

Towers of Power:
An empirical analysis of Toronto's Central Business District

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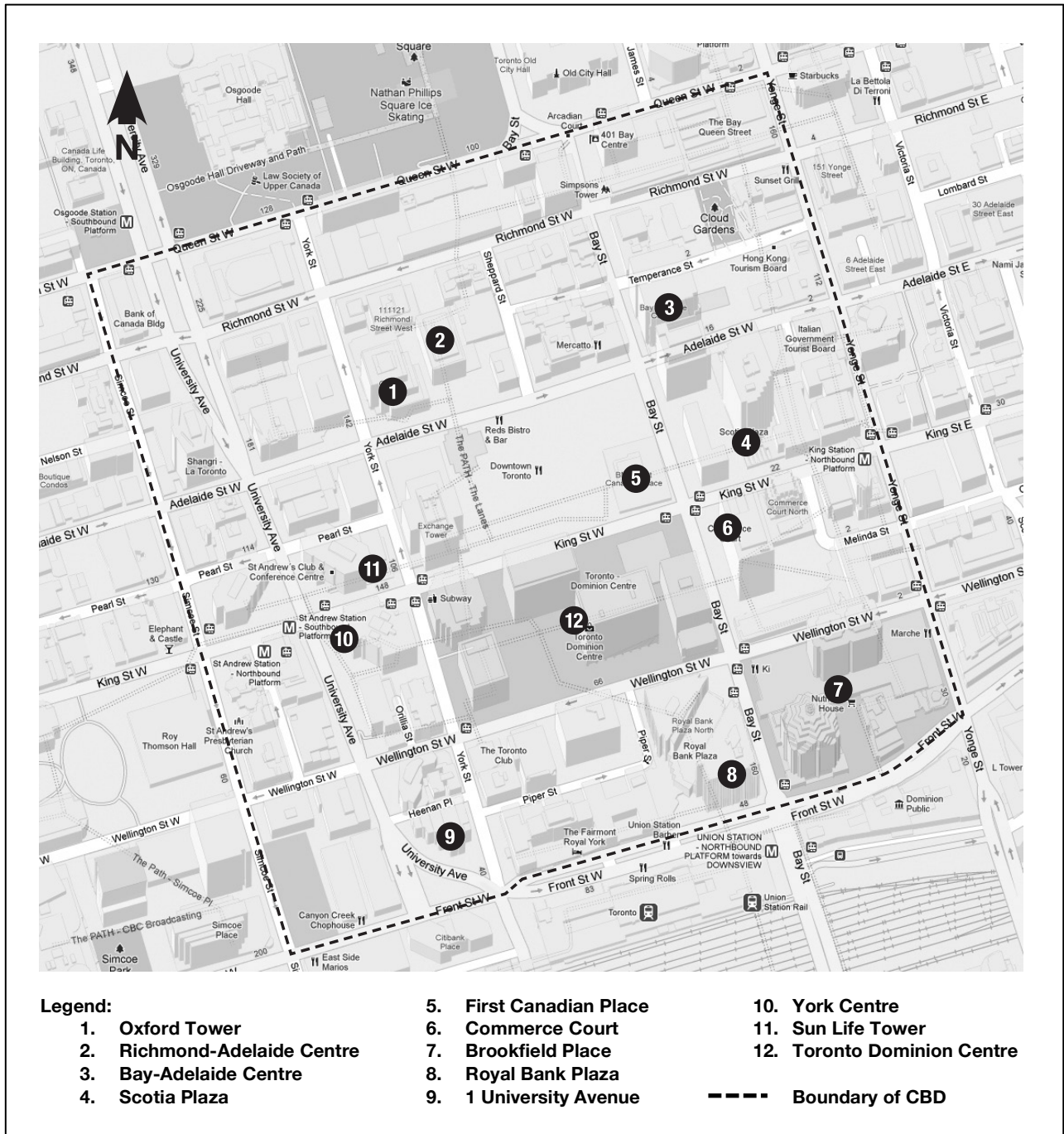


Figure 1. Map of Toronto's CBD and Census Metropolitan Area boundaries (Retrieved December 2, 2012 from maps.google.ca)

The Central Business District (CBD) in downtown Toronto (Figure 1) is one of the oldest areas in the city and yet has had some of the most dramatic changes. It was first developed in 1797 as a residential area, but by 1850 manufacturing industries had begun to take over and displace the homes. Almost one hundred years later, the area once again was redeveloped, but this time large

office complexes displaced the industrial buildings (Gad, 1991). Beginning in 1967 with the Toronto Dominion Towers (Figure 2), the city witnessed its first international-style skyscrapers, and in less than a decade, 25 more towers were erected within the CBD (Bélanger, 2007). Since then, skyscrapers have become an expected and desired sight in the downtown core. However, along with the office tower expansions came building densification and a loss of public spaces. The following discussion of the CBD will provide an analysis of three privatized spaces: the corporate office towers, plazas, and the PATH



Figure 2. Toronto Dominion Centre plaza and buildings (Photograph by author).

system, each being analyzed through themes of power, control, security, and accessibility. The methodology used for the empirical data collection in this paper was observational site visits of twelve corporate offices and plazas¹ in the CBD, as well as the PATH system. Through the qualitative empirical data and theoretical analysis, this paper will argue that the built environment of Toronto's CBD reinforces class distinction and capitalist hegemony through unequal access to privatized-public space.

¹ The twelve locations observed were: Oxford Tower, Richmond-Adelaide Centre, Bay-Adelaide Centre, Scotia Plaza, First Canadian Place, Commerce Court, Brookfield Place, Royal Bank Plaza, 1 University Avenue, York Centre, Sun Life Tower, and Toronto Dominion Centre. Each site was visited twice, once during working hours (2:30pm) and once after the end of the business day (5:30pm). These buildings were chosen due to their size, location, and exterior grounds or plazas, as well as accessibility to the PATH system. The data was collected through detailed note taking while observing the environment.

CBD Corporate Office Towers

Office Tower Exteriors

While the aesthetics of the CBD office towers may be unique in appearance, they all are made of similar materials (glass, steel, concrete, or stone), and are of considerable height, providing an imposing sight on the urban landscape. Nine of the twelve buildings observed are either raised or sunken below ground and set back, in some cases, quite a distance from the street. As a feat of technology, the towers are a source of prestige for the architects, the city, and its politicians, and represent landmarks on the urban skyline.

While formidable in size, the imposition of the buildings on the landscape also reinforces their power over the city. Skyscrapers' imposing size and minimalist design portray images of efficiency, power, strength and representations of wealth, while remaining architecturally modern, both appealing to city planners and corporate institutions housed within them (Goss, 1988; Dovey, 1992; Huriot, 2012).

The design of the office tower is a clear expression of the political and economic dominance of its occupants. Lefebvre (1976) states that the symbols associated with corporate office towers represent “places of official Power, the places where Power is concentrated, where it reflects itself, looks down from above—and is transparent. The Phallic unites with the political, verticality symbolizes Power” (p. 88). The 26-storey Royal Bank Plaza (Figure 3) in the CBD is an example of



Figure 3. Columns surround the main entrance to Royal Bank Plaza North Tower (Photograph by author).

Lefebvre's concentration of power. The financial institution has an exterior of reflective opaque glass with a sunken façade and an entrance encircled by columns. The size and architectural design of this building provides an image of the financial institution as almost an impenetrable fortress. According to Goss (1988), a building's aesthetics and expensive land value ultimately ascribes a commodification of space, and reinforces a distinction about what these buildings have been built for and who is meant to have access to them. Needless to say, while the exteriors of the building exude power and strength, the interiors are highly political spaces of hierarchical control, both of labour production and social discourse (Goss, 1988).

Foyers and Security Measures

A common theme with the office towers are large expansive windows at the street level, sometimes the full front of the building, showcasing lobbies containing substantial pieces of artwork, decorative chandeliers, polished marble walls and/or floor-to-ceiling columns (Figure 4). Like the



Figure 4. Toronto Dominion Centre lobby with the entrance on the right, and a security station in the centre just before a hallway to the elevators (Photograph by author).

buildings themselves, the lobbies are awesome in size and grandeur, and are meant to remind visitors of the power and prestige of the corporations housed upstairs. The symbolism embedded in the space through their sheer size (oftentimes taking up two to three stories and the entire street frontage), sterility, and glamour is a spatial separation between the inhabitants of the building and the street (Dovey, 1992).

Another commonality between the buildings at street level is that for someone to be able to access the elevators in the middle of the foyer, they must first walk past a concierge desk where either one or two uniformed security guards are stationed (Figure 4). This sequence suggests that the



Figure 5. Security guard standing at entrance to Scotia Plaza. Large planters provide a subtle break from the street to the building entrance (Photograph by author).

building management is actively making the visitors and workers aware of security personnel. Thus, while the symbolism and ideology of the height of the building is of success and power, the opposite is also suggested through a perception of negativity and disorder associated with the street and the individuals in it (Huriot, 2012).

Security presence also acts as a barrier, filtering access and reinforcing a specific code of conduct to be adhered to within the space. According to Byers (1998), the key to “maintaining the success of a property is for building managers to ensure the perception of safety, even if that means standing by while the perception is cultivated that the outside world, on the streets, is unsafe” (p. 199). In the cases of Scotia Plaza (Figure 5), Toronto Dominion Centre, and Bay-Adelaide Centre, security guards were roaming the lobby, as well as the grounds around the exterior, monitoring the individuals coming in and out. Their patrolling, in addition to the architectural design elements, reinforces the perception of the building as a fortified and safe environment. While visibly effective, this is not a new concept as town walls and gates, and guards as protection, have been used as symbols of defensible space for centuries (Nissen, 2008).

Plazas

The exterior plazas, which surround the properties of these office towers, while seemingly public, are reflective of the same limited accessibility as the interiors of the office towers themselves. The aesthetics of the plazas display a significant order and functionality to the design, and are landscaped in such a way to make the spaces feel separated from the street, through the use of stone walkways, foliage, sculptures, large planters (Figure 5), and/or walls. Four of the properties— Brookfield Place (Figure 6), Commerce Court (Figure 7), Scotia Plaza, and First Canadian Place— even have evident signage, which indicates the rules and regulations of the plaza space.



Figure 6. Posted "rules of use" signage in the plaza at Brookfield Place (Photograph by author).



Figure 7. Private property signage in front of Commerce Court North Tower (Photograph by author).

This form of privatized and ordered environment, while accessible to the “public,” is the modern capitalized form of public space within the CBD (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1993). The introversion of many of these “public” spaces, which are oftentimes enclosed in the property of the

office complex, prevent usage by the general public through architectural measures, as well as their inaccessibility from street level—such as the Toronto Dominion Centre plaza, which is encircled by buildings and raised up from the street (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Toronto Dominion Centre plaza. Buildings surround a grassy area with trees, foliage, and benches (with notches in them, suggesting a measure to prevent skateboarders from using them) (Photograph by author).

This effectively allows for the regulating of use to only the legitimized few that work in the

office complexes and wish to escape from the city (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1993). The commodification of this space for elite and corporate consumption can truly be called, as Wagner (1993) so appropriately states, the “front gardens to the strongholds of capitalism” (p. 298)². The design of these spaces, with stylish architecture, manicured and landscaped gardens, and ornamental materials, are meant to reinforce orderliness, not spontaneity, and to be consumed by and “promote cues consistent with the goals of private enterprise” (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1993, p. 153). Through the domination by the towers and the closed-off nature of the plazas, they are, in effect, isolated to the world outside, and, with the use of private security firms which police the interior and exterior property, they are able to maintain this division.

The PATH System

The PATH system began near the turn of the twentieth century with tunnels built at the department store (of the same name as the shopping mall), The Eaton Centre, and Union Station,

² Wagner (1993) as quoted in Nissen (2008, p. 1134).

but became popularized during the 1950s and 1960s at the completion of the subway system (Bélanger, 2007). While the main reason for their development was to separate pedestrians and traffic at street level (Byers, 1998), their expansion throughout the CBD was primarily due to a loophole in



Figure 9. The PATH System's retail stores beneath the Toronto Dominion Centre (Photograph by author).

city zoning (Bélanger, 2007). When building the new office towers, any space that was below-grade was not included in the height limitations set by the city bylaws, and developers were able to capitalize on this by creating a subterranean retail system in an otherwise undesirable space. By utilizing space belowground, developers were able to free up street-level space for impressive and expansive lobbies (Bélanger, 2007).

The PATH is a privatized-public space six city blocks wide by ten city blocks long, spanning three kilometers from end to end and connecting over fifty office towers (Byers, 1998). While walking through the maze of paths in the underground it becomes evident that the affluence of the corporate buildings above is translated into the PATH system below. This is apparent through the use of polished marble or granite on the floors and walls, architectural fixtures of brass and polished metals, and high-end stores lining the hallways (Figure 9). As with the lobbies and plazas, there is a very visible presence of security staff patrolling the privately regulated system.

The PATH system services over 100,000 individuals during the average workday (City of Toronto, n.d.), yet the retail spaces and conveniences offered in the system only cater to a very

select group of people: office workers. The system is designed and operated to create a comfortable environment for consumers, and, through subtle controls of the space, are able to limit its use (Byers, 1998). The very distinct separation of the PATH system from the street level helps to maintain a middle-class consumer homogeneity while excluding diversity from the street. Jones (1993) sums up the highly specialized PATH system as,

A place devoid of children and young families, the elderly, the lower income segments of our society and the underclass. In large part, the underground is a retailing subsystem that is directly linked to the corporate city of enterprise. It serves the residents of the white-collar city of privilege (p. 17).

Thus, this pseudo-public space provides the retail consumers and the office workers a controlled, ordered, and “safe” environment, which cannot be guaranteed in the “disordered” public streetscape (Byers, 1998). This separated system reinforces the distinctions of the social environment and the differentiation between the pedestrian classes, providing individuals with the ability to enjoy the city, but without the fear of the unknown as the “undesirable” element is actively discouraged from entering through architectural and securitized measures (Byers, 1998).

Discussion

The dominant demographic of individuals observed at each of the sites were middle-aged men and women in business attire, and missing were children, young people, and the elderly. The lack of diversity within the CBD and the privatized-public spaces is not by accident, but has instead been systematically reinforced through social and spatial factors. The corporate offices in the CBD employ social classification through subtle and not-so-subtle means. While they use very visible security measures—such as the patrolling guards at Scotia Plaza, and the outdoor signage, outlining the regulations of the privatized plaza at Brookfield Place—their more subtle architectural design elements—such as the posts lining the street in front of the offices at First Canadian Place (Figure 10) and the high-end retail establishments in the PATH—promote a social stratification and codification of acceptable classes of individuals.

Accessibility to these spaces depends more and more on the individual's ability to assume the role of a middle-class consumer and fall within the narrow parameters set up by the capitalist few (Nissen, 2008). Peterson (2006) so aptly recognizes that the built environment is not created in a vacuum, but instead is,

often designed to produce and support particular forms of public and private, provid[ing] the terrain on which concerns of access, security, surveillance and use are played out. Laws that authorize privatized public space and exclusions intended by “defensible space” are necessarily enacted by *people*. These controls become a means of constituting a public through relative inclusions and exclusions and... [from this] social groups and stratifications are produced (pp. 377-378) (italics added for emphasis).



Figure 10. A homeless man, with a wagon full of bags, stands on the sidewalk in front of First Canadian Place. Posts provide a physical line differentiating between the public street and the private property (Photograph by author).

By removing the marginalized from view, the orderliness and “bourgeois cleanliness” of the CBD remains intact (Amster, 2003, p. 197). The standards with which undesirable elements—such as homeless, urban poor, panhandlers, elderly, children, etc.—are excluded from the privatized-public spaces is enforced and determined by those with power solely for the advantage of their own interests (Amster, 2003). Through “spatial and cultural cleansing,” the CBD’s powerful executives and building developers are able to stifle identities that are not in accord with capitalist perspectives on economic growth and prosperity (Amster, 2003, p. 199). For instance, while four homeless individuals were observed, all were on the street and not in or on any of the privatized-public spaces

(Figure 10). Their lack of visibility is a way of ensuring that they do not threaten the validity of meaning with which the capitalist and middle-classes interpret their lives (Mair, 1986; Amster, 2003; Mitchell, 1995).

According to Allahaar & Côté (1998), “the state of capitalist society has two principal responsibilities: first, to ensure the long-term reproduction of capitalism and capitalist institutions and, second, to protect the interests of the various fractions of the capitalist class” (p. 41). Thus, to protect the economic prosperity of the CBD, the privatized-public spaces are legitimized only for capitalist endeavours of a white-collar, homogenous, “consenting, invisible, and harmonious” public (Peterson, 2006, p. 359). This exclusionary system is reinforced through political and social systems, which promote a normative, and limited, representation of “public,” and through social discourse is idealized as desirable and preferable (Mitchell, 1995). Through the design elements of the built environment, and by employing regulations, which are inherently exclusionary, executives of the capitalist class are able to filter out all but those who they deem as the desired public.

Conclusion

The CBD’s built environment has been systematically constructed to serve the needs of the dominant capitalist and middle-classes at the exclusion of others. The class distinctions and capitalist hegemony are embedded in the built environment of the CBD and are enforced through social, cultural and physical controls. This paper has argued that the architecture of the office towers of the CBD symbolize institutions of power held by corporations, while their plazas, lobbies and street-level security act as buffers preventing access of the undesirables to the elite capitalist class, and the PATH system promotes a limited and idealized form of consumerism and bourgeois functionality. Accordingly, societal ideologies of power and social relationships with space are complex and deeply interrelated, ultimately constructing and reproducing unequal forms of privilege.

While this paper has attempted to examine the relationship between built form and social structures, it is limited by its focus on the CBD only. The social forces behind the large office complexes in the downtown core and their exclusivity to the upper- and middle-classes speak to a larger issue of social polarization within Toronto. With that in mind, this situation cannot be examined in isolation from the rest of the city, but instead must be examined as part of a larger urban, regional, national and global system of social, economic and political power. For further research, the framework applied to the CBD could be expanded to include other areas of the city to examine socio-spatial disparities, such as suburban sprawl, gentrified neighbourhoods, and in-between cities. In addition, while gathering empirical data in the CBD it became apparent in early observations that there was a racial divide between the white-collar, business professionals and the service-sector employees. This unequal representation of racial diversity, while not discussed in this paper, also requires further examination and research.

Residents and users of the city must recognize that the built environment that surrounds them is not natural and is a social construct by the privileged few that have the means to manipulate the city into something that represents their vision of inclusivity, efficiency, and beauty. The very fact that the alternative identities of the marginalized are a threat to the capitalist few suggests that the excluded masses hold a power that makes the bourgeoisie nervous. Within this power lies the possibility for these individuals to make a claim on the built environment and spatially secure a place for themselves within the city.

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