

## "If you lived here...": Lifestyle, Marketing, and the Development of Condominiums in Toronto by Ute Lehrer

It's not just a condominium, it's a lifestyle. Minto 30 Roe is almost too good to be true. This is a lifestyle for the young, and the young at heart, smack in the middle of Toronto's most vibrant neighbourhood [...] On April 14, we're holding a Preview Event to launch the amazing Minto 30 Roe. Register today and get on the list for your personal invitation.

—Advertisement in *Toronto Metro*,  
April 5, 2012

Commercially motivated sales strategies for attracting potential buyers are as old as the building industry itself. But in today's world, wherever we look, we are bombarded with material and non-material images. As intellectuals in the twentieth-century first showed us,<sup>1</sup> commodification has reached into every corner of our society and led to unprecedented levels of mass production and consumption. Guy Debord called this "the society of the spectacle," in which social relations are mediated through images. He postulated that industrial capitalism was obsessed with the notion of possession, while in a post-industrial society the objective is to "appear."<sup>2</sup> This is exactly what we see in today's urban transformation. An essential human right, shelter, has become commodified in such a way that it is no longer about the necessity of housing people, or of owning a dwelling, but of buying into a lifestyle, and thereby pushing use toward a new degree of alienation.

Toronto is undergoing a massive spatial, social, and quite possibly political, transformation. It began in the late 1990s, when billboard signs and sales offices popped up, taking over parking lots and derelict industrial lands, using a plethora of images that spoke the language of youth, health, and beauty. Part of the sales strategy of developers was to turn the sites of future condominium development into a spectacle.

Billboards, brochures, and websites publicized amenities such as roof-top gardens, swimming pools, barbeque terraces, and indoor gyms. All of these images implied the creation of secured spaces with guarded lobbies, while hyping up a lifestyle specific to the condo dweller's experience (including birds-eye views of the city). People seemed to buy into the combination of individual ownership and collective use of common spaces and amenities with preselected people. What followed was a building frenzy of condo towers in the downtown core that has now spread throughout the city and the Greater Toronto Area. The "Condo Boom,"<sup>3</sup> as it has been referred to from the mid-2000s onward, has since transformed entire neighbourhoods.

The condo boom has naturally had a great impact on the city. It has led to a monoculture of housing forms in the downtown core and to a further eradication of spaces that are on the fringe of the market economy. Because condo owners have almost everything inside, they no longer need to engage with the city below. Their everyday life is contained within controlled spaces, and any encounter with the "other" is reduced to its bare minimum.

Image production within the built environment has been around for a long time.<sup>4</sup> But in the case of the condominium tower it wasn't enough to sell the physical product; there was also an explicit necessity to create a need for a lifestyle unique to the condo. Before the typical condo-dweller moved into his or her new place the need for such a life had to be socially constructed. When legal regulations took shape in North America in the mid-twentieth century,<sup>5</sup> Toronto began to see a few isolated examples of this form of housing, particularly along the waterfront. The normal trajectory was, and still is, to privilege the single or semi-detached house over any other form of living arrangement. While about half a million (of 2.7 million) Torontonians live in high-rise apartments built by private developers between 1950 and the early 1980s, these dwellings tend to be rental units in neighbourhoods along traffic nodes and corridors.<sup>6</sup> A new cultural understanding was thus necessary to convince people to buy property in downtown areas, within buildings where all residents shared an entrance and amenities, paid maintenance fees and tolerated the s and smells social practices of their neighbours.

In the early days of the boom, condo development faced two challenges: While developers were drawn to developers in Toronto as a foreign practice in the urban landscape of this city, and that the cheap lands in Toronto's former industrial areas they had little experience in selling units in a highrise building. Likewise, potential buyers needed to be introduced to the idea of this form of living. Hence, with the help of the advertisement industry, ng needed a complete image makeover in order to be attractive to the tentia buyers lifestyle became the selling point, not the building itself. It is helpful to borrow here from Charles Rutherford's concept of "imagineering," which he understands as place-making not only through urban design but also the "aggressive, relentless use of advertising."<sup>7</sup> Together with what Kipfer and Keil<sup>8</sup> call "Toronto Inc.," this practice can be seen as the backbone of a forceful advertisement strategy of condo developers in seeking their clientele, which also corresponds with the municipal and provincial strategies that



Artist's concept of the DNA3 condominium at the corner of King and Shaw Streets Toronto.  
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were developed for planning policies since the early 2000s.<sup>9</sup> These were all features of a concerted effort to make condo-living attractive at a place where there was no widespread practice of this living form: billboards went up on potential sites; stylish websites were launched; glossy sales brochures were disseminated; themed sales offices were erected; their openings were celebrated as hip events with long lineups (sometimes lasting hours, or even several days); and chic TV and radio commercials drew the attention of the public to this new form of living. One of the most controversial ads was a video clip, showing a couple lining up at the entrance of a club. When they finally reach the front of the line the bouncer asks them, "are you on the list?" We then see them stepping aside, crestfallen.<sup>10</sup>

When, in the early 2000s, the first massive wave of billboards appeared in the downtown core, an advertising language was developed that was significantly different from suburbia, which normally draws on images of family, nature, and harmony.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, the visuals in the city showed healthy-looking, young, active, white and predominantly female residents enjoying life in their new condominiums.<sup>12</sup> Condo advertisements comprised a crucial part of an intensive effort to transform former industrial areas into places with a particular lifestyle—a lifestyle that first needed to be created. One common strategy played with the imagination of potential buyers by making reference to other cities. As if Toronto were not hip enough to sell itself on its place-specific merits, sales strategies, especially between 2005 and 2007, pointed to cities around the world:

Living at 76 Shuter is living downtown New York style.<sup>13</sup>

Inspired by the world. Fashioned in Toronto. The Delano in Miami. The Mercer in New York. The Montalembert in Paris. W Hotel in Honolulu. What sets these hotels apart? Each is a boutique of singular style and character. This is a luxurious South Beach style Skyline bar.<sup>14</sup>

Chateau Royal itself is modeled after an elegant Parisian residence complete with a steeply sloping copper look roof, dormer windows and balconies galore. The street level is home to small specialty shops and a café all sheltered by the white awnings reminiscent of Boulevard St-Michel or St-Germain-des-Prés.<sup>15</sup>

The lobby, cool, crisp and composed, borrows its inspiration from the couture runways of Paris, London or New York.<sup>16</sup>

Malibu is a condo development squeezed between an elevated inner-city highway and a busy surface road, and it plays on the imagination of passersby by making reference to a

place associated with an outdoor lifestyle that is healthy, playful, and affluent. During construction, all year round a female body in a bikini lured the eyes of drivers to the site and promised a life full of sunshine and beaches: "Right where Harbourfront meets the real lakeshore, there is an enclave of West Coast cool. Malibu. Toronto's first California condos."<sup>17</sup> Now that the condo is completed and people have moved in, it is fair to say that there is very little California feel to this development, just as the lack of "London" is evident at the Esplanade development, which presented itself with the slogan, "Club London. If you live here, you are a member."<sup>18</sup>

Exclusivity is also one of the dominant strategies used to sell the condo lifestyle. A club with a fitness centre is a staple of almost every condo in town, but more and more condos are also geared toward the high-end market,

incorporating exquisite materials and design elements, individual access elevators, as well as service personnel such as concierges and butlers. Another strategy that is applied almost universally is the reference to "Owning the sky."<sup>19</sup>

Welcome to your personal window of the world.<sup>20</sup>

Stunning, unmatched panoramic views both to the north and south overlooking historically protected properties.<sup>21</sup>

Revel in breathtaking, unobstructed waterfront and city views.<sup>22</sup>

All these slogans are complemented by a gendered imaginary that more often than not uses the female body in the visual presentation of the condo environments.<sup>23</sup> In a variation on the normative homogeneity of these fantasies, some advertisements use Toronto's ethnic diversity to sell a form of cosmopolitanism and exoticism. While advertising agencies are busy selling us condominiums as a lifestyle, they further alienate us from the idea of dwelling as shelter.

The spectacle that surrounds condo dwelling has created its own nemeses, though only in very sparse forms. The "are you on the list" video clip sparked an instant response from ordinary people who wrote lists of names on billboards, and the ad was quickly pulled before the controversy could grow any bigger. Immediately adjacent to this project was the Bohemian Embassy, and the developers there did not lose any time in suing a local artist, Michael Toke, after he had used the visuals and graphics of the development and turned them into a critique by calling it "Bohemian Embarrassment. Cons and lies."<sup>24</sup> While these are place-specific interventions, recently, we saw a more politically motivated critique,<sup>25</sup> bringing together the sales strategies of the condominium boom with the fundamental right for shelter. After having observed the ad campaign for condo developments, Sean Martindale appropriated some illegally placed advertisement boards for condos and used them to construct a tent-like structure. While he was more interested in them as sculpture than as shelter, he left their subsequent use open to appropriation. His response lies somewhere between Debord's call for ordinary people to make ordinary art to liberate us from capitalism, and John Berger's warning about glamour culture:

Glamour cannot exist without personal social envy being a common and widespread emotion. [...] Either [the individual] then becomes fully conscious of the contradiction and its causes, and so joins the political struggle for a full democracy which entails, amongst other things, the overthrow of capitalism; or else he lives continually subject to an envy which, compounded with his sense of powerlessness, dissolves into recurrent day-dreams.<sup>26</sup>

The success of the condo boom in Toronto and other cities around the globe leaves us with the impression that individual lives are increasingly regressing into daydreams. X

### Notes

- See for example: Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 1936. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin Books, London, 1972); Fredrick Jameson, *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).
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- Arlene Williams and Diego Garcia, "Condo BOOM! event shakes up discussion about Toronto city planning," *YFile*, Dec 15, 2006.
- See Ute Lehrer, "Willing the Global City: Berlin's Cultural Strategies of Interurban Competition After 1989" in *The Global City Reader*, eds. N. Brenner and R. Keil (Routledge, 2006), 332-338.
- John Cribbet, "Condominium: Homeownership for Megalopolis?" *Michigan Law Review* 61 no. 7 (May 1993): 1207-1244. Douglas Harris, "Condominium and the City: The Rise of Property in Vancouver," *Law and Social Inquiry* 36, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 694-726.
- See [www.towerrenewal.ca](http://www.towerrenewal.ca).
- Charles Rutherford, *Image-neering Atlanta* (London/New York: Verso, 1996), 2.
- Stefan Kipfer and Roger Keil, "Toronto Inc.: Planning the Competitive City in the New Toronto," *Antipode* 34, no. 2 (March 2002): 227-264.
- See also Adrian Blackwell and Kanishka Goonewardena, "Poverty of Planning: Tent City and the New Official Plan," in *The Contested Metropolis*, ed. Raffaele
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- Landmark Building Group for Westside Lofts. See also Ute Lehrer, "Urban Renaissance and Resistance in Toronto," in *Whose Urban Renaissance? An International Comparison of Policy Drivers and Responses to Urban Regeneration Strategies*, eds. L. Porter and K. Shaw (London: Routledge, 2006), 147-156.
- Roger Keil and John Graham, "Reasserting Nature: Constructing Urban Environments After Fordism," in *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millennium*, eds. Bruce Braun and Noel Castree (London/New York: Routledge, 1998).
- Ute Lehrer, "The Urban Artefact as a Prototype for Lifestyle Changes: Sales Offices, Billboards and Advertisement Strategies for Condominium Towers in Toronto," (paper presented at *Urban Artefacts, Types, Practices, Circulations*, University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland, June 14-15, 2007).
- <http://www.76shuter.com>.
- <http://www.boutiquecondos.ca>.
- <http://www.chateauroyal.ca>; website expired.
- [http://www.22condominiums.com/main\\_nav.html](http://www.22condominiums.com/main_nav.html); website expired.
- Text from original condo website, expired.
- <http://www.londoncondos.ca/flash/index.html>.
- <http://www.cityplace.ca/panorama>.
- <http://www.yorkvilleresidences.com>.
- <http://www.museumhouseonbloor.com/buildingfeatures.php>; this is the text of today. Seven years back the text read: "Forever views both north and south."
- <http://www.cityplace.ca/hve/index.asp>.
- Leslie Kern, "Selling the 'Scary City'," *Social and Cultural Geography* 11, no. 3 (May 2010): 209-230.
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Ute Lehrer is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University and a member of the CITY Institute. She has held academic positions at Brock University, SUNY Buffalo, and ETH in Zurich. This article is based on a SSHRC-funded Research Grant on "Urban Images, Public Space and the Growth of Private Interest in Toronto," in which she studied the development of private residential real estate development in the form of condominium towers in Toronto. She is currently involved in a major research project on global suburbanisms.