

Condo Towers and Buried Streams: Stories from *The Housing Show*

Gabriel Levine & Shelby Shapiro

The Housing Show was a collaborative documentary-theatre project that used verbatim voice, puppetry, movement, and multimedia to tell stories of the ongoing housing crisis in Toronto. Created by director Gabriel Levine and Drama students of Glendon Campus at York University, the resulting performance in March 2020 had three sections: “The Consultation” (a mock public forum on affordable housing staged in the university cafeteria using verbatim text from interviews), four “Table Shows” (tabletop object-theatre performances featuring stories from the housing crisis), and “Land and Water” (a movement and video piece that questions what it means to make a home on Indigenous land).¹ The performance sought to stage pressing questions of precarity and inequality, and to foster more truthful conversations about privilege, class, race, and belonging in our community.

Gabriel Levine is a writer, teacher, musician and theatre artist living in Toronto. He has released numerous recordings on Constellation Records and other labels, and his puppet-theatre projects have toured to festivals in North America, Europe, and the Middle East. He co-edited *Practice* (2018), published in the MIT/Whitechapel series Documents of Contemporary Art, and his book *Art and Tradition in a Time of Uprisings* (2020) was recently published by MIT Press. His writing has appeared in the journals *Performance Research*, *PUBLIC*, *Topia*, *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, *Canadian Theatre Review*, and others. He is co-curator of Toronto’s Concrete Cabaret, and is currently Program Coordinator and Assistant Professor of Drama and Creative Arts, Glendon College, York University. [website: gabriellevine.net]. **Shelby Shapiro** is an English and Drama Studies major in her fourth and final year at Glendon College, York University. She is the President of *GUESS – Glendon Undergraduate English Student Society*, organizing several writing workshops and events at the college. She was one of the original creators of *The Housing Show*, writing the song “Buried Streams” and the final land acknowledgement. She is currently curating and compiling documentation of *The Housing Show*.

¹ The March 2020 performance of *The Housing Show* featured direction by Gabriel Levine, set and projection design by Duncan Appleton, lighting design by Lisa van Oorschot, and choreography by Meredith Thompson. The show was created and performed by Bella Baldin, Suannah Berrette, Jonah Blander, Madeleine Borg, Alex Chan, Ryan Dietrich, Kate Dover, Amanda Kadima, Kelly-Ange Leke, Elizabeth Lima, Carmen Searson, Shelby S., Cassandra Singh, Daniella Ungaro, and Sarah “Westy” Weston.



Figure 1. Construction site and demonstrators in solidarity with Indigenous land defenders, Toronto. Photo by Gabriel Levine, 2020.

1. Social drama

GABE: In a downtown Toronto hotel ballroom in summer 2019, I attend one of the public consultations for the Quayside “smart city” plan by Google affiliate Sidewalk Labs. The ambitious master plan, which was later scuttled, hoped to turn large swaths of the Toronto waterfront into a soft dystopia of mass-timber constructed buildings and data-mining, with self-warming sidewalks and sensors everywhere. It was a near-giveaway of prime city-owned land to one of the world’s richest corporations—an entity with no track record of urban development—who promised a sprinkling of semi-affordable units to sweeten the deal. That day, the public consultation’s structure immediately strikes me as theatrical. Three acts: an opening presentation in the ballroom, then breakout sessions on specific issues with participants seated around tables, and finally a return to the ballroom for a whole-group debate. The initial presentation is by Waterfront Toronto, who attempt to give a neutral outline of the vague and far-reaching project. Then in smaller rooms, in groups of ten around the tables in our breakout sessions, we state our concerns to Waterfront Toronto staff and board members. I am seated with digital activist Bianca Wylie, who coolly slices into the inequities and lack of accountability in Sidewalk Labs’ 1500-page illustrated “master plan.” Later, when we reassemble in the ballroom, partisans on both sides move into the

aisles and take the mics. Boosters of the project want Toronto on the map for this “world class” and “exciting” digital initiative; critics wonder how a U.S.-based conglomerate gets to turn 90 acres of public waterfront into a lab for data-monetization in the service of their own product development. I love the crackle of disagreement, the varied voices (although skewed, like most public consultations, toward the white and the wealthy), the applause and jeers from the crowd, the sense of public life in the making. I wonder: in *The Housing Show*, can we translate this three-act structure into theatrical performance, offer the mic to unheard voices, go deeper into matters of land and housing, and question how the living earth is packaged up and sold as “real estate”?

2. Home

SHELBY: I sit in my favourite cafe with my phone in my empty bowl in front of me, as the former student who I am going to interview about the history of their own precarious housing situation smiles back at me from across the table. Warm and pleasant as always, they are not someone whom a privileged person would have pegged as being homeless at any time in their life. Early on in our conversation, they invite me to learn some new terminology: the difference between being “underhoused” and being “street involved.” Underhoused is a term that applies to anyone who does not currently have their own accommodation, as opposed to street-involved people, often referred to as “panhandlers” or “homeless people.” It is possible to be both, or one or the other. Some of the people who approach you on the street may have an apartment with children they are trying to support and may only be street-involved because they are unable to find or keep a job. Then there are those who do not have their own home, but through connections with friends, couch surfing, and sometimes sex work, are able to find somewhere to sleep each night. To the naked eye—naked of any housing precarity and financial fear, that is—these underhoused people appear put-together, well-dressed, generally happy, and for all intents and purposes “normal.” I have learned better than to apply the terms “normal” and “average” here, as a recent study found that “36% of Canadians have been homeless themselves or know someone who has been homeless” (CAEH 2020). I, however, am in the privileged position of never having had my housing status put up in the air, and likely will not for the foreseeable future. Yet as our conversation continues, it becomes clear that in the delicate state of Toronto’s housing climate, many are just one payment, one mistake, from losing their accommodation, and that those who do not have family support are far more likely to experience homelessness. The harsh reality that comes from living an underhoused life leaves long-lasting effects on one’s mental and physical health. During the period they describe, my interviewee often couch-surfed, and relied on dating and hook-up sites like Grindr to dictate where and when they would have a place to stay. When they couldn’t find one, they would spend the

night sitting in a 24-hour McDonalds with a small coffee, so as not to freeze in the cold Canadian winter. There is much that we don't think about when it comes to the comfort of our homes. Many of us take for granted having a solitary space, a place to think, a place to call our own.

GABE: I'm writing these lines from a vacant basement apartment below my one-bedroom rental, which our building's residents have long used for storage and office space without the permission of our landlord. The walls are crumbling, it's damp and dark, but it's a cheap refuge down here. I am one of the lucky ones, although my partner and I feel stuck in our affordable but cramped apartment with our five-year-old son, unwilling to pay triple or quadruple our current rent for something more spacious. I'm a full-time professor (in a semi-precarious, contractually-limited position) at a major Toronto research university, but I missed the property boom in Toronto, and now I watch as house and condo prices spiral into the stratosphere, even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic. How did the middle-class city I grew up in become a playground for the rich? How have policy and planning become tools to enrich homeowners, white settlers, the already wealthy? How can tenants, Black people, Indigenous people, newcomers, artists—anyone without family wealth—survive in this “hedge city”?² As I research these questions in preparation for *The Housing Show*, I learn that gentrification is not an inevitable process, but a political policy choice. Sam Stein's *Capital City* (2019) describes how complicit planners “use gentrification to create the physical environment for capital to thrive. It is the process by which cities seek capital and capital seeks land” (78). As Stein puts it, in words that remind me of Toronto's transformation:

Its endgame is a city controlled by bankers and developers, run like a corporation, designed as a luxury product and planned by the finance sector. What was public becomes private; what was common becomes enclosed; what was cheap becomes expensive; what was shared becomes traded. (78)

This process of privatization and gentrification is conducted by what Stein calls “the real estate state.” Across the world, municipal, provincial and federal governments have been captured by real estate capital. States and municipalities enact policies that benefit developers, private equity, and landowners, deepening social and racial inequalities. But crucially, in the settler state of Canada, the process of enclosing the commons began long ago, with the dispossession of Indigenous nations and the transformation of Mother Earth into property. Gentrification is the latest act in the colonization of this land and the expulsion of its original

² The phrase “hedge city” refers to the purchase by international speculators of urban real estate as a hedge against more volatile investments, which further drives up prices. It was coined by Vancouver-based planning scholar Andy Yan (see Gurstein and Yan 2019, 232).

inhabitants. And here I am, a settler writing in a basement sunk into land owned by an absentee slumlord, while the buried Garrison Creek rushes somewhere in the depths below me, occasionally seeping up through cracks in the foundation as a stormwater surge. Can the buried histories of settlement, dispossession, commodification and gentrification, sedimented in the city's land and water, be allowed to seep up into the light?



Figure 2. Audience members at *The Housing Show*. Video still by Natalie Logan, 2020.

SHELBY: “If you can’t afford to live here, move.” Says one of my fellow Drama students as we sit together around a long table in a university classroom on a Tuesday evening. His statement cools the atmosphere of the room considerably, raising gasps of surprise as the rest of the group struggles to take in the harshness of his suggestion.

“But if you don’t have any money, how can you afford to move?” replies another of my peers.

“And all the jobs are here,” says another. Many people believe that this is the easiest way to fix the Toronto housing problem. If you can’t take the heat, get out of the kitchen, right? I can still remember how angry that statement made me. Having grown up in Kitchener-Waterloo, and moved to Toronto to continue my post-secondary education, there really wasn’t a question of whether or not I could leave the city. Growing up I always knew I wanted to go to university in Toronto, the looming big city just more than an hour away. I was hurt because without the financial support of Ontario and my year off working three jobs, realistically I could never afford to live in Toronto on my own. It’s just too expensive. Even

now, sharing a bachelor basement apartment with my partner of three years, we rely heavily on OSAP's financial aid and our two jobs. The reality of the situation is that if you can't afford to live in Toronto, where employers and schools are clustered, you are just as likely to not be able to afford to live anywhere else.

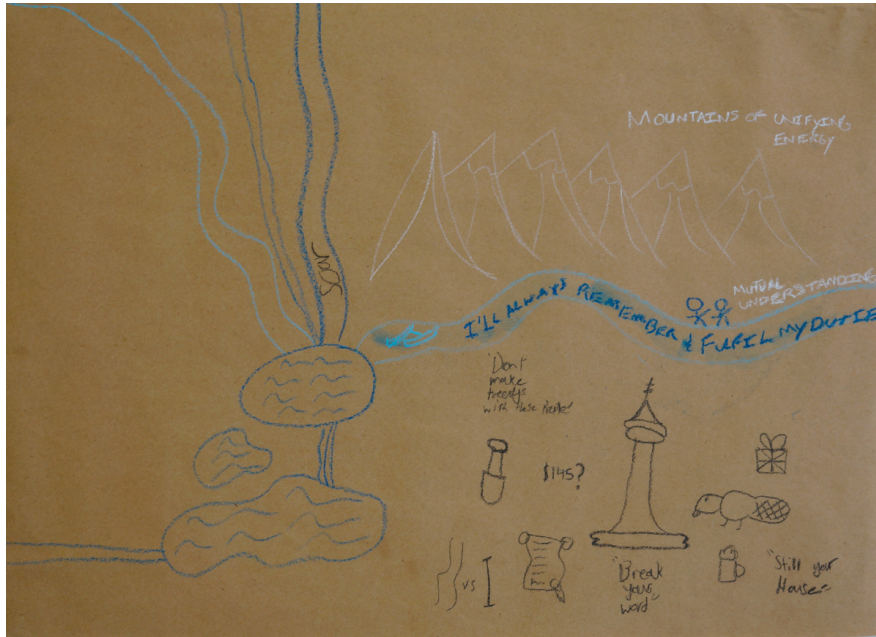


Figure 3. A student's drawing from the *Talking Treaties* workshop with Ange Loft and collaborators, York University Glendon campus, 2019.

3. Treaties

GABE: From 2017 to 2019, before I begin working on *The Housing Show*, I closely follow the *Talking Treaties* project, led by Ange Loft, a multidisciplinary artist and theatre-maker from Kahnawake Mohawk Territory. Loft was working under the umbrella of Jumbly Theatre, in collaboration with historian Victoria Freeman and many other artists and volunteers, to gather and retell the histories of Indigenous treaty-making on the land that is now Toronto. The team did countless interviews, filling binders with testimonies from Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices, and excavated historical documents and images, turning them into the groundwork for large-scale pageants, workshops, and installations. At the *Talking Treaties Spectacle*, a pageant staged at historic Fort York in 2017 and 2018, dancers in mascot-like Beaver and Britannia costumes lead the crowd around the historical buildings, while Indigenous performers move across the stone walls reciting a collage of found text, interview snippets, and cheeky call-and-response poetry. At

one end of the site, a huge pile of calico-cloth-wrapped objects—jugs of rum, mirrors, kettles—sits beneath the CN tower and condo skyline. These objects stand in for the gifts offered by the British during the so-called “Toronto Purchase”—a deal so shady that it had to be done twice, in 1787 and again in 1805. In the frameworks of Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee treaty-making, these presents were not payment in exchange for land, but a sign of an ongoing relationship supposedly built on mutual trust and obligation. The giving of presents shows that the parties *were present* and ready to enter into relations of respect and reciprocity (Rath 2014, 303). Treaty is not a done deal, but (as performers in the *Talking Treaties Spectacle* chant repeatedly) “a long-term relationship to take care of the land and the relationships between humans and non-human peoples on that land” (“Talking Treaties Spectacle” 2018). But in treaties like the Toronto purchase, this practice of reciprocity ran up against a colonial ontology of property. Once “purchased” under property law, land becomes fungible: a possession to be bought, sold, and disposed of. The settler-colonial city is based on the ownership of land as property: this is never truly threatened by land claims like those settled by the city of Toronto with the Mississaugas of the Credit in 2010. As a performer states in the *Talking Treaties Spectacle*, quoting an interviewee from the Mississaugas of the Credit: “When you do a land claim settlement, you will never get your land back, actual land back” (“Talking Treaties Spectacle” 2018). But treaty as “living relationship” still binds all of us living on this land (Stark 2010, 152). The tension between land as property and treaty as living relationship, so crucial to Loft and Jumblies’ *Talking Treaties* project, is at the core of what I want to explore in *The Housing Show*.

SHELBY: On a cold November afternoon in 2019, my peers and I from Glendon College’s third year Approaches to Theatre class participated in an eye-opening workshop brought to us by Jumblies Theatre and Ange Loft. Right from the outset, there was something comforting and calm about how Loft and her co-facilitators, Nimikii Couchie-Waukey and Jamie-lee Oshkabewisens, controlled the room. The tables that were normally arranged in a ‘U’ to facilitate active conversation had been pushed closer together to create one long table that divided the room. Across it lay sheets of brown kraft paper, with baskets of art supplies and small ribboned tags of paper marked with mysterious symbols. I felt like I had been transported back to kindergarten and we were about to engage in afternoon craft time. However, what we were crafting was not the PVA-glue-and-tape concoctions of my childhood; it was instead the slow but steady crafting of an understanding of the history of Toronto’s colonial establishment as a city. As we drew blue rivers on the brown paper and added keywords drawn from oral testimonies, the workshop asked us to reflect on our pre-conceptions of Indigenous histories and cultures, and encouraged us to keep learning about the people who were so blatantly displaced and disregarded in our not-so-distant past.



Figure 4. Performers sing “Buried Streams,” by Shelby S., from *The Housing Show*. Video still by Natalie Logan, 2020.

After participating in Jumblies Theatre’s *Talking Treaties* workshop, I was motivated to move beyond my white settler guilt to create something that engaged with Toronto’s sordid history. I was haunted by the reality of an unchangeable past, the potent visuals, and the emotional testimonies. In the days that followed my experience with the workshop, I didn’t want to let myself move on from the discomfort it had roused within me. The specific images of the rivers, once open and flowing freely, now confined beneath our city’s layers of concrete, litter, and poverty, radicalized me. The fact that you need to search of your own accord to learn about the historical significance in the city’s name, the years of tradition erased by discarded treaties and manipulative miscommunications, motivated me to write. This inspiration eventually led to the creation of the song “Buried Streams,” which was later included in *The Housing Show*.

Months later, after the conclusion of *The Housing Show*, I once again found myself engaged with the content and research of The Toronto Purchase. However, this time I began to build a bank of resources and perspectives around the subject. It was during this time that I truly began to feel the colonial weight and pressure that the Toronto Purchase has left in its wake. In a time of revolutionary movements such as Black Lives Matter and Land Back, it seems that now more than ever is the right time to return to the injustice of such a blatant betrayal of trust and breach of contract (or treaty). But how to do this without getting overwhelmed, or paralyzed by guilt? Ange Loft herself has commented that “you can’t treat everything sacredly, in a sense. It’s just sad. It’s sad stuff. So

how do you say the sad stuff without making people too sad? You have to maintain hope” (Loft 2019, 7). The more that we engage with these topics in a creative way, the more the public becomes aware of their existence, and we can begin to reconcile with the treachery of the past.



Figure 5. Scene from “Period Piece,” from *The Housing Show*.
Video still by Natalie Logan, 2020.

4. Verbatim

SHELBY: I first heard the term “period poverty” in my first year of university, during a conversation with a member of the Women’s and Trans centre of my college campus. We were talking about how difficult it could be to obtain period products as a young woman, especially in low-income homes, when she casually introduced the term. It wasn’t until the early stages of *The Housing Show*, where one of our tasks was to do some preliminary research surrounding housing in Toronto, that I decided to introduce this subject to my peers. In “Periods an Extra Hardship For Homeless Women,” *Toronto Star* housing reporter Emily Mathieu notes that “as many as 235,000 Canadians experience homelessness in a year, with women accounting for 27 per cent... There is also, experts say, a vast number of women who count as hidden homeless, or who are living in unsafe, temporary, overcrowded or precarious conditions” (2017). Mathieu’s article does more than just offer statistics: it offers an exposé on the emotional and traumatizing realities of being a low-income person with a vagina.

I found the article particularly moving, in that it gave first-hand testimonies by underhoused women of how they were forced to deal with their menstruation with insufficient products. It was only in retrospect that it became clear to me that I had also experienced forms of period poverty in my adolescence. Having had to make some of the same sacrifices as the women in the article, like foregoing lunch or transportation in favour of purchasing much needed materials. I realized why I found such a strong connection to this issue and how learning and talking about it made me feel like I could make a difference. Our “table show,” *Period Piece*, is inspired by Mathieu’s article, incorporating strong visual components—a giant fabric vagina, an oversized tampon costume made of kraft paper, the live popping of a condom—to accompany the women’s testimonies. We adapt verbatim statements, like “what if I have a heavy flow” and “they only give four or five at a time,” to show what the severity of period poverty can look like when it is openly discussed.

GABE: In December, at the end of our first semester of work, students present brief solo performances based on the research we’ve done into the housing crisis and questions of land and belonging, including the Talking Treaties workshop. There are some flashes of insight that we’ll later incorporate into the show: Kate’s participatory (rigged) board game called *Rentopoly*, and Shelby’s song about buried rivers and broken treaties. But many of the other performances are caricatures of housing experiences, especially of homelessness. Students envision these experiences as best they can, but they participate in the cultural imagination that reduces housing precarity to a set of prefabricated narratives: the teen mother, the abandoned husband, the chess-player in the park. This despite all of our reading into documentary theatre traditions that draw on in-depth research, from *The Farm Show* to *This is For You, Anna*, to *London Road* (Filewod 1987, Barton 2008, Belfield 2018). Several group members call out this slide into stereotyping, and as the director/professor I take responsibility for it. To correct this, when we regroup in January our priority becomes conducting interviews and gathering verbatim text. With guidance from Robin Belfield’s book *Telling the Truth* (2018), a workshop from playwright Natasha Greenblatt, and a presentation by housing researcher Kenny Lamizana, each student seeks out an interview subject—experts, interested parties, and diverse members of the public—and conducts a long-form interview on their experience of housing in the city. A script team (composed of myself and three students) then takes the stack of transcriptions and begins the task of sifting, selecting, and compositing these hundreds of pages of text into dramatic form. I am new to this way of working, and while I bring my editing and theatre-making skills to bear, it’s still an overwhelming amount of work. I gain new respect for the painstaking labour of documentary playwrights! Slowly, an imaginary public consultation takes shape out of this mountain of words: three experts (a planner, a journalist, and a human rights lawyer) invite members of the

public to debate the lack of affordable housing in our city. Sparks fly, and these borrowed words have a frisson of truth. A “reality effect,” of course (Barthes 1969)—but we’ve left caricature behind. To the point that in performance some members of the audience are fooled into thinking they’ve stumbled into a real public event, and one spectator even takes the mic...



Figure 6. An unexpected guest at “The Consultation,” from *The Housing Show*. Video still by Natalie Logan, 2020.

SHELBY: Live performance is an exercise in unpredictability and the unknown. Working alongside a diverse array of creators and professionals means you need to be comfortable with variation and flexibility. *The Housing Show*, a somewhat guerilla-like theatre show, realistically mimics the sensation of a public consultation by inserting the performers into the audience and calling for others to share their stories. By performing an interactive piece like this, we were perhaps asking for audience members to mistake performance for reality and come to the microphone to share their own troubles regarding the Toronto’s housing crisis. Despite taking time to consider this possible intrusion, our cast was dumbfounded when, on our opening night, a young student decided it was time to air his grievances to our audience. Listening to a frustrated student from Hong Kong in leisure active-wear crack jokes and gesture to me and other performers staged as “experts” could only be described as surreal. His complaints of unrealistically expensive housing, lack of available housing, and the uncomfortable realities of living in student accommodation merged into our curated consultation consisting of other verbatim text from the community. This surprise student managed to collapse our 90-

minute show's central arguments into a ten-minute interruption of improvised hilarity and true gumption. It's one thing to sit in a university classroom reading and watching documentaries and journal articles about the critical state of Toronto's housing, and a completely different experience listening to a peer exclaim, "Okay, can we all agree the food is shit here?" in the very cafeteria that he is critiquing. The cafeteria came alive: people beyond just the prescribed audience of our show became engaged in our consultation and even cheered and applauded the jibes at the food and accommodation of the very college where we sat. Though our show proceeded to run two more times uninterrupted, our opening night was punctuated by this visceral moment that only the cast and crew knew was an interruption rather than a staged monologue. This surprise guest validated our show's point that we need to start talking honestly about housing in Toronto, and that these issues are as easily unearthed at 8:00pm on a Thursday evening as they are in months of preparation.

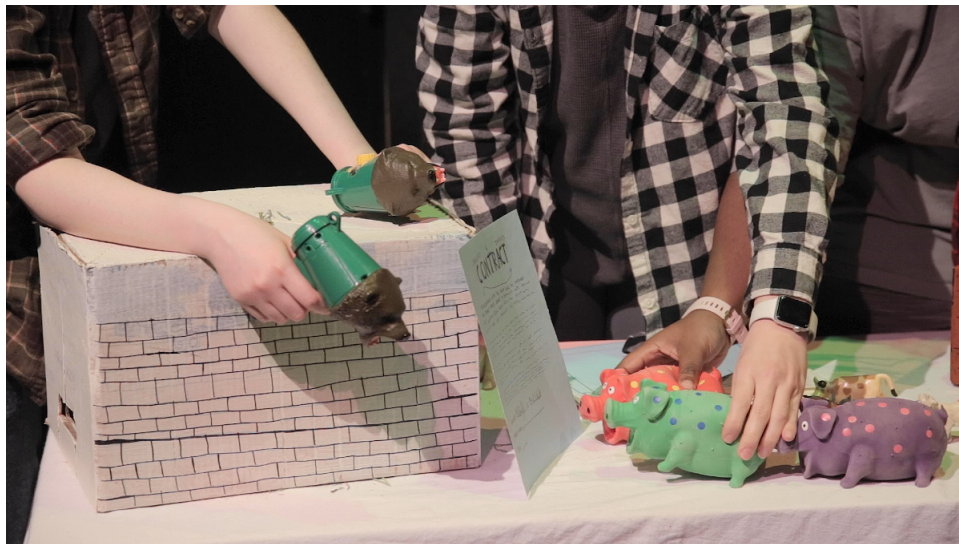


Figure 7. Scene from "The Farm Show," part of *The Housing Show*.
Video still by Natalie Logan.



Figure 8. Scene from “Roommates,” part of *The Housing Show*.
Photograph by Duncan Appleton, 2020.

5. Play

GABE: In the second half of the performance, in four corners of the theatre divided by illuminated paper apartment buildings, small groups perform their “table shows.” The audience rotates through these short object-based pieces that take up aspects of the housing crisis: from differential housing experiences based on race and queerness, to the vagaries of life with roommates, to the experience of homeless women struggling to find clean pads and tampons. The content is often stark, but the tone is playful: in one of the tabletop performances, “The Farm Show,” three performers stage a mock children’s TV show in which a band of farm animals stage a rent strike against their sleazy wolf landlords. The squeaking noises and wolf howls of the plastic toys add the right kind of absurdity to this upside-down fairy tale.

In *The Housing Show*, playing with objects on tabletop stages turns the rigid architectonic structure of the city into a miniature playground.⁵ The housing crisis in Toronto is the result of political and economic decisions that have been concretized in the built environment: the commodification of land, restrictive zoning, the

⁵ I came to this tradition through the tabletop object-theatre of Paul Zaloom and the toy theatre of Great Small Works; see Fong and Kaplin 2003, Sussman 2014.

initiation of the Condo Act, the withdrawal from social housing, and the lack of purpose-built rental apartment construction (Lamizana 2019). These choices have produced a privatized and seemingly immutable urban landscape of gleaming condo buildings, spacious single-family homes, and crowded run-down apartment towers—with sharp social differentiations based on race and class. Shrunk to the size of a tabletop filled with cardboard and toys, the crisis and its divisions become a play-space that allows for construction, assembly, and reimagining. This sense of playful reassembly extends to the mock public consultation that opens *The Housing Show*, in which intimate stories and divergent experiences try to break through the bureaucracy and make housing policy more equitable and humane. In the promotional video that opens the consultation, a sponsorship message from the fictional Emerald City Investment Trust, two well-dressed developers dance a soft-shoe paean to “condos condos condos” and end up playing in a sandbox with toy diggers and Duplo blocks. Why should developers and real-estate investors be the only ones who get to play? Can we follow the dreams of radical urbanists and artists, and turn the city into an egalitarian space for play, care, pleasure, and imagination?

SHELBY: Once we finally had the skeleton of a script, we prepared for the performance during an intensive week of full-time rehearsals. These took place during the Winter semester of our term’s Reading Week. We were to meet every day from 10am until 4pm and attendance was mandatory. This rehearsal time was short but intense. We worked long days physically plotting and blocking our show, as well as crafting and finalizing the sets and performances for our “table shows” that we had prepared in four small groups. Between rehearsals, essay-writing for other classes, working, and preparing for a Linguistics midterm (my first class on the subject), I was overworked. It was inevitable that halfway through the week I developed a cold and a pretty high temperature. All of this to say, I don’t quite remember much of the rehearsal process. I spent most of my time reading my lines (and then immediately forgetting them), doing my homework on the subway, and extremely high on cold medications. It was only later, during the actual performances of *The Housing Show*, that some of my peers recited to me anecdotes of my either cold or drug-induced antics, of which I have no memory. A week after our performances the entire university closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and I was afforded a small amount of time to rest. I feel fairly certain that what I experienced was not the virus responsible for a global shutdown, as no one around me showed any signs of contracting my illness after we made contact, but as that time remains mostly a blur in my memory, I might never know.



Figure 9. Scene from Emerald City Investment Trust’s promotional video, part of *The Housing Show*. Video still by Victoria Matchett, 2020.

6. Performances

GABE: March 5, 2020: *The Housing Show*’s opening night, one week before a COVID lockdown that will irrevocably alter our shared reality. A crowd has gathered in the Glendon Cafeteria, in rows before a low stage, flanked by two flatscreen monitors that read “Glendon Forum on Affordable Housing.” We’ve given the stage an official and institutional look for the opening panel, with cloth-draped tables, name cards, microphones onstage and in the aisles, and lights shining up the wood-panelled walls. Despite Kate in her top hat hosting a game of *Rentopoly* to the side of the stage, more than one audience member asks me, “wait, is this actually a play?”

The consultation proceeds in a realist vein, with panelists arguing and students planted in the crowd coming up to the microphones to share their stories. This is interrupted by a student’s karaoke performance of R&B artist Solange’s melancholic hit “Cranes in the Sky,” a reference to condo towers in her old Miami neighbourhood. As Bella sings while walking up the steps to the stage, the lights dim, images of construction cranes flash on the monitors, a disco ball spins, and performers rise from the crowd and begin to dance. It’s a dream of connection, longing, and desire in the middle of all the hard-nosed social drama.



Figure 10. “Cranes in the Sky,” from *The Housing Show*. Video still by Natalie Logan.

At the end of the Consultation, the audience is invited to walk into the adjoining black box theatre, where lit-up paper apartment towers become a shadow screen for domestic scenes of tea-drinking and soup-making. After being divided into two groups, and rotating through the four corners of the theatre to watch the Table Shows, the crowd reassembles for the performance’s final movement, Land and Water.

SHELBY: In a post Truth and Reconciliation Commission Canada we have seen a rise in the public discourse surrounding the issues of Canada’s past relations with its Indigenous peoples. This has led to an increase in the practice of the land acknowledgement: a recognition of the systematic colonial displacement of Indigenous peoples and the honouring of the current treaty holders. I was taught that each statement should reflect an individual’s own research and should be personalized and original to them. However, as the land acknowledgement has become a common practice for large groups of gathered people, it has quickly morphed into a universalized pre-written statement, sometimes recited in monotone with mispronunciations of key terms and groups of people. Recently, it feels as if these land acknowledgements (usually from large institutions) have become empty performatives, which has resulted in their being criticized, challenged, or satirized, as in a now-famous skit from *Baroness Van Sketch* (CBC Comedy 2019). We wanted to include the prescribed university land acknowledgement in the first part of *The Housing Show*, The Consultation, in order to create the illusion of an institutional event, and to gently satirize this often perfunctory gesture. However,

this didn't seem enough. The last part of the show, Land and Water, became our collective land acknowledgement. It was a moment where we could share with our audience the important histories that we had spent all year researching, and a time for us to acknowledge that our presence on this land was/is not without consequence.



Figure 11. The audience at *The Housing Show*. Photo by Duncan Appleton, 2020.

GABE: Land and Water begins with a shift in tone. From the social drama of the Consultation to the playful experiments of the Table Shows, we pass to a flowing collage of images, words and movement. The audience, previously divided in two, reassembles in an open space beside the lit-up paper towers. On a hanging scrim and an open floor criss-crossed by kraft paper pathways, images are projected: protesters marching in solidarity with Indigenous land defenders, historical maps of the Great Lakes and the Toronto Purchase, and contemporary maps of the shrinking reserve lands allocated to the Mississaugas of the Credit. In small groups, repeating a series of water-inspired gestures, performers dance their way slowly to the centre of the space.



Figure 12. “Land and Water,” from *The Housing Show*.
Photo by Duncan Appleton, 2020.

The projected maps fade to lapping water, turning the wall and floor into a rippling lake. Then, as the images become paper drawings taken from the Talking Treaties workshop, the students perform a final choral acknowledgment: of their dreams and desires of home, of the Indigenous peoples whose land we perform upon, and of the lack of Indigenous voices in our group. Finally, performers turn to the back wall of the theatre, which is made of tall windows. The theatre darkens, and floodlights illuminate the wintry trees and snow outside. It’s a glimpse of the land, looking out from the dream-space of the theatre.

Here, as in most cases, performance doesn’t change much in itself: it can’t give the land back or open up new affordable homes. But performance can offer a space for collective dreaming, a way to imagine a different arrangement of space and bodies. All of the bodies in this theatre and in this city need to be housed, somehow, on what we know is stolen land. There are no easy answers to this need to find more equitable ways of living together in the settler city, but the alternative is social misery and continuing injustice. Perhaps the planners, builders, and investors can step back and make some space for these bodies, for everyone living on this land, to find a better shared dream of home.

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