grew. Fumia (2010) explains, "Moss Park has long served as a refuge for transient populations, providing shelter, food and services for single unemployed men and more recently women, unemployed populations with disabilities, and some of the city's poorest individuals and families" (p.276). 230 Sherbourne Street itself can first be recognized as lodging for soldiers on their way to Europe in 1914, and by the 1930s was advertised as a dedicated rooming house for $4 per week in the Daily Star (OCAP 2013). But, as reverberations of speculative gentrification in the early 1970s sought to expand into the downtown east the area's generationally affordable semi-detached houses were being purchased, boarded up, and tenants evicted for future development in mind, a literal display of Smith's potential rent gap. The pressure and stress of dispossession and displacement felt by community residents came to head in two significant moments of community resistance and direct-action protest.

Located just north of Dundas on Sherbourne Street, the Dan Harrison Community Complex, a large multi-building complex of Toronto Community Housing Corporation housing, was constructed as a direct result of community protest. In the early 1970s, famed urbanist Jane Jacobs and then councillor John Sewell, in participation with community protesters, invoked an obscure municipal bylaw by ripping off boards from the construction hoarding to prevent the demolition of aging rooming houses along Sherbourne Street. Explained by Seno (2003), area "residents became

involved in formulating alternative plans when it became apparent that the houses could be renovated, and were of value as part of a larger complex as well as in themselves" (p. 23). While construction was halted momentarily, Sewell, City Council, and Provincial staffers negotiated the municipal purchase of the houses and found funding to redevelop the land as social housing. (Ironically, those boarded up rooming houses then symbolic of modernism and drastic neighbourhood alteration and calls for state action are boarded up again. Now these buildings symbolizing neoliberal austerity and failed state policy are being left to deteriorate as the TCHC and Toronto City Hall conjures up a future plan for them – most likely a redevelopment similar to Regent Park and Lawrence Heights where public common land is leveraged to private interest and profit for minimal public return).



Figure 6: Protesters after tearing down construction hoarding to prevent the demolition of houses at the now Dan Harrison Community Complex. Photo found at: http://individual.utoronto.ca/shireen/project2.pdf

Shortly after this community victory on Sherbourne, further north and peripheral to the high-rise neighbourhood of St James Town, gentrifying high density tower development was pressuring the area's adjacent affordable semi-detached houses. As these houses were being purchased for speculation and boarded up, the tenants where being evicted by mob style hired goons supported by city police officers. Filmmakers captured moments of community resistice towards the state sanctioned evictions in the wonderfully illuminating and rebellious 1974 short film *Free Bleecker St*. Similar to the emptiness perceived at 214-230 Sherbourne St. today, the film offers a glimpse of the vast expanses of speculative fields contingent of demolition as developers displaced and dispossessed inhabitant of their existing relationships, networks and community connections.

In December 1985, after being refused entry into a local shelter due to smelling of alcohol, Drina Joubert froze to death in the back of a truck behind 230 Sherbourne. A victim of the lack of support for addiction and mental health one could access from a life on the streets, Drina's death catalyzed an outraged community to action through the formation of the Affordable Housing Not Hostels Coalition. A subsequent Coroner Inquest into the cause of Drina's death, by result of continued pressure by Housing Not Hostels, not only identified addiction and mental health as causes of death but explicitly identified homelessness as a contributing factor. As explained by Palmer and Héroux (2016), Joubert's life meant little to the state and general public while alive, but in death, Drina "helped spur provincial action", as the provincial government "promised to build three thousand units of social housing across Ontario in 1986, and one year later $31.5 million was earmarked for new emergency shelters and homeless relief" (p.308). Bittersweet, the authors retell how "the hostel that had closed its doors to Joubert on the night of her death, new facilities were created that improved conditions for the homeless, expanding [their] capacities … to address the needs of women" (ibid).



Figure 7: Poster commemorating the life of Drina Joubert on a wall of 230 Sherbourne Street. Photo K.Nickel.

What is strikingly similar to today as to what was documented in the 1974 *Free Bleecker St* film was the willingness of city police to withhold the rights of invisible property owners at the expense of area residents. As true today, as then, citizenship was merited upon property rights, or through a community capacity to enact a political will to act in their interest, as witnessed at the Sherbourne Street protest. Another interesting comparison is the Coroner's inquest after Drina Joubert's death which resulted in the state recognition of the deteriorating conditions within Ontario's shelters, and

the subsequent badly needed investment into public housing. A similar inquest was conducted in the mid 1990s after a string of individuals experiencing homelessness died on the streets during a harsh winter in early 1996. That coroner's inquest, again brought on at the request of a coalition of social agencies, and presided over by the same Dr. Murray Naiburg who presided over Drina Joubert's inquest, had adopted an ideological shift meritorious of individualism and neoliberal small state, and ultimately laid blame onto the individual(s). The inquest, as accounted by Palmer and Héroux (2016), once again found cause in death contributed by mental health and addiction, but this time around, Dr. Naiburg placed blame on personal lifestyle choices as a contributing factor to their unnecessary demise, not their homelessness.

Toronto's downtown east still offers refuge from life on the street, as the area is location to several prominent shelters, such as Seaton House (scheduled for revitalization which will result in a reduction of its shelter services), All Saints Community Church, a longtime drop-in shelter and meal provider in the community (which in the 1960s removed the majority of its pews to accommodate the growing number of community members using the church as a drop-in, but now is facing renewed criticisms for their empathetic support towards the area's poor, from adjacent homeowner associations and NIMBYism), and Street Health, a community health centre serving the community since the early 1980s. But gentrification, and especially speculation aided by provincially legislated reterritorialization and provincial subway expansion, has seen community needs and previously provided services come up against luxury condo development which sells lifestyles not marketed to the downtown east's poor.

Expropriate 214-230 Sherbourne! Community Driven Development Plan

The lone remaining house at 214-230 Sherbourne St has sat empty since 2008 and enclosed from the community. The old Victorian house boarded up and removed from social use sits symbolic of the effects of abstraction contingent of speculative property investment in Toronto's downtown east. A scar on the land of a neighbourhood which long has welcomed and supported Toronto's working class, poor, and homeless. The *Expropriate 214-230 Sherbourne! Community Driven Development Plan,* written by community activists, academics, and practicing architects in 2019, is an excellent example of radical planning, where, to paraphrase Friedmann, planning acts as a link the between knowledge and action. The *Community Driven Development Plan* presented to Toronto's Planning and Housing Committee in 2019 looked to confront the established conception of absolute property rights (as the proposal was for public use on privately held third-party land), gave precedent to the poor and homeless (which runs counter to amalgamated Toronto's focus on development for workers from finance, insurance, real estate, and tourism), and confronted a popular and lasting ideal that land-use must be done for a highest and best use through material incentive (profit). The Community Driven Development Plan sought to expand the citizenship rights of Toronto's disenfranchised by producing space which reflected their needs and conceptions of urbanity. The *Expropriate 214-230 Sherbourne!* conception, development, and presentation was but a moment within decades of continued tireless work by community members, activists, organizations, and political allies to ensure that Toronto's downtown east is (re)developed in a manner which benefits all residents and not just for a matter of profit.

From 2013 to their dissolution in 2023, organizers and members of the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) held 7 significant rallies or press conferences in front of 230 Sherbourne calling for the municipal acquisition of the land and to build badly needed deeply affordable housing. In 2018, largely due to OCAP's advocacy and refusal to quit, the City of Toronto, supported by then ward councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam, studied the feasibility of expropriating the 214-230 Sherbourne for this cause. A former senior City of Toronto Housing director explained in an interview, "primarily because of the community activists and OCAP that [expropriation] got brought forward. In simple terms, *they just simply wouldn't give up* [...] I was the one that kind of suggested the expropriation route versus the acquisition *because the City had, in the distant past, had a track record of having expropriated properties.*" (04272026-06, my emphasis). However, in the Decision Letter (June 2018) from city staff to the Affordable Housing Committee, expropriation was not recommended due to a lack of procedure as grounds for that refusal. The letter states:

> *The City of Toronto does not currently have a policy or standardized approach to the acquisition/ expropriation of properties for affordable housing development*. This report recommends Create TO, the Director, Real Estate Services Division and the Director, Affordable Housing Office, develop an affordable housing real estate acquisition/ expropriation strategy and report on the strategy in 2019 as part of the development of the Housing Opportunities Toronto 2020-2030 Action Plan (Toronto 2018, p.2, my emphasis)

Eight years later, the City of Toronto still does not have a policy or standardized approach for the expropriation of properties for affordable housing development, and the identified *Housing TO 2020-2030 Action Plan* (2019) does not speak to the matter of expropriation, but rather envisions a supportive role for the City in the "creation of 40,000 affordable rental and supportive homes through a public/private/non-profit land banking strategy" (Toronto 2019, p.5). Land banking is a process of strategically identifying contextually relevant private land to support the development of 40,000 affordable homes. With this in mind one could suggest that 214-230 Sherbourne strategically meets these contextual criteria of community continuity for housing. Personal correspondence and inquiry with the City resulted in the understanding that council approaches expropriation on a case-by-case matter, a process which highlights the gravity of financial austerity, isolation of land from its ethnographic realities, and reaffirmation of the inviolable property rights found within capitalism.

In the follow-up of 2018 OCAP protest which saw protesters place a large sign satirizing Toronto's notorious white development information sign on the front of 230 Sherbourne, (and once again calling for the municipal acquisition of 214-230 Sherbourne St), OCAP members began to wonder what form, or what shape a community inspired vision for that site would take. Shortly afterwards, OCAP began to work in collaboration with members of Open Architecture Toronto (OACTo), and architecture students from Waterloo University to produce a concrete representation of that community directed vision.



Figure 8: Poster for a design charette for the Community-Driven Development Proposal. Photo OCAP archives

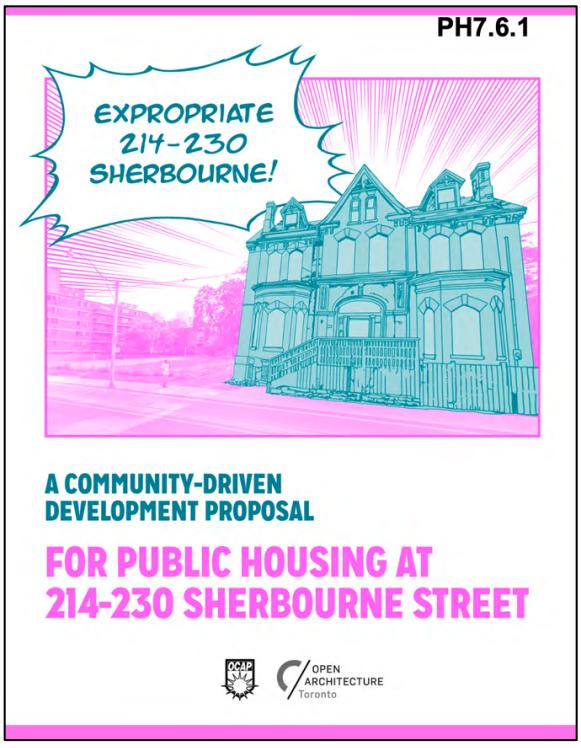


Figure 9: Cover of the Community-Driven Development Proposal presented to the Planning and Housing Committee, July 2019.

In May 2019, members of OCAP and OACTo collaboratively held two sessions of community consultation in addition to street outreach to gain a diverse participation to aid in the preliminary design and development of a community driven development proposal for the land at 214-230 Sherbourne Street. The authors of the proposal, through the design charettes, sought to produce a tangible model and concrete vision for the land which could then be presented to city council and planning staff in the hopes of "creating a strong case for expropriation" (OCAP and OACTo 2019, p.14).

The charettes, according to the summary provided by OCAP and OACTo (2019), involved activities to gain public insight on four main architectural aspects: overall building form, ground floor programs, public space qualities, and domestic space qualities. Participants were given three options for building form, two midrise options with different ground level spatial layouts and one high-rise option that prioritized housing. Maximizing the amount of affordable housing was an aspect that the "vast majority of respondents emphasized" (p.16). For ground floor programs (or a publicly accessible podium), participants were asked to value a list of five options from 1 to 5, with community health clinic, hot-meal service, and a community center offering social and employment services the top three choices respectively. Responses also stressed a "desire for public open spaces for socializing, meetings and developing any program or event based on resident's needs" (p.17). For public space qualities responses reflected a large desire for "214-230 Sherbourne to be inclusive, inviting and welcoming" (p.18) while producing a strong "connect[ion] directly with the street" (p.19). As per domestic space qualities responses emphasised the need for universal accessibility which would "provide barrier free elements within the units and communal areas" (p.20). Similar to the exterior, there was a desire from respondents for communal spaces for socializing.

Proceeding from the charettes, and counter to private development which prescribes tower design based off of lifestyle marketability, cost per square feet, and profitability, the OCAP and OACTo design took into consideration the needs of community members, specifically the respondents desire to maximize the amount of deeply affordable housing offered, the creation of inclusive inviting social space that is accessible and providing community services. Ultimately the report proposed a two-part design with an 18-storey tower and a 6-storey podium that sloped not to overpower the adjacent building, where the two buildings would create a nested courtyard accessible to Sherbourne Street. The design would support 152 units if it followed city guidelines for affordable housing (a prescribed percentage mix of one, two, three, and four-bedroom units) but could hold 262 units if built for single occupancy bachelor units. Importantly, as described by one of the plan's authors during its presentation to the Planning and Housing Committee (July 3, 2019), the *Community-Driven Development* would "[respond] to the existing developer driven architecture of the city, matching its high density in order to create an equivalent floor area of rent geared to income units, as a contemporary condominium would have" (Toronto City Council 2019b, 8:53-14:30).

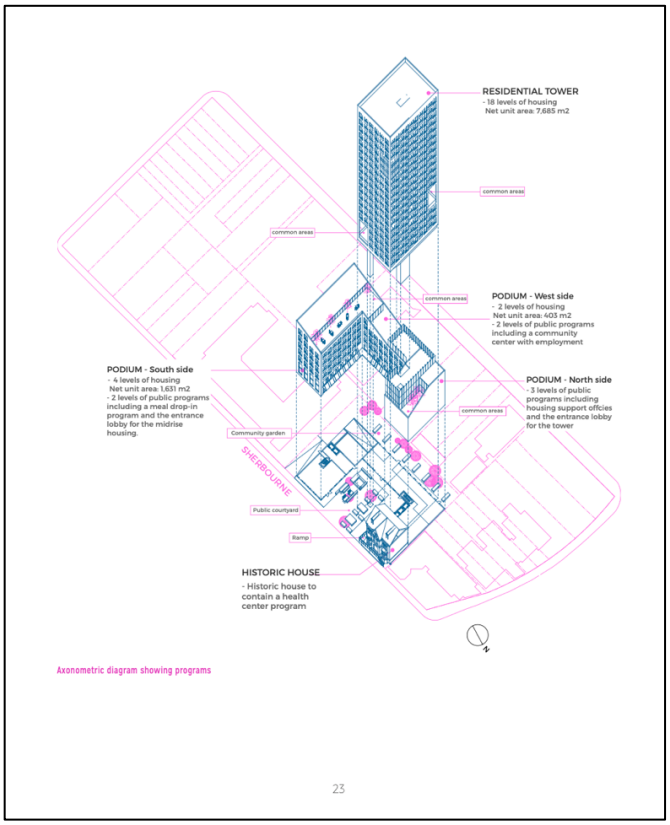


Figure 10: Axonometric diagram showing programs within the final building design. From the Community-Driven Development Proposal

Importantly, the *Community-Driven Development Proposal* was a practice in radical planning where the respective organizations brought their expertise and knowledge to a collaborative process where lived experience and community need shaped architectural design within the confines and established framework of municipal planning legislation. In his deputation to the Planning and Housing Committee (July 3, 2019), professor of architecture at Waterloo University and contributing author of the *Community-Driven Development Proposal*, Adrian Blackwell argued that the city of Toronto should "challenge development [in the downtown east] which displaces those who are most vulnerable" and "threatens to make the downtown a livable place for only those who can afford it". In contrast to developer driven development which solidifies conceptions of citizenship and community upon property rights, Blackwell argued, the *Expropriate 214-230 Sherbourne! Community-Driven Development Proposal For Public Housing* could resist the "strongly encroaching and gentrifying forces that are pushing low-income people out of this neighbourhood" (Toronto City Council 2019b, 8:53-14:30).

After presenting the development proposal to the Housing and Planning Committee, a member of OCAP was approached by a high-level Municipal Planning Staff member who stated, "I believe you guys have put something forward that's going to give me a lot of leverage to move something forward here" (04072026-03). But any material action by City Council and planning staff on expropriation or acquisition of 214-230 Sherbourne was deferred until the release of the Housing TO 2020-2030 Action Plan, and the creation of a broad stroke procedure for the use of expropriation for affordable housing. While the land at 214-230 Sherbourne was subsequently identified as

strategically important in conjunction with the Dan Harrison Community Complex revitalization (Toronto 2022), no attempt, other than an unsuccessful bid to purchase 214-230 Sherbourne through private sale in 2022, has been made by the City to obtain the land and move forward with OCAP and OACTo's 2019 Community Driven Development Plan.

When the collaboratively written *Expropriate 214-230 Sherbourne! Community-Driven Development Proposal For Public Housing* was presented to Toronto's Planning and Housing Committee the presenters were given the usual excuses, deferments, and questions regarding cost, as fiscal responsibility outweighs social responsibility. Where rational technocratic professionalism and capital friendly guilds and codes of ethics confront and belittles amateur attempts at planning and knowledge creation. But community experiences from the streets are a latent resource for collaboration between the state and public. John Friedmann contentiously likened the optimal role of the planner as a link between these two worlds of professional knowledge and community action. Granted this might give planners too much credit, there are still powers available to municipal planners, such as the greatest possible amount of inclusion for community knowledge and participation.

One Moss Park community member and active 230 Fightback participant exasperated in interview, "I think what a waste of resource that the city isn't actually coming, and are begging to come to [community activist meetings], and saying, what do you people think? *Because that's, there's such a knowledge, and it could be given away for free*. But it's so discouraging to then realize that we're looked on just as a nuisance, not even really an afterthought, just a, you know, a boring bit to get through on an [community committee] agenda. [Council members know] how to listen to the delegations, get my game out" (interview participant 032526-01, my emphasis).

It has become plainly visible that Toronto council truly believes the fallacy that they lack power to enact the will of the people they are paid to represent. In an April 2026 Toronto East York Community Council Meeting, while hearing deputations and discussing the concerns of midtown residents' disapproval of a proposal within the pricey neighbourhood of Summerhill, councilor Gord Perks, after explaining his belief that council's powers have been neutered by provincial policy towards development uttered, in either a moment of political theatre or annoyance,

> Provincial law does not give local governments final say in development applications … and the anger you hear in the room is entirely justified, and it's an anger I share … The province of Ontario has made it impossible for counsel to consider this in a good faith way. In community meetings in my neighbourhood, I put it this way. We're the waiters in [Premier Doug] Ford's restaurant, we just bring you the food. He sets the prices, he cooks the meal, he puts the fly in the soup (Toronto City Council 2026, 2:06:00)

This sentiment was echoed during my conversation with the current Ward 13 councilor, who argued,

> I have said privately that these applications, you know, that come to council every month, we're just agents of the province, right. They have all the rules for the Planning Act, we do all [the] public consultation. We get all the negative deputations coming here, but we have no power to actually affect the changes that we want … and the public doesn't always see that. They feel

> that, you know, I'm on the side of the applicant, which I am not. I'm just looking out for our best interests with what we have before us (07022026-08).

This sentiment lays the foundation for a defeatist apologist council looking to avoid conflict while saving public tax dollars, as the agenda and concerns of rate payers trump needs and concerns of rent payers.

230 Fightback



Figure 11: Members of 230 Fightback protesting outside The Well at a ORECA event where a KingSett Executive is speaking. Photo Ian Weir

Formed in 2022 as response to the private sale of the land at 214-230 Sherbourne Street to the national private equity real estate investment firm KingSett Capital for $53million, 230 Fightback has engaged a self-proclaimed direct-action fight back campaign to prevent KingSett from realizing their objective of constructing a 47-storey luxury condominium tower at the site. Héroux and Clarke (2022) state:

> Admittedly, this is a formidable David and Goliath battle. Those waging it do not have billions of dollars in assets but *plan to create a resistance in the Downtown East which the city and KingSett will not be able to ignore*. They will refuse to be pushed out. *Building on the long and proud history of resistance of this working class neighbourhood, 230 Fight Back will take up this struggle with every intention of winning it.* (n/p, my emphasis)

Situating themselves within a long line of social and community resistance to state (municipal/provincial/federal) policy and speculative capital investment which contingently accelerates the displacement of the area's working-class, precarious and poor, 230 Fightback meets the criterial laid out by Tilly and Wood's (2018) definition of a social movement. Since inception 230 Fightback has been engaged in a campaign to "create a resistance in the Downtown East which the city and KingSett will not be able to ignore", a campaign that was began over a decade ago by Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP).

In their 4 years, 230 Fightback has organized over 30 events of either direct action and disruption, moments of advocacy, community rallies, protest marches, and attendance in solidarity with other local organizations' actions and events. The majority of these events are actions confronting and disrupting the current landowners, KingSett Capital, in a camiagn to pursue them to negotiate a sale of 214-230 Sherbourne to the city. A continuous act of contentious politics proceeding outside the realm of traditional protest and democratic participation.

The organization has created a repertoire through regular rallies and direct actions within and externally to the downtown east, which aim, in most cases, to provide the community with a meal while promoting the continuance of a collective knowledge as to the symbolic importance of the land, long history of community resistance, and name the actors involved in the near two-decade community struggle for deeply affordable housing at 214-230 Sherbourne.

230 Fightback's activist legitimacy is heightened through key members past foundational connection with the former militant anti-poverty organization OCAP, whose protests, rallies, and actions where notorious within Toronto and southern Ontario. OCAP's *fight to win* motto meant that members would go to any length or any cost to achieve their objectives. The group employed a method of direct action-casework, where actions that reduced real experiences of suffering could be transferred into a greater, and loyal participation at larger rallies and actions seeking to erode the effects of neoliberal capitalism. A myriad of successful actions, such as the Pope Squat, Special Diet campaign, Dinner With A View – Of the Rich action, and the infamous June 15th, 2000, March on Queen's Park (promulgated by the media as the Queen's Park Riot) drew healthy media attention to issues of socio-political injustices and highlighted the absurdity of state policy and legislation measured for fiscal responsibility, at the expense of the poor, and dissolution of state responsibility within Ontario. 230 Fightback, though focused on the single campaign of social housing at 214-230 Sherbourne St, has continued OCAP's core method of "disruptive forms of collective action as the basic strategy of resisting poverty" (John Clarke, quoted in Palmer and Héroux 2016, p. 312).

Numerically, 230 Fightback has a small, dedicated membership, but has been very successful in amplifying their voice and message through establishing and maintaining 'chains of equivalence' through acts of solidarity and reciprocity with other anti-poverty, housing, and tenant organizations within Toronto. In conversation with a member of 230 Fightback, speaking to the siloed experience(s) of city-wide housing activism, explicitly stated: "I think the best thing that 230 Fightback is doing is fighting back against that fragmentation, of the voices that want something different, and they're starting to bring people together" (interview participant 032526-01). The countering of grassroots fragmentation is greatly noticeable at 230 Fightback's annual general meetings where members of those external organizations are invited to attend and participate in the shaping of goals, targets, and actions of 230's upcoming year. This production of a counter-hegemonic chain of equivalence is visible through the success of the Toronto solidarity group, The People's Assembly For Housing Justice, which got its start at the 2025 230 Fightback annual meeting. The People's Assembly has been successful in cooperatively organizing three major events which have brought together hundreds of activists, protestors, academics, and care workers representing all areas of Toronto to the 2025- and 2026-People's Assembly for Housing Justice, and the 2025 People's March for Housing Justice. The People's Assembly has also held a smaller

information session, on migrant rights, with the strategic goal of breaking down neighbourhood silos, promoting conversation and knowledge sharing, and producing connection(s) to further weld and strengthen the links in the united chain against housing and social injustice in Toronto. As for 230 Fightback, participation in the People's Assembly have brought closer ties and reciprocal participation at actions with grassroot organizations such as the Parkdale Housing Justice Network (PHJN, who had also been waging a campaign against a KingSett development), the Toronto Underhoused and Homeless Union (TUHU), and the York South Weston Tenants Union (now known as the Toronto Tenant Union (TTU) after amalgamation with Climate Justice Toronto). Another core member of 230 Fightback who was deeply involved in the organization of the People's Assembly argued, "different advocacy groups at different levels linking up together is an important piece of how community activism could play a role in shaping and reshaping and forcing the state to make concessions, around social housing and poverty reduction" (interview participant 032526-02).

230 Fightback, in addition, is actively engaged in the preservation and perpetuation of a collective memory and community connection with 214-230 Sherbourne St., as the enclosed land serves as a symbolic gesture to the struggle that is experienced in surviving homelessness, as well as the historical feats of community resistance to speculative (re)development. Members of the 230 Fightback regularly poster the area with material detailing who is responsible for nearly twenty years of the land enclosure; calls on the Mayor, ward councillor, and senior city housing staff to act in the community's best interest and not as apologists of fiscal limitations; and information regarding upcoming actions, rallies, and meals. 230 Fightback also maintains an active publicly accessible website to chronicle their campaign of anti-poverty social justice and provide access to resources for a historical understanding of the downtown east, and general understanding of current planning and development practices, and information in regard to topics such as financialization, gentrification, and real estate investment trusts (REITS).

Foundationally, 230 Fightback align with Piven and Cloward's (1979) idea that a protest movement "entails a transformation both of consciousness and of behavior" (p.3) within the individual and greater community. Its action and strong community support has highlighted a collective question towards the state's legitimacy to address systemic social issues, such as the housing of Toronto's poor. 230 Fightback continues to exhibit the grassroots understanding that only through direct action a political will to act can be forged to address the widely perceptible societal injustice(s). 230 Fightback employs the methods of direct action in accordance with Piven and Cloward's understanding that Toronto's poor have little to withhold from the state and capital, and as such possess little influence within the traditional mechanism of politics. Piven and Cloward expound on the issue, "so long as lower-class groups abided by the norms governing the electoral-representative system, they would have little influence. It therefore became clear [...] that protest tactics which defied political norms were not simply the recourse of troublemakers and fools. For the poor, they were the only recourse" (1979, p.3). Disruptive direct action are collective claims of citizenship intended to instill a capacity to alter one's own future. They are attempts to transform the ontological nature of the urban from a location of capital profit and abstraction to a location which reproduces socially around a notion of human centred care, or, alternatively, a location of renewed state responsibility to ensure the well-being of all inhabitants. Importantly, 230 Fightback's actions speak to Castells' idea that an urban social movement are "collective actions

consciously aimed at fundamentally modifying the city's role in society, or redefining the historical meaning of 'urban'" (p.71).

230 Fightback promulgates claims of citizenship through a Marxist understanding of class, exploitation, and alienation, but act through an anarchistic dialectic of direct action and advocacy. Members pursue all and any opportunity to fight for and force state and non-state actors to listen to and understand the community's side to a mainly single-sided conversation and future vision about Toronto's downtown east (such as speculative investment, a location for potential rent gap, or media representations of the area in need of social and physical revitalization).

In October 2025, 230 Fightback organized two separate actions, one at the offices of KingSett Capital, and the other at City Hall, where both actions caused a moment of disruption which forced recognition of the organization's claim for citizenship. The first action began just after noon, when over a dozen 230 Fightback members and allies converged upon the financial district to deliver a jar of keys to KingSett Capital's corporate office. The keys were for locks placed previously upon the



Figure 12: Members of 230 Fightback occupy the lobby of KingSett Capital's 37th storey office, October 2025. Photo Ian Weir

fence enclosing locks placed previously upon the fence enclosing 214-230 Sherbourne from the community through a symbolic display of resistance to being locked out of the community by speculative development. Members were able to make their way up the elevators to the 37th floor of the Scotia Plaza, unfurl a banner calling for social housing at 214-230 Sherbourne, and briefly occupy KingSett's office to demand that a senior executive meet with them. After Scotia Plaza

security's arrival, KingSett's Chief Asset Management Officer spoke briefly with a member of 230 Fightback. The KingSett executive accepted the jar and then proceeded to repeat the well-rehearsed trope that it was up to the city to initiate and negotiate any sale of the land, and that KingSett was open to selling the property for the proper price. Having met their goal of reiterating that the community will not be locked or pushed out, 230 members and their allies left without incident.

After leaving Scotia Plaza, the members walked several blocks north to Toronto City Hall where Create TO was holding their annual general meeting. Create TO, an arm's length municipal organization responsible for the strategic leveraging and deployment of Toronto's real estate portfolio, is recognized as needing to be directly involved with any possible municipal acquisition of 214-230 Sherbourne Street. 230 Fightback members, upon entering the meeting room, began passing out leaflets to Create TO staff, while other members, again, unfurled the banner calling for social housing at 214-230 Sherbourne. In an attempt by Create TO to regain control of their meeting, and the failure of city hall security to remove the protesters, four members agreed to speak with a senior Create TO executive in the hallway, while the majority remained and continued the disruption. In the hallway the senior staff member agreed to set-up a formal meeting with Create TO's executive, including Chief Executive Officer Vic Gupta, and provide an opportunity for both organizations to speak directly to 230 Fightback's exigency.



Figure 13: Members of 230 Fightback after their disruption of the Create TO annual general meeting, October 2026. Photo 230 Fightback.

230 Fightback's disruption of Create TO's October meeting lead to three subsequent meetings with senior members of Toronto's planning and housing agencies (such as Create TO; the Housing Secretariat; Corporate Real Estate Management; the Toronto Community Housing Corporation; and Housing Development Office), which presented an opportunity for 230 Fightback to practice direct

advocacy towards their goal of the municipal procurement and subsequent construction of deeply-affordable social housing at 214-230 Sherbourne. 230 Fightback members attending these meetings with city staff were not naïve to believe that they would result in or even move 230 closer to the achievement of their ultimate goal. A post meeting report back from April 8, 2026, succinctly summarizes this sentiment:

> The meeting wasn't a decisive step and we had no illusions it would be. However, the struggle we have taken up and the criminal neglect of a community that it speaks to are now very much part of the agenda. The senior planners are aware of this issue and must relate to it in their deliberations.
>
> Beyond that, we have no expectations of winning this fight courtesy of enlightened municipal officials. It will take powerful and sustained community action to break the power of the developer and the subservience of the political decision makers to that power. The struggle for social housing in the Downtown East continues (230 Fightback 2026)

An important aspect of these meetings was the verbal recognition of the symbolic importance of 214-230 Sherbourne to the community by senior planning and housing staff. As the above quote states, "senior planners are aware of this issue and must relate to it in their deliberations". This recognition alone won't drastically alter the course of housing in Toronto's downtown east, but should be considered a small, situated victory by 230 Fightback members as their message was fully received, established potential future contacts within city hall, and an invitation to participate and voice the community's concerns in two upcoming significant downtown east planning strategy reports. As Piven and Cloward (1979) argued, outcomes, results, and comprehension of what constitutes a victory must be situated and weighed against realistic expectations, "[w]hat was won must be judged by what was possible" (1979, p. xiii).

But sometimes lofty goals are needed to conceive a reality beyond what is currently experienced. This idea was foundational to OCAP's method of direct-action casework, where the minimizing of real-world sufferings led to a larger collective participation and understanding of systemic issues molding the ontological and pedagogical realities of the urban. In a moment of complete surrender to pragmatic rationalism, a former high-level municipal housing executive argued that 230 Fightback should focus their efforts on the adjacent Dan Harrison Community Complex instead of 214-230 Sherbourne, as in their opinion, that land was gone, not a viable option anymore (04272026-06). To them, the community activists should focus on what is existing, the deteriorating TCHC housing, which admittedly, is a very real growing crisis. But, through 230 Fightback continuing their fight for the enclosed lands at 214-230 Sherbourne, the group is focusing on the existing. 230 Fightback's actions and advocacy is focused on the very real and existing levels of poverty and homelessness, and the very real land which sits latent and could provide refuge from this existing violence of life on the street. The current Ward 13 councilor admitted, in interview, that housing was the City's only tool to combat mental health and addiction (as healthcare falls under provincial responsibility), a fact that makes it logical to assert that finding ways to provide housing within areas of concentrated poverty and homelessness should be the City's, and councilor's top priority: at all and any cost. But, the councilor asserted, "I don't think there's a public appetite to purchase that property at the cost that KingSett is trying to sell it to us for" (07022026-08). The councilor's clearly disparate narrative to decades of community pressure, action, and struggle for

the land further purports sacrosanct property rights, fiscal responsibility above human need, and perpetuates the City's recognition of two classes of citizenship, those who own and those who don't.

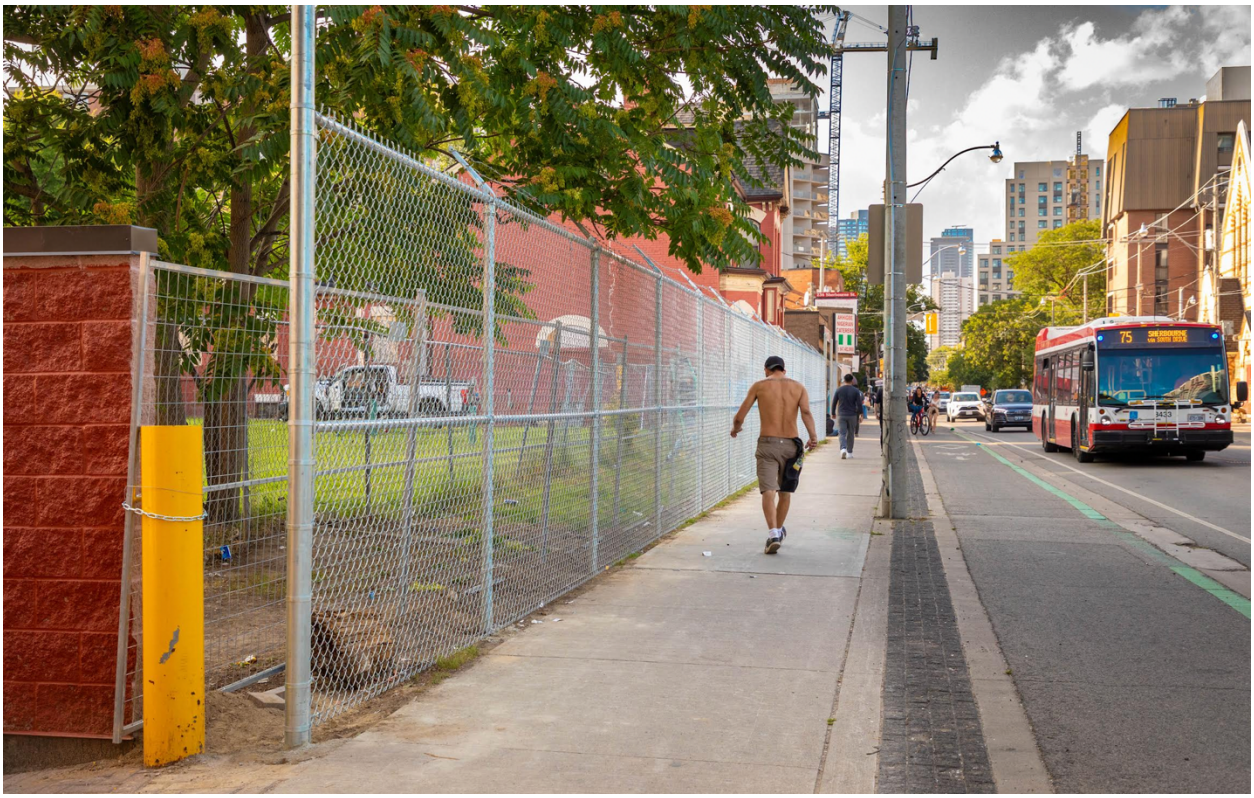


Figure 143: KingSett's newly installed hostile fence at 214-230 Sherbourne St., August 2026, which is butted right against the City sidewalk. Photo by: Colin Perkel.

Following the removal of several encampments which had germinated along the fence since members of 230 Fightback had tried to cut through it in the summer, KingSett has erected a hostile fence, complete with barbwire, to fortify the empty lot from the community. An act which further animates the ability for invisible property owners to place their abstracted visions and plans beyond the immediate needs of existing community members. 214-230 Sherbourne street remains a symbol of Toronto's sacrosanct recognition of private property rights and subsequent policy responses which incentivise the private provision of housing as answer to the global financialized housing crisis. Policy which trumpets and asks for individual answers to a socially constructed housing problem.

Moving forward, 230 Fightback continues to seek opportunities to disrupt any state or non-state proceeding that directly affects 214-230 Sherbourne. 230 Fightback will continue their concerted attempt to "fundamentally modifying the city's role in society" (Castells 1983, p.71) through direct action and the strengthening of the chains of equivalence by means of active participation and acts of solidarity. The struggle for social housing in the downtown east continues.

Conclusion

As the city streets offer little respite to the summer sun, social conditions are worsening around the boarded up and abandoned rooming house at 230 Sherbourne Street. Across the street the All Saints Church-Community Centre have closed their doors and community services for the month of August. In addition, Margaret's Community and Housing Support Services will cease to offer their long-time nightly drop-in services at All Saints Church in September, resulting in a loss of shelter beds. And as a provincially mandated municipal election in October approaches, the incumbent ward councillor is promulgating his accomplishments of cleaning up the area through a combination of encampment clearances and increased police presence, a blatant compliance to property owners' concerns. As an outsider to Toronto City Hall's mystified inner workings, it truly appears that all vested parties (municipal, provincial, developers, and private property owners), except impoverished inhabitants, community service providers, and anti-poverty activists, are waiting for TOD and processes of gentrification to cleanse the remaining poor and homeless from Toronto's downtown east. Waiting on time to abstract and detach the ethnographic realities of Toronto's Garden District through the removal of working-class, poor, and homeless' ability to dwell.

The case study this paper detailed tried to situate two events historically along a linear path of a greater social movement for social justice within Toronto's downtown east. First, the paper discussed the development, presentation, and immediate outcome of the *Expropriate 214-230 Sherbourne! Community-Driven Development Proposal*, which produced the benefits of a collaborative efforts of community activism combined with the professional knowledge of architecture to produce a land-use proposal that runs counter to normative development within Toronto. The *Community-Driven Development Proposal* looked to community desire and need to aid in the design of an 18-storey deeply affordable tower inclusive to the community and social use. The proposal was ultimately deferred as a standardized path for expropriating land for affordable housing didn't (and still doesn't) exist in Toronto, in conjunction with an ideological swing within City Hall where real estate practices and the observance of the sanctity of private property began to take hold. Expropriation was no longer a viable option, and what would become painfully apparent, the City of Toronto could not financially compete on the open market with private equity as 214-230 Sherbourne St was sold privately for $53 million. Though recently told by several municipal housing agencies (Create TO, Housing Secretariat, and staff from the TCHC) that future policy would approach housing concerns in Toronto's downtown east through a lens of social compassion and historical recognition, the land at 214-230 remains privately owned and fortified from the community, as surrounding social housing continues to fall into social and physical disrepair.

The second historically situated event was the current and ongoing campaign of direct action to stop the development of a proposed luxury condominium at 214-230 Sherbourne St, by the anti-poverty group 230 Fightback. 230 Fightback was founded after the private acquisition of 230 Sherbourne by KingSett Capital in 2022, by a core group of former OCAP members. 230 Fightback approaches their campaign through a combined method of direct action and advocacy with the goal of disrupting, and advocating for the municipal procurement and construction of social housing on the land at 214-230 Sherbourne St. As discussed above, 230 Fightback continues

OCAP's previous method of "disruptive forms of collective action as the basic strategy of resisting poverty" (John Clarke, quoted in Palmer and Héroux 2016, p. 312), while taking measures that "are often needed to match the seriousness of the issue" (Interview participant 04242026-04). Gaetan Héroux has called the corner of Sherbourne and Dundas East the Rubicon for development within Toronto's downtown east: once crossed by luxury condominiums and gentrification the area's working class and poor's collective memory will be erased. Who belongs and who doesn't within the area will be finally defined by inhabitants' ownership status and their ability to financially cooperate within a homogenized commodified society.

The case study plainly depicts Toronto's City Hall showing their capacity to ignore community concern and need, while complicitly abiding by provincial rule and threat. Systematically the City of Toronto still engages in modernist dreams of social and urban utopia, where private development, incentivised to include the working-class, precarious and poor, produces abstract visions of compact sustainability. But as Wright (2016) argues, utopian thinking is detached and abstracted from reality, whereas real utopias "can be found *wherever emancipatory ideals are embodied in existing institutions* and proposals for new institutional designs" (p.18, my emphasis).

Essentially this paper has been about land, and the role planning plays in recognizing or denying claims of citizenship, while the struggle for social housing in the downtown east continues.

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Appendix

Interview Participants By Category

230 Fightback Members

03252026-01 – P., Middle aged female and permanent Moss Park resident. Has been an active member of 230 Fightback for two years.
03252026-02 – W., Senior female, retired, former healthcare provider, longtime resident of the downtown east. Former member of OCAP and has been socially and politically active for 40+ years.
04242026-04 – D., Middle aged female and former OCAP organizer. Experienced social worker within the downtown east.

Community Driven Development Plan Authors

04072026-03 – Y., Middle aged male. Former OCAP organizer. Now lives in British Columbia
04232026-05 – M., Middle aged female, Architect, community activist, and former University of Waterloo Architecture student.

City of Toronto Councillors and Staff

04272026-06 – S., Senior male, retired City of Toronto housing director, now runs a municipal housing consultancy, member of a west Toronto Land Trust board.
04282026-07 – K., Middle aged, former City of Toronto councillor, currently a sitting Member of Provincial Parliament. Worked collaboratively with OCAP to try and expropriate 214-230 Sherbourne Street.
07022026-08 – C., Middle aged male, current Ward 13 councillor.
07022026-09 – E., Middle aged male, long time City of Toronto staff member as an advisor, who sat in with my interview with the councillor once he heard we were discussing 214-230 Sherbourne Street.

Interview Questions By Category

230 Fightback Members

- In your opinion what is the role and responsibility of the state in housing and poverty reduction?
- If housing isn't a state responsibility, then whose responsibility should it be (or whose is it?)
- What role, do you believe, can the community (activism [direct or advocacy] and social movements) play in shaping state policy and responsibility towards housing provision and poverty reduction?
- Do you believe that Toronto's City Hall (Mayor, Council members, committees, and Staff) listens to community concerns regarding planning and current/future community needs?
- What is your understanding of direct community action and social movements?
- What is your understanding of collective memory and the role it can play in the production of *spaces of representation* and social movements?

- (If applicable) From your perspective how has the Dundas Sherbourne area (Moss Park) changed over the last 10-20-30 years?
- In your opinion how would deeply affordable housing at 214-230 Sherbourne be or potentially not be beneficial for the community, neighbourhood, and Toronto greater?
- Are you aware of the 2019 *Expropriate 214-230 Sherbourne! Community Plan* written by members of OCAP and OACTo? If so, what were your realistic expectations of the *Expropriate 214-230 Sherbourne Community Plan*?
- What would/could be 230 Fightback's best method to compel The City to procure and construct deeply affordable housing at 214-230 Sherbourne?

Community Driven Development Plan Authors

- Could you introduce yourself and your connection to 214-230 Sherbourne St, 230 Fightback, and 2019's *Expropriate 214-230 Sherbourne! Community-Driven Development-Plan?*
- In your opinion what is the role and responsibility of the state towards housing and poverty reduction? (e.g. Direct provision, Market conditions, Public subsidization)
- What role, do you believe, can community activism (direct or advocacy) and/or social movements play in shaping state policy and responsibility towards housing provision and poverty reduction?
- Could you discuss the conception and development of the 2019 *Expropriate 214-230 Sherbourne! Community-Driven Development-Plan?*
- What were your (the) realistic expectations of the *Expropriate 214-230 Sherbourne Community Plan*?
- What is your knowledge of what happened to the *Community-Drive Development-Plan* after submission to the Planning and Housing Committee and Council?
- Do you believe that Toronto's City Hall (Mayor, Council members, committees, and Staff) listens to community concerns regarding planning and current/future community needs?
- What is your understanding of direct community action and social movements?
- What is your understanding of collective memory and the role it can play in the production of *spaces of representation* and social movements?
- In your opinion how would deeply affordable housing at 214-230 Sherbourne be/not be beneficial for the community, neighbourhood, and Toronto greater?
- What would/could be 230 Fightback's best method to compel The City to procure and construct deeply affordable housing at 214-230 Sherbourne?

City of Toronto Councillors and Staff

- In the view of Toronto's municipal council, what is the public's (community) role in Toronto's Planning Process?
- What is Toronto's municipal council, community committees, and planning staff's role?
- How seriously are community concerns to development considered in approving OP and Zoning amendments?
- Can Community activism produce political will to act in their interests in Toronto?
- Are you aware of the *Expropriate 214-230 Sherbourne! A Community-Driven Development Proposal for Public Housing at 214-230 Sherbourne Street*, developed and written by

Dundas/Sherbourne community members, housing and anti-poverty activists, and local architects, in 2019?

- The land at 214-230 Sherbourne St was previously identified as strategically important for the revitalization of the Dan Harrison Community Complex, from your understanding as the Ward's representative, why was this recognition of significance removed? (As the land was and continues to be privately owned).
- From your view as councillor, why isn't City Council, City Housing Departments, and Toronto Planning Staff seriously pursuing all means at acquiring 214-230 Sherbourne St, such as through expropriation, for community purposes and need?
- What is your vision for 214-230 Sherbourne Street, and the much-needed revitalization of the Dan Harrison Community Complex?

Related Material

Link: Expropriate 214-230 Sherbourne! A Community-Driven Development Proposal For Public Housing at 214-230 Sherbourne Street.

Link: Report - City of Toronto Strategic Acquisition of 214-230 Sherbourne Street to Support City-Building

Link: 230 Fightback website