

THE HOME IS A PLACE FOR LIVING

fifteen conversations about inhabitation, adaptation, and the
rehabilitation of Toronto's post-war apartment buildings

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

Toronto is home to one of North America's largest stock of postwar residential towers, which house nearly a million people in over a thousand towers across the GTHA¹. Built throughout the postwar population and economic boom of the 1960s for an emerging middle class, these modernist structures have become the defining typology of the city's most isolated and inaccessible suburbs². Now thirty years past their intended lifespan, Toronto's ageing towers currently house a majority of the city's low-income residents in isolated, dilapidated complexes estranged from the city-at-large. Working alongside research conducted by the Tower Renewal Partnership, a cross-professional effort spearheaded by ERA Architects, this thesis explores how the architectural revitalization of these sites can help facilitate adaptable, self-sufficient neighbourhoods that prioritize notions of tenant ownership and agency within oftentimes hostile, inherited environments.

Post-war, low-income housing developments are subjected to narratives of seemingly inevitable cycles of decline and demolition; the towers' physical deterioration serving as a misrepresentation of actual daily life within these sites. These misrepresentations contribute to feelings of resident alienation and disempowerment, further exacerbating the physical degeneration of many of these tower neighbourhoods. Through interviews with residents, conversations with key community advocates, and typological site analysis, this research presents a methodology for revitalization. In environments where the scale of the architecture often overwhelms ideas of individual desire and agency, this research explores how to mediate the dissonance between hyper-density and the realities of domestic life. Through the renegotiation of previously overlooked spatial thresholds—balconies, corridors, and empty parking lots—the project examines how these liminal spaces can serve as a tool for user appropriation and activation. Using North York's Falstaff Towers as a testing ground for architectures of agency, this thesis investigates how a series of key design interventions can help reconnect Toronto's post-war towers on two scales: that of the resident and that of the community.

[1] Ted J. Kesik, and Ivan Saleff, *Tower Renewal Guidelines: For the Comprehensive Retrofit of Multi-Unit Residential Buildings in Cold Climates* (Toronto: Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design, University of Toronto, 2009), 1-24.

[2] Kesik and Saleff, *Tower Renewal Guidelines*, 4-7.

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[fig 01] post-war apartment tower typical exterior

Introduction

“The whole [building] felt like this world that we very much never able to leave, it felt like a closed ecosystem. It was one of the few rental opportunities in the neighborhood: we were surrounded by mostly semi-suburban, low-density single family homes. It was this enclosed little world - it really felt like a little world in itself, this tower. I didn’t like how disconnected you were from the street, even after you’d exited the hallway, gone down in the elevator, or the staircase, which we used surprisingly often. We took the stairs a lot, even on the ninth floor, because the elevators were slow and often out of order. When you’d eventually get outside, you’d have to cross this field, this driveway... it was an ordeal, it was so arduous. I hated it.”

— ‘Sam’, a post-war tower resident

Sam’s Story

In July of 2020, I sat down with Sam to speak about his experiences growing up in one of Toronto’s post-war apartment buildings. This conversation was part of a much larger series of interviews that found me speaking to both past and present post-war tower residents, as well as several key community advocates and organizers over the span of a few months. The broader goal of these conversations was to begin to catalogue the unique realities that living in this pervasive building typology presented, as well as to understand the nuances of how people occupied, transformed, and adapted their inherited living environments. These conversations, focused around exploring the dissonance between hyper-density and the actualities of domestic life, went on to become the foundation of this research, fundamentally grounding the project around the dialogue between the potential renewal of this aging building stock and the people who live in them.

Sam moved into his Westmount apartment in the early 2000s, shortly after his family first immigrated to Toronto. They moved several times within the building throughout the thirteen years that he lived there; starting off in a one bedroom unit where he shared a room with his parents and younger sister before eventually settling into a

three bedroom suite on the fifteenth floor.

Sam remembers long summers spent lounging on the balcony, shielded from the street by the tall, old oak tree that grew outside. He loved passing through the sun-soaked main lobby on his way home from school each day, admiring the intricate woodwork panels lining the walls that had been there for nearly forty years. Although the building's private sauna facilities —remnants of a bygone era of easily marketable, 'attainable' luxury— were dingy and underused, Sam appreciated having access to a quiet place to himself, a wonderful rarity in his small apartment.

Sam also remembers dark and impersonal hallways, where broken appliances and other wayward objects would be piled next to the elevator bank in case anyone else had any use for them. When the weather was nice, his mother would lay a carpet down over the rough, crumbling concrete of the balcony floor so that he could stand out there in bare feet. The building's superintendent had strict rules about how residents could furnish the balcony, greatly limiting how they could use the space.

He remembers having to walk twenty minutes to the nearest express bus stop, where from there it was still a 40 minute ride into the city. He remembers seemingly endless lengths of chain link fencing that separated him from the local park, and greatly overcomplicated how he was able to navigate the grounds. He remembers teens with no place to go, smoking in the stairwells and leaving little piles of garbage in their wake. Their presence made his mother very nervous.

Stories like this are not unique to this one building, but rather represent a larger pattern of experiences that have come to define the narrative of many of Toronto's post-war apartment towers; a narrative that, while grounded in reality, oftentimes leads to a distorted public perception of daily life within the city's tower neighbourhoods.

The Decline of the Apartment Neighbourhood

Over the last forty-five years, Toronto has become an increasingly divided city. Since the 1970s, the number of low-income neighbourhoods has multiplied nearly threefold, with over half of Toronto's modern neighbourhoods now classified as 'low-income'. These

areas are not only getting bigger, they're also moving. Unlike their predecessors that were predominantly located downtown with access to public transit and other services, Toronto's current low-income neighbourhoods have migrated from the inner-city towards the liminal sprawl of the suburbs as rapidly rising land values and the slow crawl of gentrification forced them out of land now deemed desirable³. As Toronto's developers expediently populate the land surrounding main transit arteries with high-rise condominiums, effectively monopolizing the city proper for the wealthy, Toronto's most isolated suburbs have become responsible for housing the city's lower-income residents in a very different breed of high-rise building: the post-war modernist tower.

Toronto is home to one of North America's largest stocks of post-war residential apartments, which house nearly a million people in over a thousand towers across the Greater Toronto Horseshoe Area (GTHA)⁴. Spawned by the national population and economic boom of the 1960s, these car-centric apartment buildings quickly dominated the city's suburban landscape, outnumbering single-detached family homes by a ratio of 2:1⁵. Originally constructed for an emerging middle class, Toronto's post-war towers boasted 'futuristic' amenities like indoor swimming pools, underground parking and panoramic views, marketing high-rise living as an appealing, modern alternative to the more traditional single-family home⁵. In conjunction with these conveniences, many of these tower neighbourhoods were designed under the modernist principles of the 'tower-in-the-park' approach: tall, dense apartment buildings surrounded by networks of shared parking lots and green space. Intended for a car-centric middle class, the planning of the towers assumed that those who lived there were able to easily commute to work and other districts in the city by car, prioritizing the design of expansive, open park spaces over a physical connection to the rest of the neighbourhood⁶.

This 'tower-in-the-park' style adopted by many of Toronto's post-war towers was initially proposed by Le Corbusier, who favoured the methodology for its tendency to "dismantle the messiness of pedestrian life"⁷. That, coupled with the tower's affinity for efficient, cost-effective, flying-form concrete construction and hyper-rational facades quickly

[3] John D. Hulchanski, *The Three Cities Within Toronto: Income Polarization Among Toronto's Neighbourhoods, 1970-2005* (Toronto: Cities Centre, University of Toronto, 2010)

[4] Ted J. Kesik, and Ivan Saleff, *Tower Renewal Guidelines: For the Comprehensive Retrofit of Multi-Unit Residential Buildings in Cold Climates* (Toronto: Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design, University of Toronto, 2009), 1-24.

[5] E.R.A Architects and University of Toronto, *Mayor's Tower Renewal: Opportunities Book* (Toronto: City of Toronto, 2008) 8-24.

[6] Lauren March and Ute Lehrer. "Verticality, Public Space and the Role of Resident Participation in Revitalizing Suburban High-Rise Buildings." *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, no. 28 (2019): 65-85.

[7] Lamar Anderson. "Modernism 2.0: A Tower in the Park Even Jane Jacobs Could Love." *Dwell*, August 28, 2012.

[8] E.R.A Architects and University of Toronto, *Mayor's Tower Renewal: Opportunities Book* (Toronto: City of Toronto, 2008) 8-24.

[9] Lauren March and Ute Lehrer. "Verticality, Public Space and the Role of Resident Participation in Revitalizing Suburban High-Rise Buildings." *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, no. 28 (2019): 65–85.

[10] Martine August, "Challenging the Rhetoric of Stigmatization: the Benefits of Concentrated Poverty in Toronto's Regent Park." *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 46, no. 6 (2014): 1317–33.

[11] Troels S Larsen and Kristian N Delica. "The Production of Territorial Stigmatisation: a Conceptual Cartography." *City* 23, no. 4-5 (2019): 540–63.

cemented these buildings as suburban modernist icons⁸.

However, as the post-war towers aged and planned building maintenance dwindled, the intended middle-income population left to seek better quality housing elsewhere, allowing for a new demographic of low-income tenants to move in. This new generation of residents, many of whom primarily rely on public transit and walking to get around, interact with the towers in a very different way than their wealthier predecessors; parking lots have become vast expanses of useless asphalt, large areas of unkempt 'parkland' acting as barriers between them and the rest of the city⁹. These experiments in suburban modernism only further distanced the post-war towers from their contemporary domestic context, the vastly different site strategies and aesthetics further differentiating the developments as the outlier in an otherwise cohesive residential neighbourhood. Although the original vision for Toronto's post-war towers was one of a suburban, pastoral utopia, myopic site strategies, strict modernist sensibilities and external stigmatization have estranged the developments from the greater urban fabric, generating acute sites of alienation.

The Aesthetics of the 'Other': Territorial Stigmatization & Toronto's Post-War Modernist Towers

Although generous in its conception, the tower-in-the-park approach created large-scale interruptions in the surrounding hyper-uniform suburban residential fabric, introducing a spatial disruption to an otherwise consistent neighbourhood plan. While typological variety in suburban settings does not inherently generate conflict on its own, clear territorial boundaries, coupled with the post-war towers tendency to introduce high densities of lower-income tenants to existing neighbourhoods helped facilitate a detrimental 'them vs us' mentality within existing communities¹⁰, leading to the territorial stigmatization of many of Toronto's low-income postwar suburban towers.

Conceptualized by sociologist Loïc Wacquant in the early 1990s, the term *territorial stigmatization* first referred to plainly "a negative public image of specific places", but was later expanded upon to clarify how urban space acts a catalyst for "social discredit"; clarifying how territorial stigma acts in concurrence with broader societal stigmas¹¹.

Oftentimes, this stigmatization feeds into discourses of isolation and perceived social danger, contributing to a rhetoric that frequently enables the complete destruction of low-income developments in the name of state-sanctioned gentrification and inevitable resident displacement¹². This relationship between alienation and eventual obliteration can be found in the histories of many notable modernist social housing developments, such as Missouri’s Pruitt-Igoe homes, London’s Robin Hood Gardens, and more locally, the recent demolition and ‘revitalization’ of Toronto’s Regent Park. Through the case study of Regent Park, we can begin to understand how the architectural alienation of post-war, modernist social housing developments can contribute to rhetorics of stigmatization, which in turn further distances the dwellings and their inhabitants from the cities they are a part of.

Perhaps best known as Canada’s first and most controversial public housing project, Regent Park was constructed throughout the late 1940s over the razed remnants of the infamous Cabbagetown slums. Designed to rehouse the existing population in modern, ‘sanitary’ conditions, Regent Park consisted of a collection of modest brick apartment blocks sited in a pseudo-bucolic landscape with extensive, mostly-unprogrammed lawns connecting some 1,060 new units. The 1950s saw the addition of five Peter Dickinson-designed towers, which added nearly 1,000 more units to the site¹³.

For the first ten years, Regent Park enjoyed a reputation free of stigma, initially lauded by critics for its role in the rejuvenation of one of Toronto’s most blighted neighbourhoods. However, the development quickly became a renewed focus for slum discourse by many, the prevailing opinion being that Regent Park had reverted back into a problem area filled with ‘dysfunctional families and social danger’¹⁴. Regent Park’s extensive network of lawns were technically designed as a public space, but lacked a clear organizational strategy or hierarchy. This condition left questions of stewardship unanswered; tenants were unsure of what constituted their ‘yards’ and what was shared parkspace, effectively allowing the lawns to mutate into a no-man’s land. This liminality allowed illicit activities —such as drug dealing and prostitution— to thrive, further stigmatizing the already controversial

[12] Loïc Wacquant et al. “Territorial Stigmatization in Action.” *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 46, no. 6 (2014): 1270–80.

[13] Albert Rose, *Regent Park: A Study in Slum Clearance*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1958)

[14] Martine August, “Challenging the Rhetoric of Stigmatization: the Benefits of Concentrated Poverty in Toronto’s Regent Park.” *Environment and Planning: Economy and Space* 46, no. 6 (2014): 1317–33.

[15] Martine August, "It's All About Power and You Have None: the Marginalization of Tenant Resistance to Mixed-Income Social Housing Redevelopment in Toronto, Canada." *Cities* 57 (2016): 25–32.

[16] Martine August, "Challenging the Rhetoric of Stigmatization: the Benefits of Concentrated Poverty in Toronto's Regent Park." *Environment and Planning: Economy and Space* 46, no. 6 (2014): 1317–33.

[17] August, "It's All About Power..." 25–32.

[18] August, "Challenging the Rhetoric..." 1317–33.

development¹⁵. Regent Park's open spaces —originally designed in part to help keep the development porous and accessible to the rest of the neighbourhood— came to represent socially impenetrable boundaries that clearly delineated Regent Park from the surrounding area.

The public stigma around Regent Park became so great that by the early 1970s, the name was synonymous with disrepair, violence and crime¹⁶. These narratives of social depravity were only exacerbated by the development's perceived isolation from the larger community; it came to represent a highly alienated enclave beyond the influence of typical social codes. This discourse allowed the media, state, and general public to write off Regent Park as an "island of despair"; a lesson in the failings of so-called "concentrated poverty"¹⁷.

When a proposal for the complete demolition of Regent Park materialized in the early 2000s, these characterizations were used as one of the justifications for introducing 5400 new market-rate condominiums to the site, a nearly three-fold increase in density that, when built, fundamentally and irrevocably altered the social composition of the neighbourhood. Throughout this process, the TCHC launched an extensive and effective campaign to market the revitalization efforts as 'tenant-oriented', pushing a false narrative that it was the existing residents who came up with the idea to redevelop Regent Park¹⁸. This approach built upon both the mainstream and academic popularity of a mixed-income development model in helping 'improve' troubled neighbourhoods¹⁸.

Researcher Martine August challenges the pervasive narrative about Regent Park, stating that although the development faced countless problems, the overall sentiment of residents was that the area was home to a strong, thriving community, and that it was, generally, a good place to live. Through extensive tenant interviews, August concluded that the narratives of desperate violence and deterioration propagated by the TCHC were "ubiquitous but often at odds with the realities of everyday life [in Regent Park], and [were] used as a justification for displacement and gentrification". August goes on to state that the image of Regent Park as a neighbourhood in social decline was contrary to most tenant's lived experiences, with many residents expressing that the development's community was one built

around mutual aid and unity, often stemming from the fact that many residents were facing similar economic burdens and external social stigmas¹⁹.

Although Regent Park faced many significant, tangible problems throughout its lifespan, the discourses of danger, dereliction, and alienation that plagued the development contributed significantly to its demise. While some of these narratives were rooted in reality, they were often exaggerated and taken out of context, used to propagate the myth of Regent Park as a ‘defamed’ place that was beyond saving. These negative archetypes helped facilitate the view that a complete tabula rasa was the only viable solution²⁰.

Ultimately, Regent Park’s aesthetic and spatial qualities contributed greatly in strengthening the narratives put forth by the development’s critics. Seemingly innocuous and once benevolent design decisions became symbols of social despair; old, punched windows in walls of monotonous brick represented more than just disrepair, acres of loosely programmed open space were viewed as a stage for unsavoury activities. Outsiders viewed Regent Park as a place that existed outside of the boundaries of everyday society, a sentiment only strengthened by the development’s stark visual difference - both in form and in siting- to the rest of the neighbourhood. This view of Regent Park as an isolated island within the city led to the popularity of the ideologies of ‘social mixing’ within areas of concentrated poverty and the demolition of the existing development²¹.

Fundamentally, Regent Park’s perceived alienation from its surroundings contributed greatly to its obliteration, with outside narratives of social isolation and instability overriding the everyday realities most tenants faced. Although the circumstances surrounding Regent Park’s demolition and subsequent ‘revitalization’ were specific and extreme, instances of territorial stigmatization and external prejudices are not unique to this area. Similar narratives exist in many suburban neighbourhoods throughout the GTA, with neighbourhoods like Jane-Finch, Rexdale, Malvern, and Flemingdon Park among others becoming metonymic for poverty, violence, and social isolation²². Like Regent Park, many of these areas have high concentrations of post-war towers which house many of the area’s low-income residents. While

[19] Martine August, “‘It’s All About Power and You Have None:’ the Marginalization of Tenant Resistance to Mixed-Income Social Housing Redevelopment in Toronto, Canada.” *Cities* 57 (2016): 25–32.

[20] August, “‘It’s All About Power...’ 25–32.

[21] Martine August, “Challenging the Rhetoric of Stigmatization: the Benefits of Concentrated Poverty in Toronto’s Regent Park.” *Environment and Planning: Economy and Space* 46, no. 6 (2014): 1317–33.

[22] Martine August, “Challenging the Rhetoric of Stigmatization: the Benefits of Concentrated Poverty in Toronto’s Regent Park.” *Environment and Planning: Economy and Space* 46, no. 6 (2014): 1317–33.

these areas do face significant social issues brought on by both outside discourses and the modern realities of low-income post-war tower developments, demolition and forced relocation of existing residents will do nothing to ease both the perceived and real issues of isolation that this typology of development faces.

Through the extraordinary circumstances surrounding Regent Park, we can begin to understand the drastic outcomes territorial stigmatization can have on low-income communities. Although Regent Park may be Toronto's most prolific and notorious high-density social housing developments, it does not exist as a singularity; rather, it exemplifies a common and deeply concerning trend that a majority of the city's low-income post-war towers are facing. Throughout these developments, outdated siting strategies, strict modernist spatial principals, and rampant stigmatization coalesce and transform Toronto's post-war towers into critical sites of alienation. In the case of Regent Park, this social and architectural alienation contributed to the development's downfall, displacing many of the area's low-income residents and contributing to the vicious cycle of demolition for the sake of gentrification.

Although Toronto's post-war tower stock has fallen victim to a decades-long campaign of disinvestment through lack of needed maintenance, funds, and attention, it exists as one of the region's most plentiful and valuable housing typologies. As discussions of 'regeneration' and 'redevelopment' arise, ample consideration must be given in regards to strengthening the existing communities found within these developments, while also reconsidering how they fit within their greater neighbourhood contexts.

[23] Ted J. Kesik, and Ivan Saleff, *Tower Renewal Guidelines: For the Comprehensive Retrofit of Multi-Unit Residential Buildings in Cold Climates* (Toronto: Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design, University of Toronto, 2009), 1-24.

Tower Renewal Initiatives

The Tower Renewal Partnership, a cross-professional effort spearheaded by the local firm E.R.A Architects, provides an alternative to decay and eventual demolition for many of Toronto's deteriorating post-war towers. The aim of the initiative is to rejuvenate the current tower stock focusing on six key areas: greenhouse gas reduction, housing quality, affordability, growth, complete communities, and culture²³. This initiative marks a pointed change in tone towards

Toronto's modernist high-rise buildings, acknowledging the apartment neighbourhoods as a 'tremendous housing resource', identifying that tower renewal should be considered a 'best practice' in planning moving forward, and recognizing the contemporary discourse surrounding the embodied energy challenges surrounding demolition²⁴. In the late 2010s, the Tower Renewal Guidelines were endorsed by the Toronto City Council as an official policy direction and were translated into several city-endorsed initiatives, such as the High-Rise Retrofit Improvement Support (Hi-RIS) program, the Residential Apartment Commercial (RAC) Zoning by-laws, the continual benchmarking of building energy performance and the founding of neighbourhood-based organizations like the Recipe for Community. Tower Renewal exists now as a permanent, city-run program within Toronto, that "drive[s] broad environmental, social, economic and cultural change by improving Toronto's concrete apartment towers and the neighbourhoods that surround them"²⁵.

The guidelines recognize the tremendous potential the original design of the city's post-war towers hold in their current forms; solid masonry exteriors allow for innovative yet straightforward overcladding strategies that have a minimal impact on existing residents. Large swaths of unprogrammed green space, especially when located near the city's extensive ravine network, provide a strong foundation for stormwater management systems. Occupiable, expansive roofscapes hold the potential for both solar and rainwater collections. The partnership understands that tower renewal initiatives are most successful when they combine sustainability measures with extensive community engagement processes.

While exciting in its potential and comprehensive in its scope, the Tower Renewal Partnership focuses more on larger-scale, top-down approaches to the rehabilitation of these neighbourhoods, neglecting to articulate avenues for tenant-controlled appropriation of space within the apartment neighbourhoods, across all scales and users, within their recommendations. Although the Tower Renewal Initiatives address some aspects of tenant control within their plan (i.e "complete communities" and "culture"), the current scheme does not address the idea of building-integrated agency and autonomy. If a framework is not

[24] E.R.A Architects, and University of Toronto, Mayor's Tower Renewal: Opportunities Book. (Toronto: City of Toronto, 2008) 8-24.

[25] "Tower Renewal ." Toronto - 311 Knowledge Base. Accessed January 21, 2021. <https://www.toronto.ca/311/knowledgebase/kb/docs/articles/social-development,-finance-and-administration/community-resources/tower-renewal.html>.

provided for residents of these ‘rehabilitated’ communities to transform the space into their own vision of home, the redevelopment of suburban high-rise towers will have been for naught; they will fall victim to the same familiar cycle most re-developed low income communities face—eventual decline and demolition.

A Case for Architecturally Considered User Appropriation

In September of 1929, the Frankfurt arm of the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM), held a conference revolving around the idea of ‘minimum housing’, undertaking a common problem faced by many cities after the end of World War One; a drastically increased demand for affordable housing²⁶. The solutions generated during this meeting proposed architectures that fulfilled an ‘existential minimum’, tied closely to mostly theoretical understandings and over-simplifications of what constituted necessity in a domestic environment. To compensate for the spatial extremes proposed, the Frankfurt Congress also advocated for the inclusion of increased formal rigor, as well as the maximization of access to light, air, and green space. In reality, many of these recompenses were ignored in practice and regarded as superfluous to the design²⁷. The consequences of these manifestos echo throughout the legacies of many modernist housing developments globally, first affecting low-income populations, and then, eventually, the middle-class through the adoption of popularized modernist principles, as is the case with much of Toronto’s post-war tower stock.

Architect Giancarlo de Carlo, an eventual member of CIAM himself, challenged the ethos set out by his predecessors, questioning a process that produced buildings concerned with achieving efficient minimums, rather than engaging with the everyday realities of human need and want²⁸. Under this manifesto, a building’s ‘beauty’ became closely tied to its ‘utility’, with hyper-functionality eventually overriding the inclusion of anything that could be accused of being simply ornamental. De Carlo argued that since the tools needed to actualize design proposals - land, money, material, jurisdiction - were entirely dependent on those in power, the architect oftentimes acted as an arm of the bourgeoisie state, which was more concerned with the

[26] Giancarlo De Carlo, “Architecture’s Public.” Essay. In *Architecture and Participation*, edited by Peter Blundell-Jones, Doina Petrescu, and Jeremy Till, (London: Spon Press, 2005) 3–22.

[27] Giancarlo De Carlo, “Architecture’s Public.” Essay. In *Architecture and Participation*, edited by Peter Blundell-Jones, Doina Petrescu, and Jeremy Till, (London: Spon Press, 2005) 3–22.

[28] Giancarlo De Carlo, “An Architecture of Participation.” *Perspecta* 17 (1980): 74–79.

perceived efficiency of a building, rather than the life it could offer its inhabitants²⁹.

Within this system, the relationship between the architect and the inhabitant was frequently interrupted by the desires of the state, creating a generation of buildings that were disconnected from their actual end use. In the case of many modernist housing developments, this dissociation oftentimes greatly contributed to their rapid deterioration, with users feeling no real loyalty to a place they were meant to call home. De Carlo states that the success of an architectural work is tied directly to how it's occupied, on the reciprocal relationships between space and inhabitant. A building should continually 'modify and be modified by the user', existing not as simply an empty shell but rather as an armature for living; continually adapted and transformed by the desires of the user³⁰. Identifying—and clarifying—the desires of the user requires an abandonment of the traditional, authoritarian planning practice in favour of insisting on direct participation within the design process, and continual involvement throughout the life of the building. As a building ages, it should be able to facilitate the needs of changing and diverse user groups, adapting to new desires and new inhabitants.

The 'Plus+' manifesto—developed by architects Anne Lacaton, Jean-Phillipe Vassal and Frederic Durot—explores this relationship between building, inhabiting, and transformation. The study engaged several French modernist, post-war social housing developments that were originally slated for demolition, and instead proposed an extension of space that fundamentally altered how the space was occupied, using the original building as an armature. The Plus+ approach works within existing frameworks ("never demolish, never replace"), cataloging, preserving and leveraging existing site conditions in order to find what is missing, and add to it³¹. This process of addition stands in stark contrast to the modernist preoccupations with 'minimums', instead preoccupying itself with questions of maximization: how can the expansion of existing space enable programmatic flexibility? How can strategic architectural interventions help facilitate 'freedom of use' for inhabitants, enabling change without the input of an architect³²?

[29] Giancarlo De Carlo, "Architecture's Public." Essay. In *Architecture and Participation*, edited by Peter Blundell-Jones, Doina Petrescu, and Jeremy Till, (London: Spon Press, 2005) 3-22.

[30] De Carlo, "Architecture's Public." 3-22.

[31] Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal. *The Incidents: Freedom of Use*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2015.)

[32] Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal. *The Incidents: Freedom of Use*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2015)

The Cite du Grand Parc project —the renovation of a 530 unit post-war development on the outskirts of Bordeaux— engaged with this idea of maximization through the expansion of the existing facade, adding three metre deep winter-gardens to each unit. This new space was highly adaptable, ultimately allowing inhabitants to transform their units as they saw fit. These extensions became gardens, lounges, second bedrooms — by simply supplying occupants with the freedom to easily adapt their living space to suit their needs, the Cite du Grand Parc provided its users with autonomy and agency over their environments, inviting those who lived there to actively participate in the design of space, even after construction was complete³³.

[33] Lacaton & Vassal and Durot. “GHI Le Grand Parc.” Essay. In *Vital Neighbourhoods: Lessons from International Housing Renewal*. (London: Publica, 2017)

The Paris-based atelier d’architecture autogérée (aaa) is a multidisciplinary practice occupied with the concept of ‘self-managed’ architecture. The studio operates as a collaborative network focused on the transformation of liminal urban spaces throughout the city through the provision of flexible infrastructure. Their project ECObox, located within abandoned lots in the Parisian newcomer district of La Chapelle, consists of a series of gardens made from recycled materials as well as mobile furniture components including cooking, media and workshop stations. The space is controlled and maintained by local residents, guest researchers, and the collective, and helped ‘domesticate’ previously unapproachable sites by allowing users to fully lay claim to the area³⁴. The highly-adaptable nature of the space has allowed the project to take on many forms, changing and growing with the community.

[34] “Atelier D’architecture Autogérée.” 180: Spatial Agency. Accessed August 1, 2021. <https://www.spatialagency.net/database/aaa>.

Historically, the architect has acted as the hand of an often unseen but resolute authority, implementing an overwhelmingly top-down approach to design that leaves the resident as a passive inheritor of an unfamiliar space³⁵. This process is highly evident within Toronto’s post-war tower stock, where resident alienation is prevalent at all scales of development, from neighbourhood to unit.

[35] Giancarlo De Carlo, “Architecture’s Public.” Essay. In *Architecture and Participation*, edited by Peter Blundell-Jones, Doina Petrescu, and Jeremy Till, (London: Spon Press, 2005) 3–22.

As conversations around the ‘revitalization’ of these sites become increasingly popular, renewal strategies must fully embrace notions of resident agency and autonomy in order to ensure the future longevity and success of these schemes. User participation within the design process is also not enough on its own; although a solid first step in

envisioning a more hopeful future for the currently dysfunctional apartment neighbourhoods, the architect must also accommodate for prolonged and varied user appropriation of space within the retrofit initiatives. Toronto's suburban towers are currently home to an incredibly diverse population whose needs vary drastically from resident to resident. There are no universal solutions when it comes to successful tower renewal strategies; each site, each building, and each unit must be recognized as having unique and ever-transforming requirements.

A way to address this variability within the apartment neighbourhoods is to design avenues for tenant appropriation of space. The currently existing modernist framework present within the post-war towers provides an opportunity for residents to capitalize on an existing sense of flexibility and adaptability within their homes. The tower renewal initiatives are in a position to explicitly embed this ideology within the suburban tower neighbourhoods, providing a structure for both present and future users to adapt their environment to suit their needs. This strategy gives residents a sense of agency over their own homes, and has the potential to create a network of independent, versatile neighbourhoods that grow and change with their populations, avoiding the traditional trap of obsolescence and eventual demolition fifty years in the future.

At Home: a conversation with 'S' about inhabitation, adaptation and Toronto's post-war apartment buildings.

At Home: a conversation with 'AI' about inhabitation, adaptation, and Toronto's post-war apartment buildings.

At Home: a conversation with 'C&S' about inhabitation, adaptation, and Toronto's post-war apartment buildings.

At Home: a conversation with 'P' about inhabitation, adaptation, and Toronto's post-war apartment buildings.

At Home: a conversation with 'A' about inhabitation, adaptation, and Toronto's post-war apartment buildings.

[fig 02] original booklets of first round of tenant interviews

At Home: Conversations

Designing with Desire

Much of the modernist movement—and the buildings that comprise its legacy—stand as a testament to the dichotomy between architecture and everyday life. The built environments generated through modernist principles are not reflections of the ever-evolving social and lived realities of their eventual users, but are rather a reflection of abstracted and overly-simplified ideas of human behaviour and desire. These generalizations lead to the construction of ultimately rigid spaces that struggle to facilitate a fluid relationship between an ‘architecture’ and its inhabitants, where questions of user agency and desire are abandoned in favour of the creation of more static, predictable and controllable spaces.

Architect and theorist Doina Petrescu identifies that this notion of ‘desire’ should ultimately be at the center of all discussions around participation and architecture. She argues that the participatory process is a mechanism that allows the community to construct a “collaborative economy of desire”—an assembly of collaged possibilities, networks, and aspirations—that enables a built environment to become ‘self-managed’. The challenge, she notes, is in both manifesting and uncovering this desire, as well as in mediating the inevitable tensions that exist within complex social networks³⁶.

Toronto’s post-war modernist towers have served as a backdrop to over fifty years of lived experience to date, playing host to a diverse and ever-changing populace. While the standardization of this building typology had the potential to create extremely homogeneous built environments, generations of inhabitant adaptation of these sites are visible through the ‘contamination’ of everyday life; laundry lines strung between balconies, vegetable gardens beside parking lots, communal libraries tucked away in the corners of lobbies. These adaptations—while oftentimes small, temporary, and highly-regulated—begin to reveal the desires of those who live in these spaces, highlighting ways in which the built environment has been altered in order to accommodate the actual needs of the user.

Fundamentally, this research has always been preoccupied with

[36] Petrescu, Doina. “Losing Control, Keeping Desire.” Essay. In *Architecture and Participation*, edited by Peter Blundell-Jones, Doina Petrescu, and Jeremy Till (London: Spon Press, 2005) 43–63.

ideas of tenant ownership over space, especially in traditionally alienating sites. The assumption that the architect as an outsider has any definitive answers in solely reimagining inhabited spaces has been challenged within the practice for decades, generating new ways of building that advocate on behalf of the existing; both the architecture and the people who occupy it. Before any notions of design could begin, I set out to explore a methodology that would allow me to develop a scheme that was informed and shaped by the existing experiences and perspectives of the user.

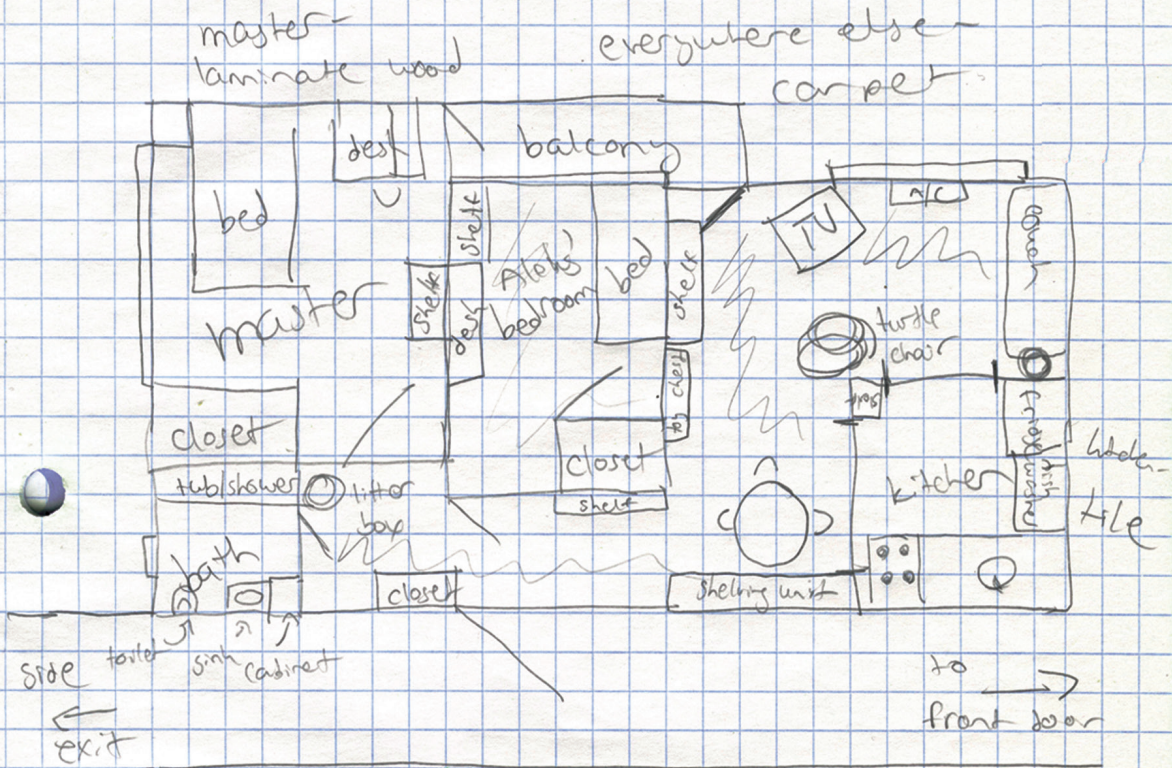
Initial Conversations

In January of 2020, I began developing a script for interviewing residents of Toronto's post-war towers. The aim of these initial interviews was to create an inventory of 'desire', a collection of lived experiences that could begin to catalog both the constraints and freedoms of living in this ubiquitous building typology (fig 02). The preliminary interview questions were focused around the relationship between adaptation and desire — how did the confines of the physical space influence how one inhabits it? How do the nuances of our daily routine shape our living environments, and how do our living environments shape our routines?

I initially spoke with five residents in their current apartments, using the pre-written questions as a conversational guide. I quickly learned that the rigidity of a questionnaire added an unproductive formality to a lot of these experiences; rather, a more open, conversational approach produced an opportunity for residents to speak freely and at length about how living in Toronto's post-war towers influenced their lives.

Residents were also asked to draw loose, figurative floor plans of their apartments, which were extremely useful in understanding their priorities within space and provided additional talking points not covered by the initial interview guide (fig 03). While these drawings provided residents with an alternate method of thinking about their living environments, many found the act of drawing in front of someone uncomfortable, concerned with their perceived skill level and 'accuracy' of the finished floor plan.

AVK-2020



[fig 03] floorplan drawn by a post-war tower resident

Tools of Appropriation

One of the first residents I spoke with was a woman named Lex, who had been living in her one-bedroom Midtown apartment for over two years. Lex's family had moved to Canada from the United Kingdom in the mid-2000s but had since moved back, leaving Lex and her grandmother alone in the city. The unit had been rented by Lex's family since 2012, but had primarily served as an address to use for a permanent Canadian residence until Lex took over the lease six years later.

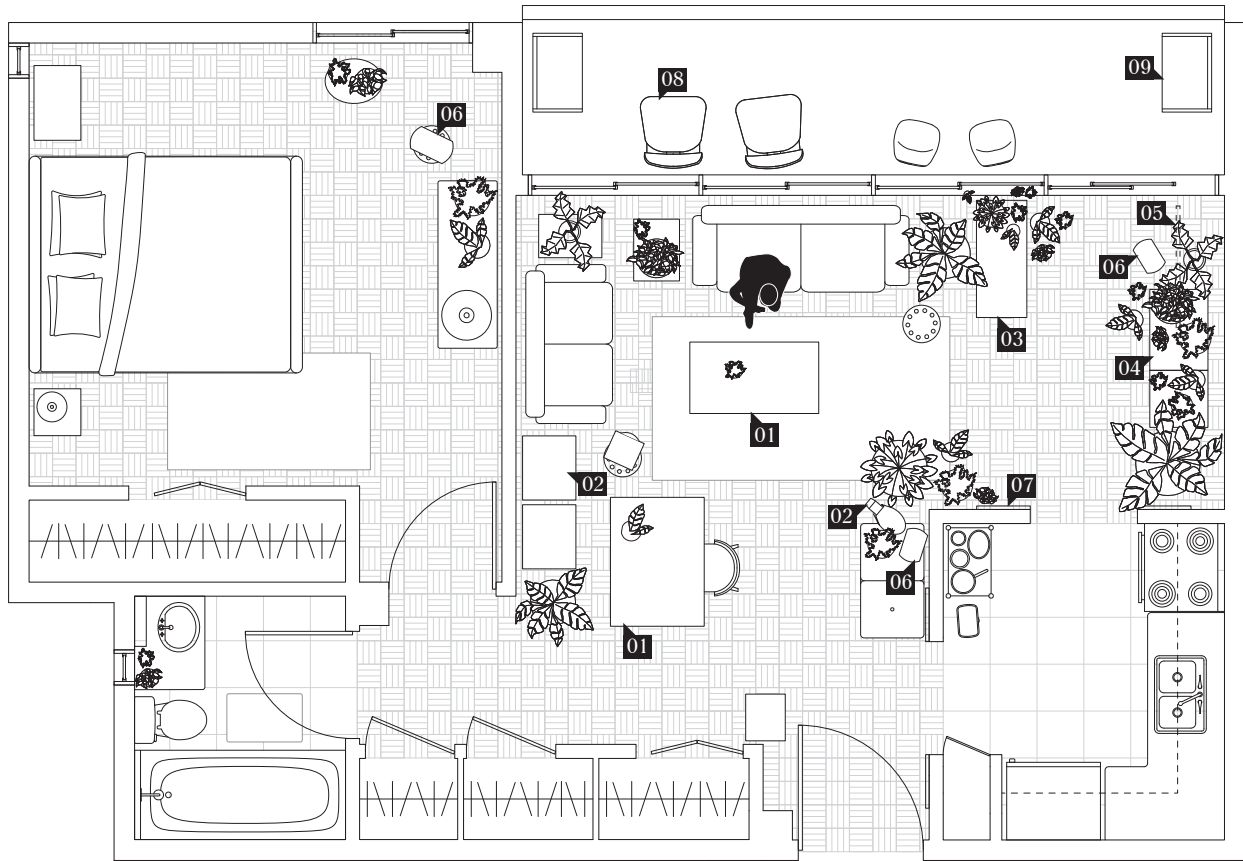
Throughout our conversation, it became clear that Lex's love of her apartment was closely tied to the flexibility of the space. The layout of the unit —consisting of standardized six meter shear-wall bays, typical to many of Toronto's post-war towers— lent itself nicely to various programmatic needs, the living area serving as a versatile and malleable space that Lex could easily and quickly adapt. Strategically placed sheets of OSB transformed her kitchen table into a 12-person dining room, metal L-channels were fastened to the ceiling in order to hang a multitude of potted plants - a ploy to get around the superintendent's strict 'no curtains on the balcony' rule.

From this conversation, I created an inventory of the strategies she used to transform her apartment, documenting ten key tools and how they impacted her use of space (fig 04). I also documented how she described occupying the space, and in turn how the space was adapted in order to facilitate this occupation (fig 05-15). Ultimately, these initial analyses revealed the interior of the unit to be generally flexible, with the space able to accommodate a variety of needs and programs with minimal adaptation.

Once the initial round of five interviews was complete, each transcript was distilled into a set of key comments. While each set was unique to the user and their individual circumstances, many commonalities - such as frustrations surrounding the limitations on allowable decorations, building maintenance, and privacy - began to arise between interviews. These comments were then mapped onto a typical post-war tower section (fig 16), with the positive statements highlighted in black and resident concerns highlighted in red.

This secondary analysis only underscored the findings of the first drawing set. It became abundantly clear that the greatest points of

[fig 04] Lex's typical apartment configuration



01 most tables are topped with a larger sheet of removable plywood: this allows the inhabitant to change the use of the surface easily

02 stand-alone lamps are placed strategically throughout the space: frequent rearrangement means that the furniture does not always match up with the fixed lighting on the ceiling.

03 versatile kitchen block on wheels serves as a multi-purpose surface that enables variety of activities

04 custom + modular shelving unit activates an otherwise dead space: provides storage for plants, speakers, yoga mat, cushions, etc.

05 one long, standard I-bracket drilled into the ceiling creates a structure to which hang baby fern balls and other delicate mosses off of. Inhabitant has future plans to create a similar 'green curtain' in front of the windows.

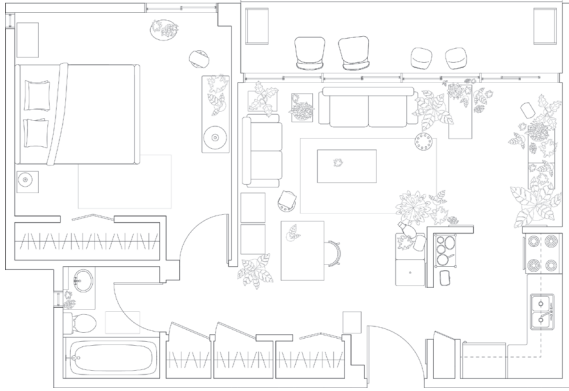
06 humidifiers create a hospitable environment for tropical plants, but a bit of a sticky environment for humans.

07 slatted doors allow for kitchen to be completely closed off from general living space - good for containing smells, dirty dishes, and occasionally 1000 live ladybugs

08 different types of chairs - high

folding stools and low, large garden lounges - allow for different types of occupation on the balcony. High stools for smoking, low chairs for reading. All furniture on balcony has been inherited.

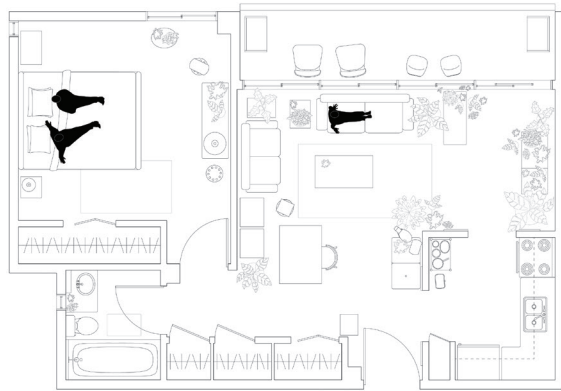
09 metal shelving units hold gardening tools, fairy lights, and ashtrays. In the summer they also act as speaker stands.



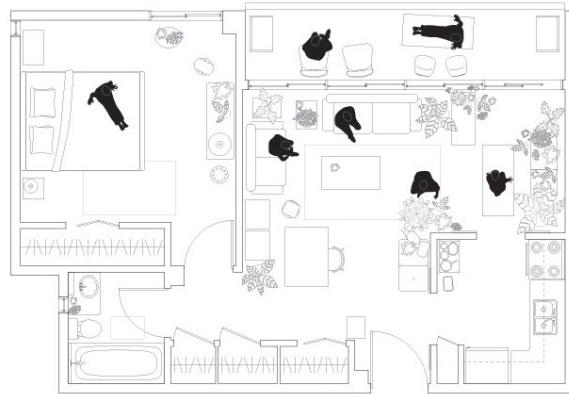
[fig 05] typical apartment configuration



[fig 06] typical sleeping situation: single person in a California king bed. inhabitant spends up to 8 hours in bed a night, occasionally more if they're reading, or watching tv on a laptop.



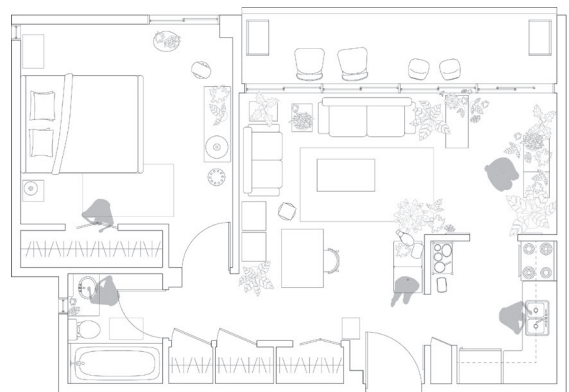
[fig 07] a-typical sleeping situation: visitors sleep in the California king bed, inhabitant sleeps on the longer couch, or occasionally on the balcony (not great). this scenario happens up to three times a year.



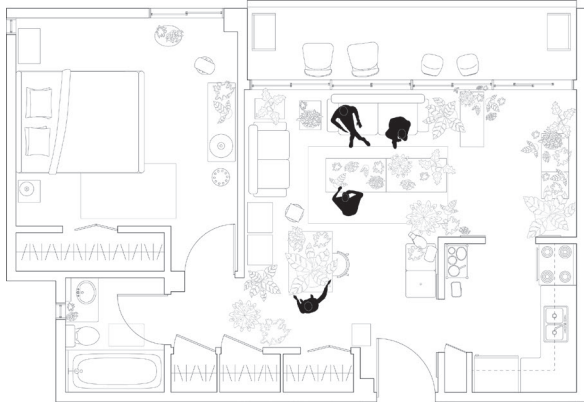
[fig 08] common places of repose: the couches, tending to the greenery, lounging in bed, doing yoga by the plant shrine, sunbathing, reading, drinking coffee, smoking, listening to music, etc on the balcony.



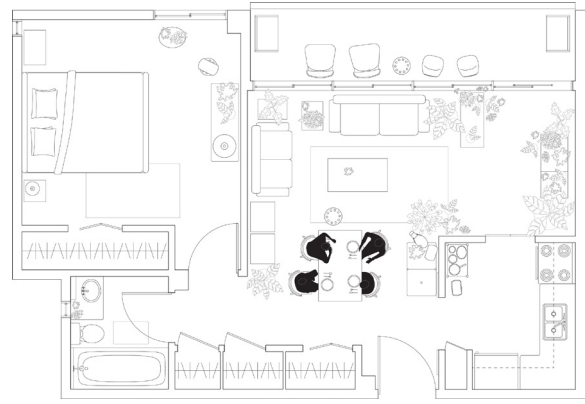
[fig 09] common places of work: the movable kitchen island serves as the most flexible space - it serves as a DJ table, a light-box stand, a drawing board, a cigarette rolling station.



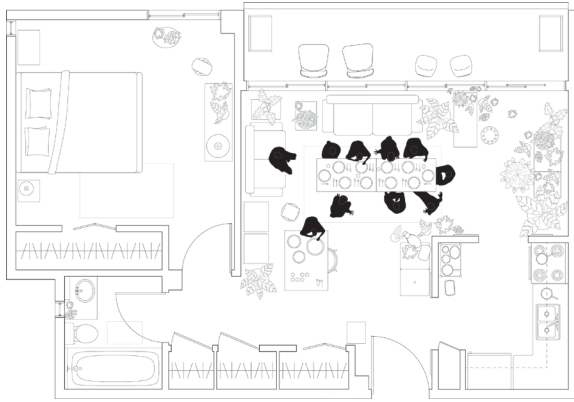
[fig 10] places of brief occupation: the entrances of closets, the bathroom, the stool in the front hall, the kitchen. All these places are occupied multiple times a day, but not for long, and not with any particular joy.



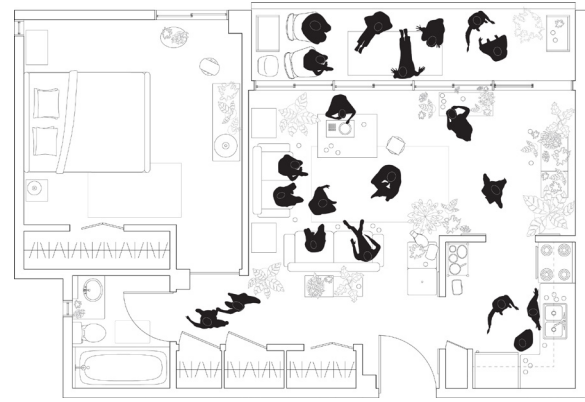
[fig 11] plant sale, etc: extra table space is added to accommodate for the sale of excess greenery - large plants are used to bar guests from the private spaces. These events are rare, maybe once a year.



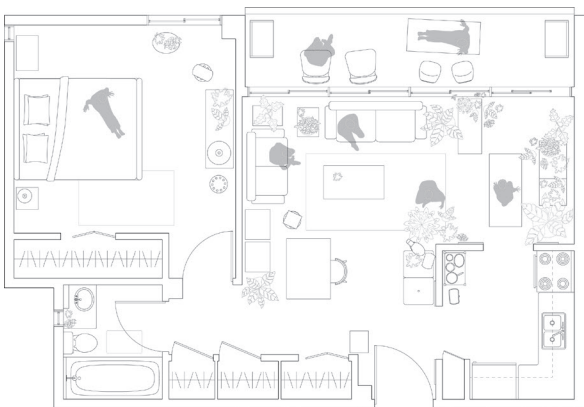
[fig 12] formal dinner: the dining table is formalized, the OSB top put away and the tablecloth laid. Extra chairs are brought down from the inhabitant's grandmothers apartment.



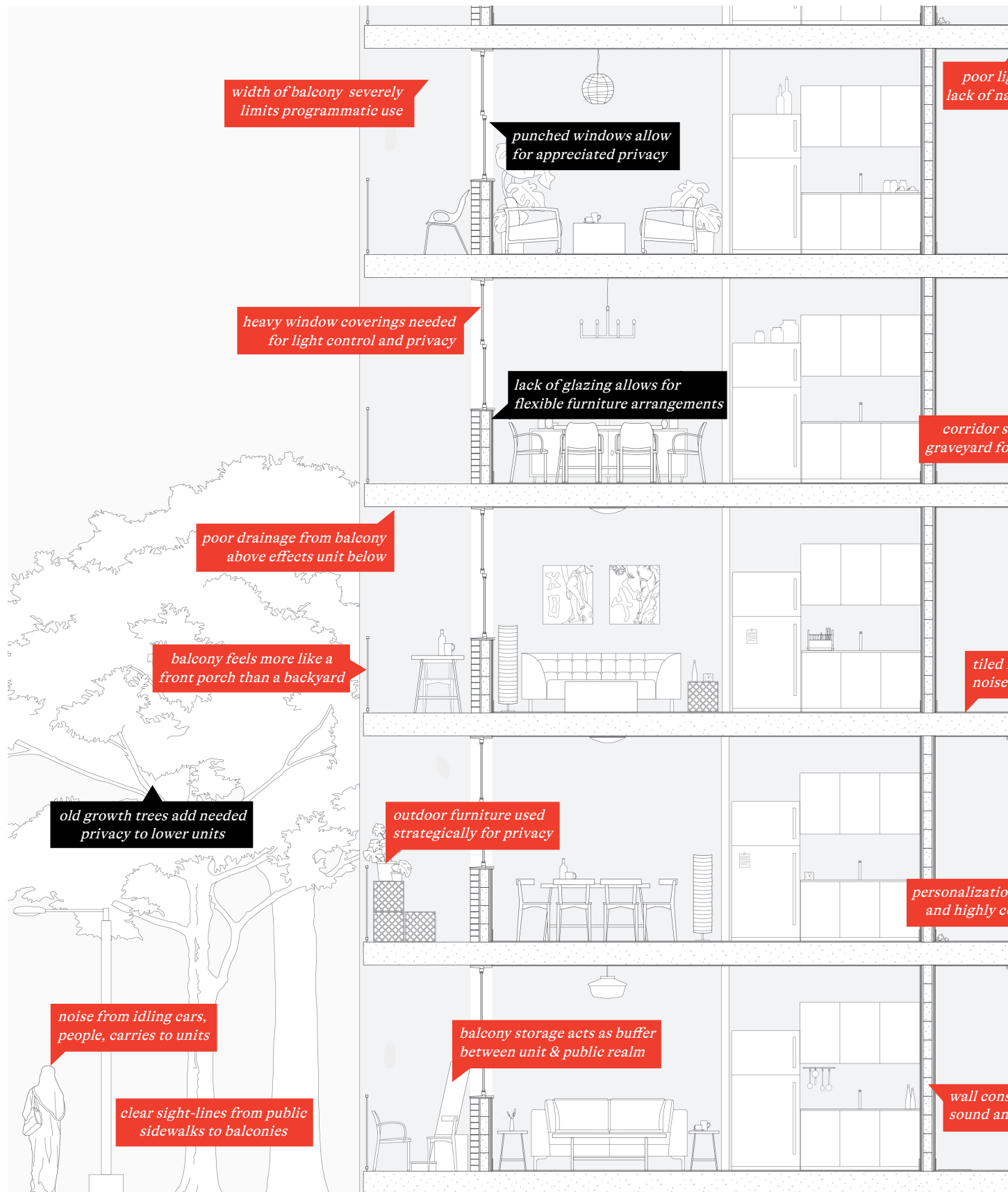
[fig 13] informal dinner party: extra OSB tops and milk crates are brought out to extend the coffee table, guests sit on the floor. This type of gathering happens once every few months.



[fig 14] large social gathering: the apartment is rearranged to create a dance floor, people fill every corner. A lot of people gather in the kitchen, always, for some reason.



[fig 15] typical apartment occupation overlay diagram



[fig 16] comments from first round of tenant interview mapped onto a standard post-war tower section



lighting + natural light

visible wear and tear on concrete slabs

when seated, balcony has sense of privacy

balcony quickly turns into storage space

concrete fins make it difficult to attach things to the walls

concrete fins make it difficult to attach things to the walls

floor amplifies in corridors

security lights create shine in lower windows

decorations not permitted above certain sight lines

decorations not permitted above certain sight lines

no clear boundary between 'backyard' and 'public space'

opportunities for informal balcony expansions

construction allows for and smell to travel

tension within these complex lay not within the units themselves, but rather at the boundaries of where the privacy of the unit confronted the public realm; the areas surrounding both the balcony, the corridor, and edges of the development (fig 17).

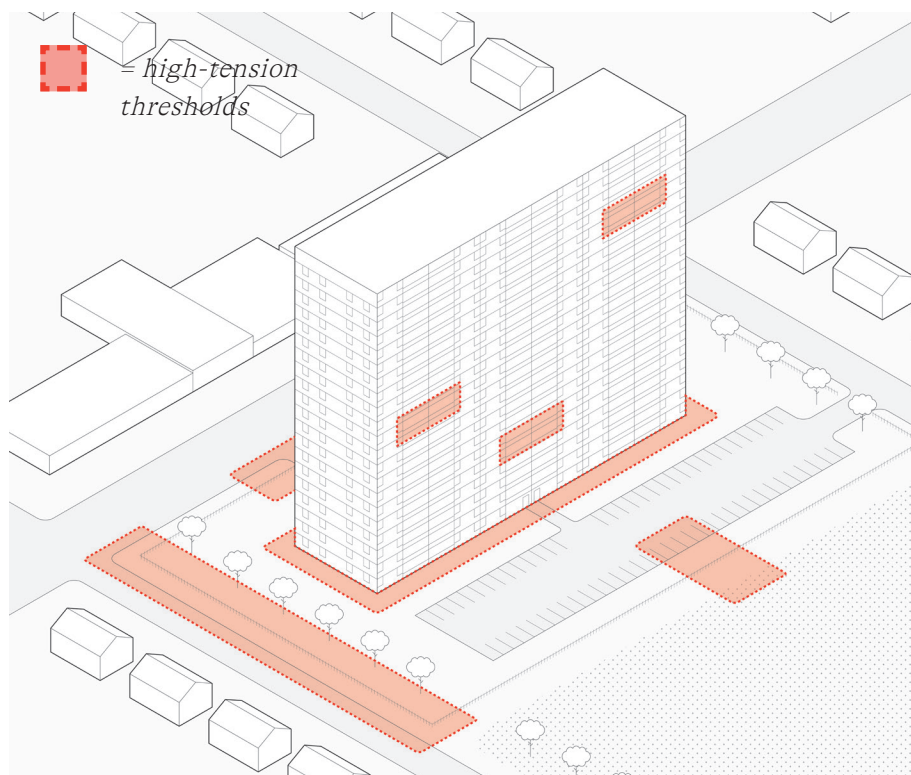
Traditionally, the liminality of these areas rendered them difficult to negotiate, with many residents unclear—or disinterested—in how to untangle the complicated hierarchy of public and private space that inherently existed within them. Alternatively, these spaces served as a kind of exploitable ‘no-man’s land’, an opportunity for residents to extend the bounds of their private space past the traditional confines of the unit. The nature of these thresholds—how they’re occupied, regulated, and viewed—became a key focus of the research moving forward.

Conversations, from Afar

In March of 2020, all in-person research activities were suspended indefinitely by the University in response to growing concerns over COVID-19. The second phase of research could not be conducted in the same fashion as the first: it was no longer feasible to meet people face-to-face, and it was especially unreasonable to expect to be physically invited into resident’s homes amongst the realities of the pandemic. All future interviews would have to take place remotely, either over the phone or through online video-conferencing platforms. While the looser style of an interview ‘guide’ worked well for in-person interviews, I expected it would be challenging to steer the conversation towards the specifics that made the first round of interviews so valuable from afar. In the past, residents were quick to overlook key aspects of their living environments due to their perceived banality - spaces such as corridors, laundry rooms, or lobbies were dismissed as uninteresting, and not spoken about unless prompted. In anticipation of this, I reworked the interview guide to have more structure, and to focus specifically on the thresholds that were identified through the first round of conversations. Additionally, the questions were modified to focus less on the interior of the unit, and more on the relationships between the unit and the surrounding semi-public spaces in hopes to better understand the tension points that were emerging in these areas.

Originally, I had planned to visit a selection of Toronto's post-war towers and post notices in common areas as a way of recruiting residents for the second round of interviews. With travel made extraordinarily difficult due to the pandemic, I had to consider alternate avenues into these apartment complexes. I ended up enlisting the help of established organizations within several post-war tower districts, such as Toronto Public Library branches and the Neighbourhood Organization, who introduced me to several key community advocates, who in turn were able to generously connect me with residents. I was also able to recruit participants through personal connections in the city's post-war tower communities.

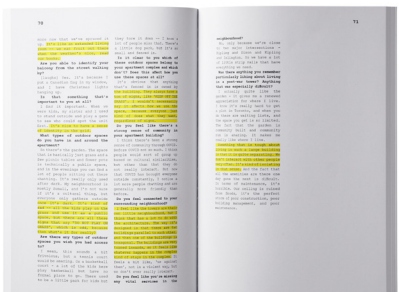
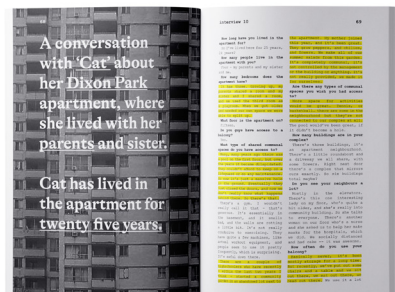
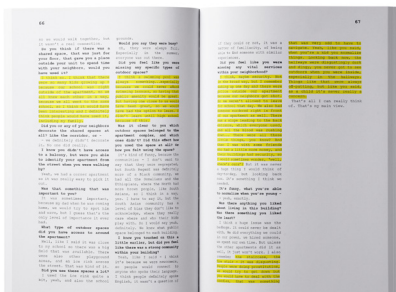
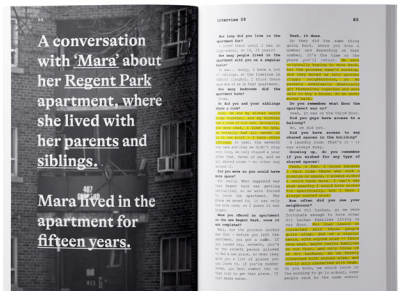
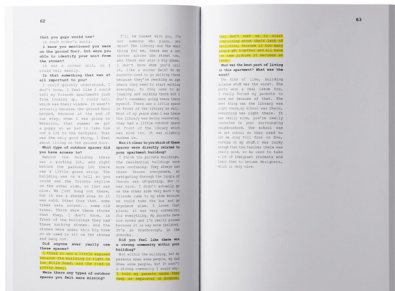
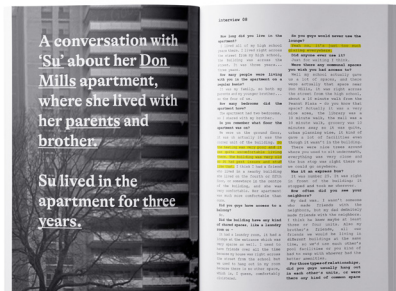
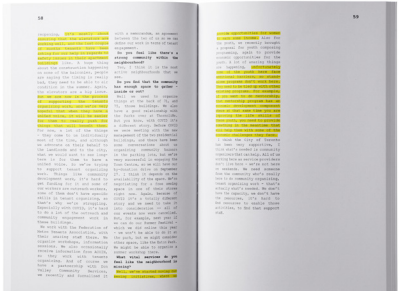
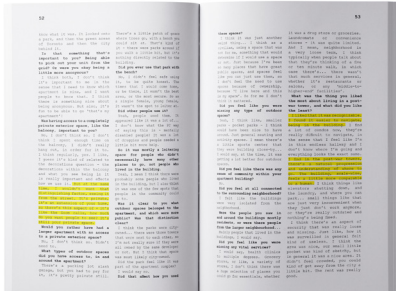
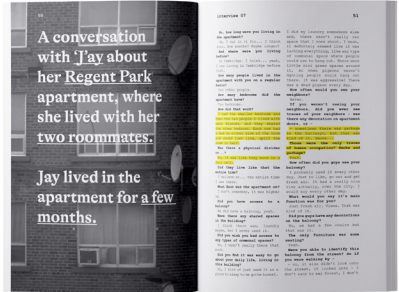
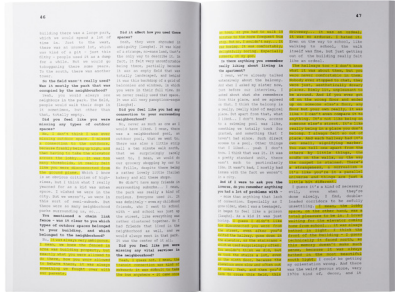
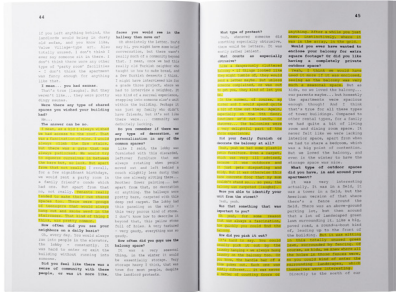
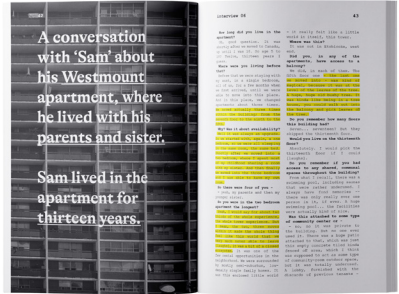
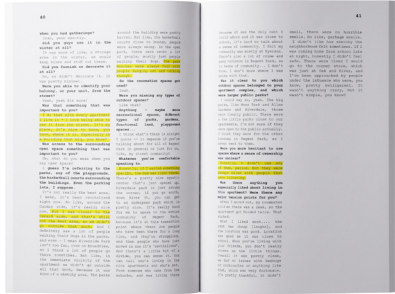
At the end of this process, I was able to interview fifteen post-war tower residents, as well as two community advocates. Participants ranged in age from nineteen to eighty-two, and lived in apartments scattered across the Greater Toronto Area. Twelve residents lived in buildings in low-income neighbourhoods, defined by Statistics Canada as a census tract where 30% or more of its population have low income. Over 70% of those interviewed identified as women, and 65% identified as people of colour.



[fig 17] common areas of tension discussed in tenant interviews



[fig 18] selected spreads of annotated transcripts of original tenant interviews



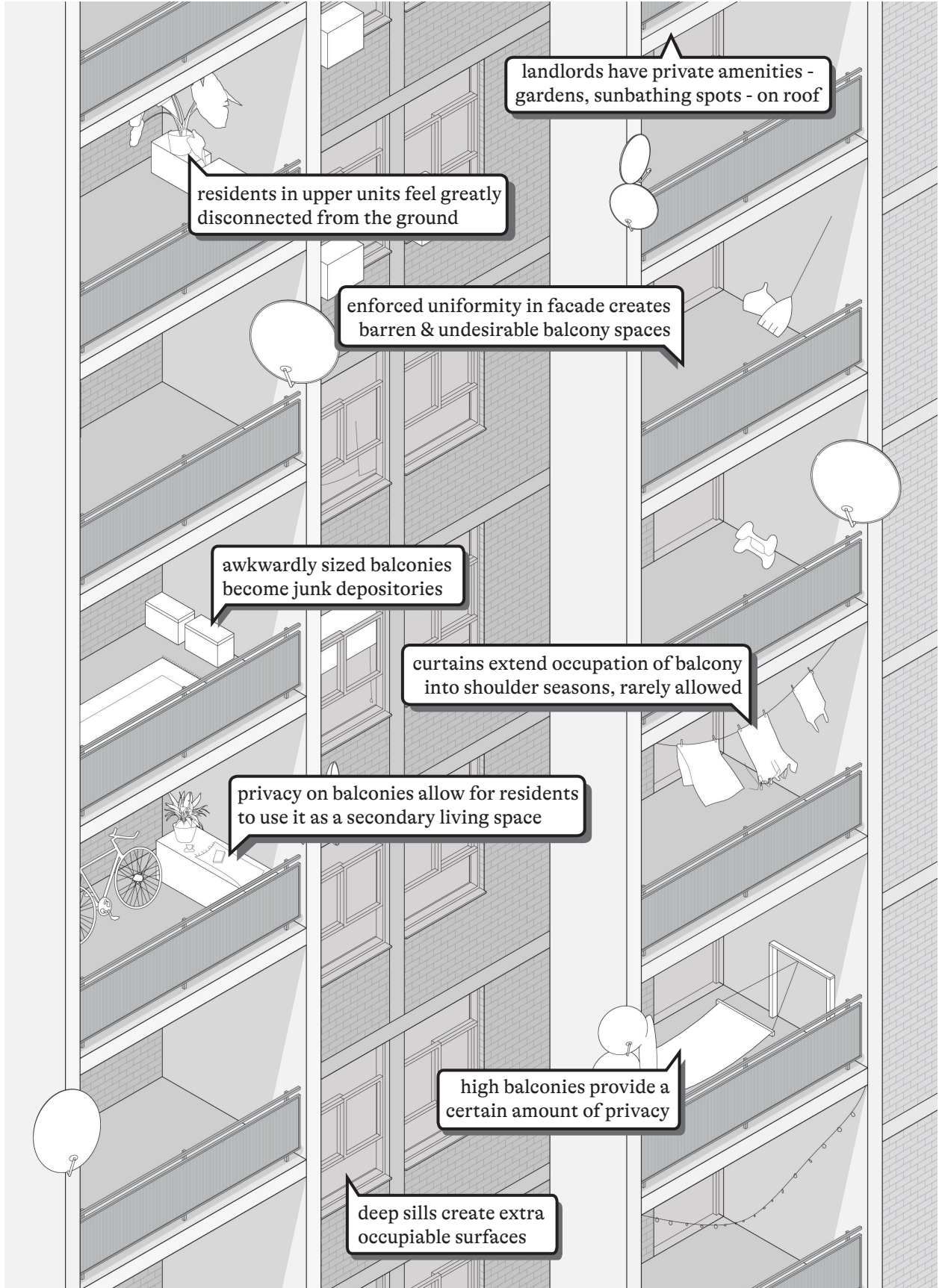
Agency, Ownership, Identity at Significant Thresholds

All conversations were recorded and compiled into a master transcript (fig 18), with common trends between each resident noted. These commonalities were then mapped onto axonometrics of a typical post-war tower, to better understand where they were clustering. This exercise immediately revealed two things: firstly, that many of the comments fell under three key areas — issues of identity, ownership and agency. Issues of identity were often around ideas of place-making and community, around notions of a “neighbourhood”, how a place fits into the larger narrative of the city. ‘Ownership’ involved a sense of authority over space, the ability for the residents and local community to advocate for the use and control of their own environments. Discussions of agency dealt with an individual’s sense of control over their own living environment, from both the interior of the unit to more communal spaces.

This analysis also confirmed that many of these issues were clustered around the previously identified areas on the site, clearly delineating a set of thresholds that proved to be specifically problematic or troublesome.

The first threshold that was identified was that of the site to the neighbourhood, which often dealt explicitly with the very edge of where the tower’s grounds met the public street (fig 20). Common statements included a strong dislike for the lengths of repetitive and often unnecessary fencing that clearly delineated the shared ground plane from the rest of the neighbourhood. Many residents felt that the chainlink emphasized the towers ‘otherness’ within suburban contexts, creating a legible boundary that outsiders often felt uncomfortable crossing.

Although there were clear boundaries between the site and the street, these boundaries didn’t help foster any sense of resident ownership over space. Large fields with no clear program were often demarcated by convoluted and seemingly arbitrary paths, making it difficult for residents to efficiently navigate the ground plane of their own developments. Lawns were awkwardly sized and rarely offered a space to dwell, with residents using the bases of light posts as impromptu benches. Overall, many of the ground planes in question



[fig 19] tenant comments mapped onto standard post-war tower, mid-height

felt like deeply transient spaces —a place to move through but not linger. Residents also disliked how the ground plane lacked any real sense of arrival— with many nondescript entrances in and out, the development’s identity often felt undefined.

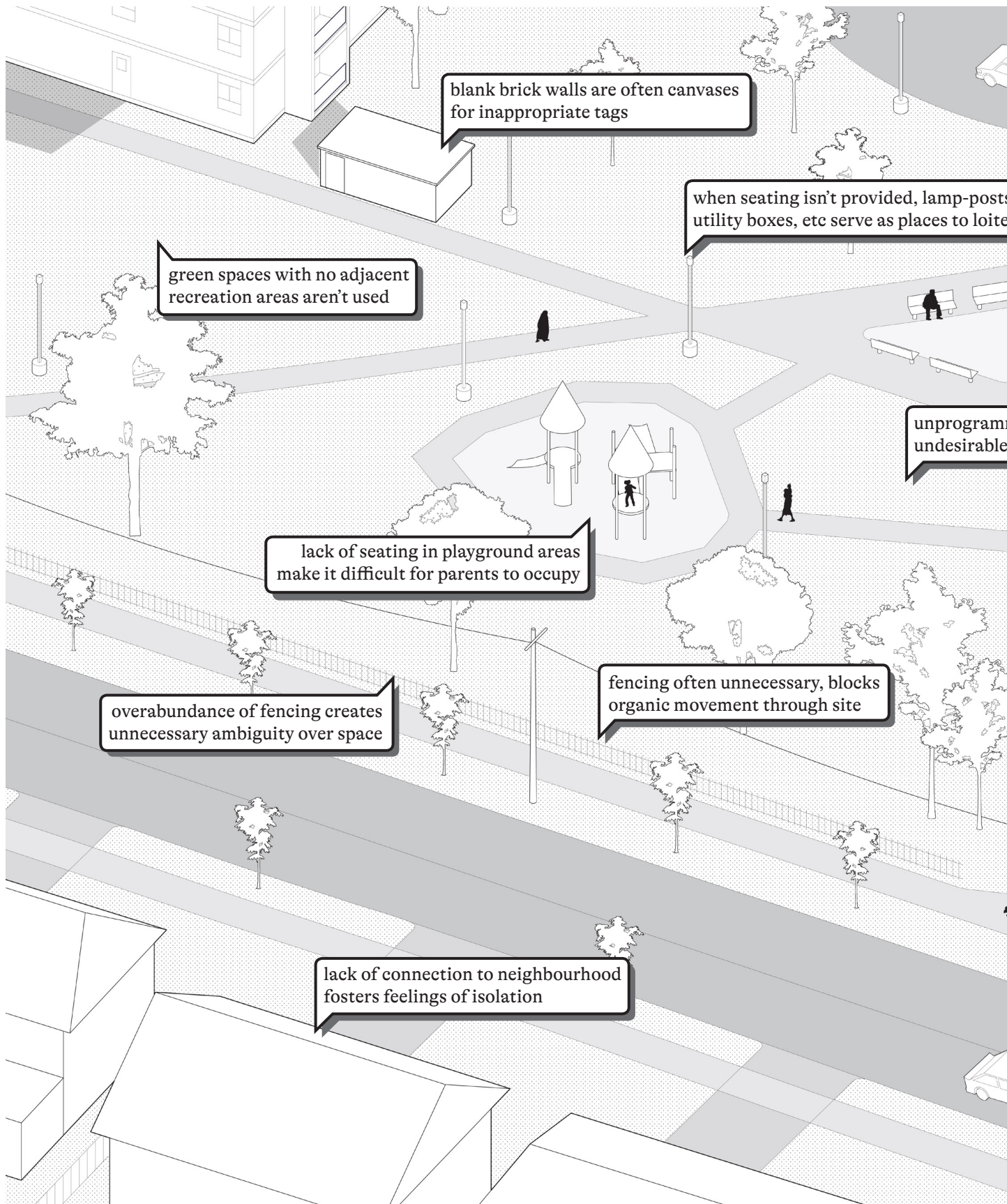
The second threshold identified was that between the individual unit and the public realm (fig 19, 21-22). This boundary is mediated by the building envelope, often consisting of punch windows set into brick walls and stacks of narrow concrete balconies. At the ground level, balconies facing onto public spaces such as lawns or the street were rarely used as they felt too exposed to truly inhabit freely. These spaces would typically either be left empty or used as storage for large and bulky items, acting as an additional buffer between the interior of the unit and the public realm. When these balconies were inhabited, residents often created an additional layer to help mediate the abrupt transition from shared common space to private domestic spaces. Although most buildings don’t allow the enclosure of the balcony, residents found ways around this rule with more ad hoc strategies, such as laundry lines with sheets permanently ‘drying’, planter boxes with tall, fake grasses or oversized beach umbrellas. While none of these strategies explicitly broke the enclosure rule, residents were often asked to remove their makeshift enclosures under the grounds of ‘eyesore’ regulations, which tightly control how the balcony can be furnished.

Units that were removed from the ground plane enjoyed the privacy the additional height offered them, and were occupied more frequently. These spaces served as secondary living rooms, breakfast nooks, small vegetable gardens, and on occasion, seasonal bedrooms. Occupation was limited not by lack of privacy but rather spatial constraints — balconies that were long and narrow were difficult to program, constricting flexible furniture arrangements. The threshold between the balcony and the unit also posed a flexibility issue — narrow doorways often cut off the exterior space from the interior, interrupting the ‘flow’ of the apartment. In this way, the balcony could often feel divorced from the unit.

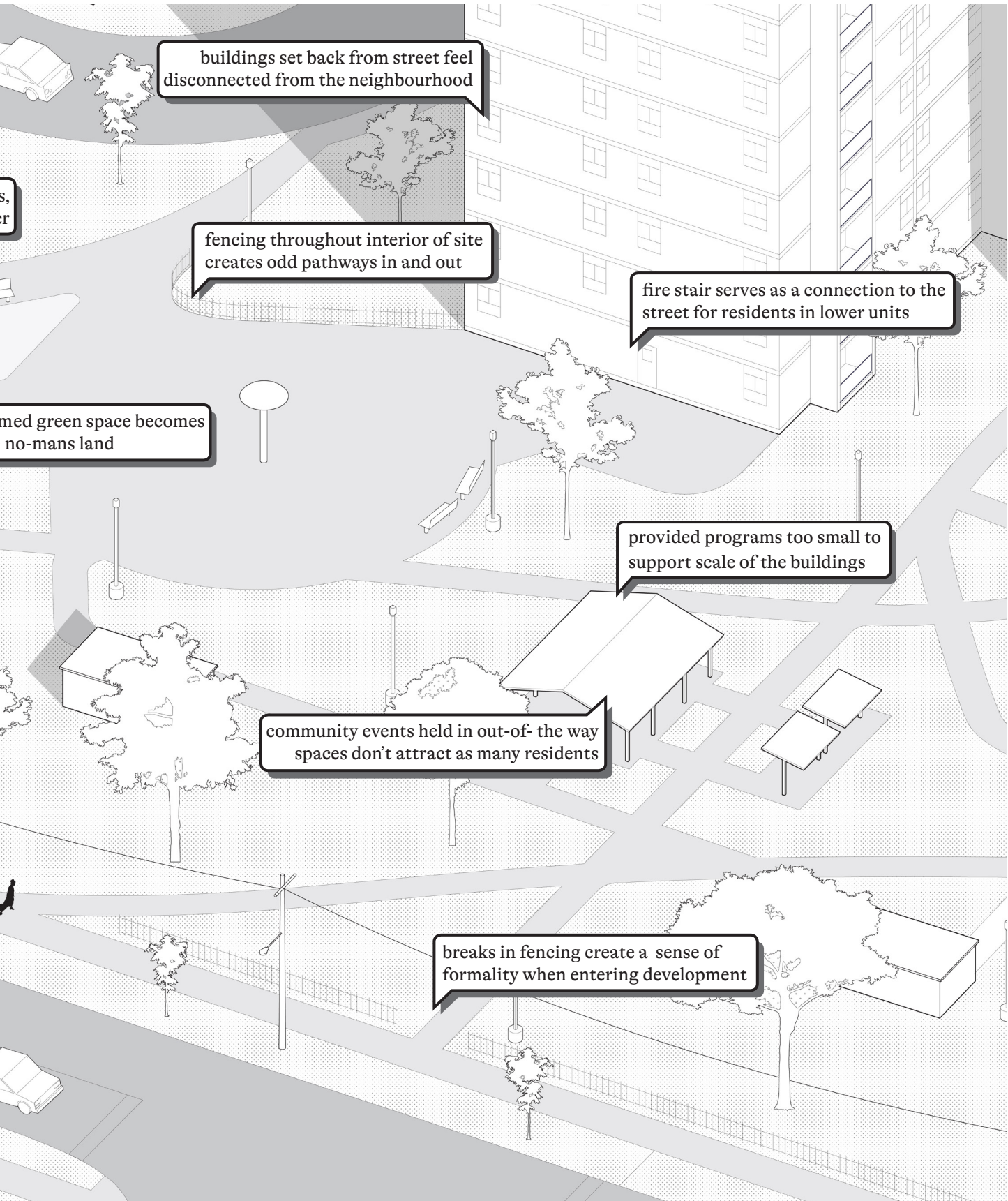
Many residents also stated that although they enjoyed the privacy that the height of the buildings offered them, occupying a unit that

felt so divorced from the street could be extremely alienating. Long corridors, slow elevators and winding staircases all intensified this isolation. Some residents tried to mitigate these feelings through the personalization of the balcony spaces, the ability to differentiate their unit through the presence of lights, flags, even a distinctive bike tire helping them feel more 'plugged in' to the neighbourhood. However, the concrete structure of the balcony made this type of adaptation difficult. Others appreciated the anonymity the hyper-rational facade lent them, the opaque railings and concrete fins allowing the space to feel extremely private, allowing the balcony to truly act as another 'room' within the apartment, operating as more of a 'backyard' condition than a 'front yard' condition.

The last common area discussed was that of the threshold between the unit and the corridor (fig 23). The corridors themselves were a very controversial topic, as almost every person I spoke with stated that this space was particularly isolating. The uniformity of the hallways between floors was extremely disorienting, and even long-time residents often occasionally got off on the wrong level, unable to differentiate between their floor and the floors above. However, high-traffic areas, such as the space adjacent from the elevators or the exit doors on either end, were often home to small resident interventions, such as informal book and furniture exchanges, or advertisements for various services. In buildings that lacked any form of communal space, the fire-stair would act as an impromptu gathering space, often for teenagers with no other place to go.



[fig 20] tenant comments mapped onto standard post-war tower site, ground plane



buildings set back from street feel disconnected from the neighbourhood

fencing throughout interior of site creates odd pathways in and out

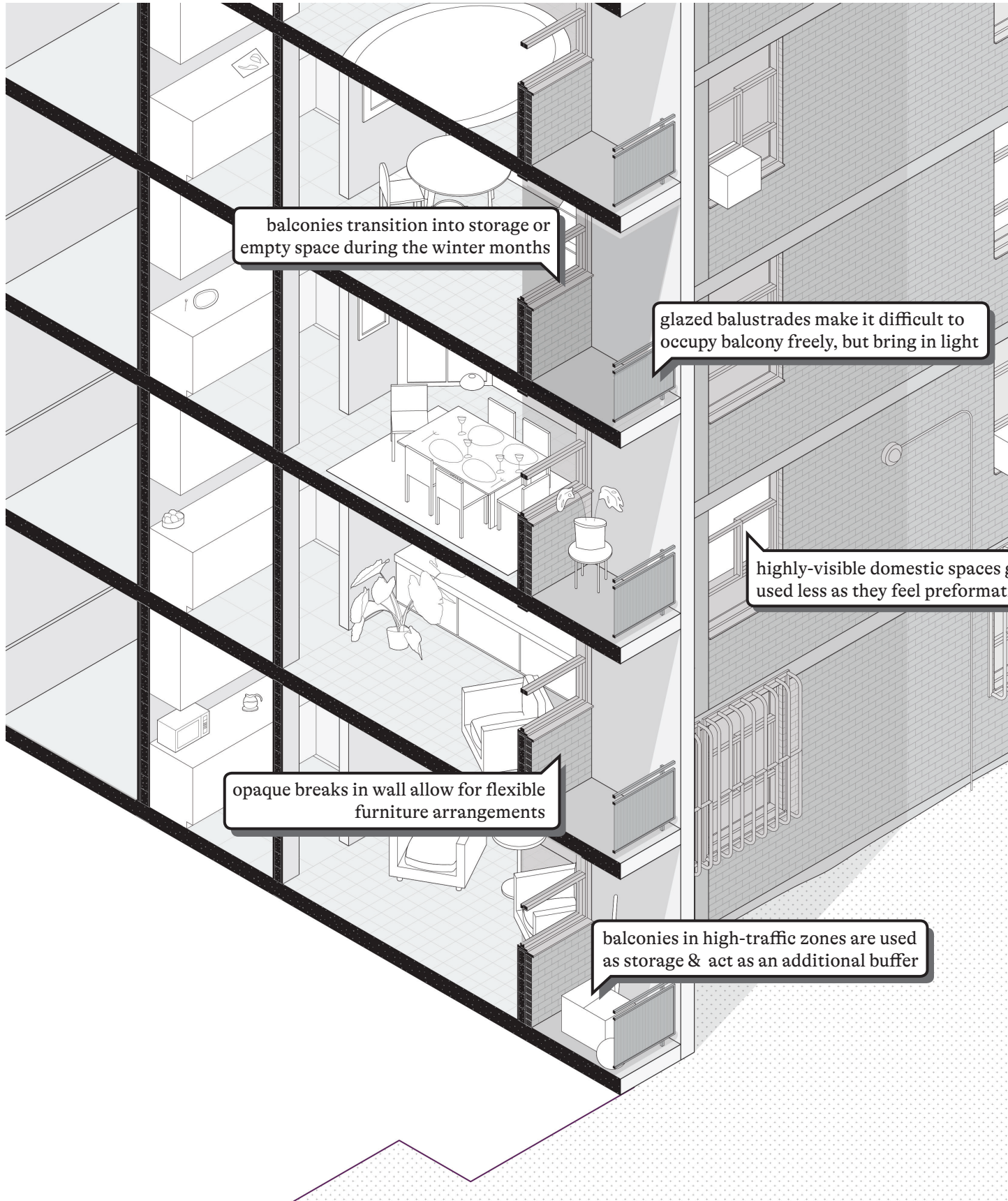
fire stair serves as a connection to the street for residents in lower units

med green space becomes no-mans land

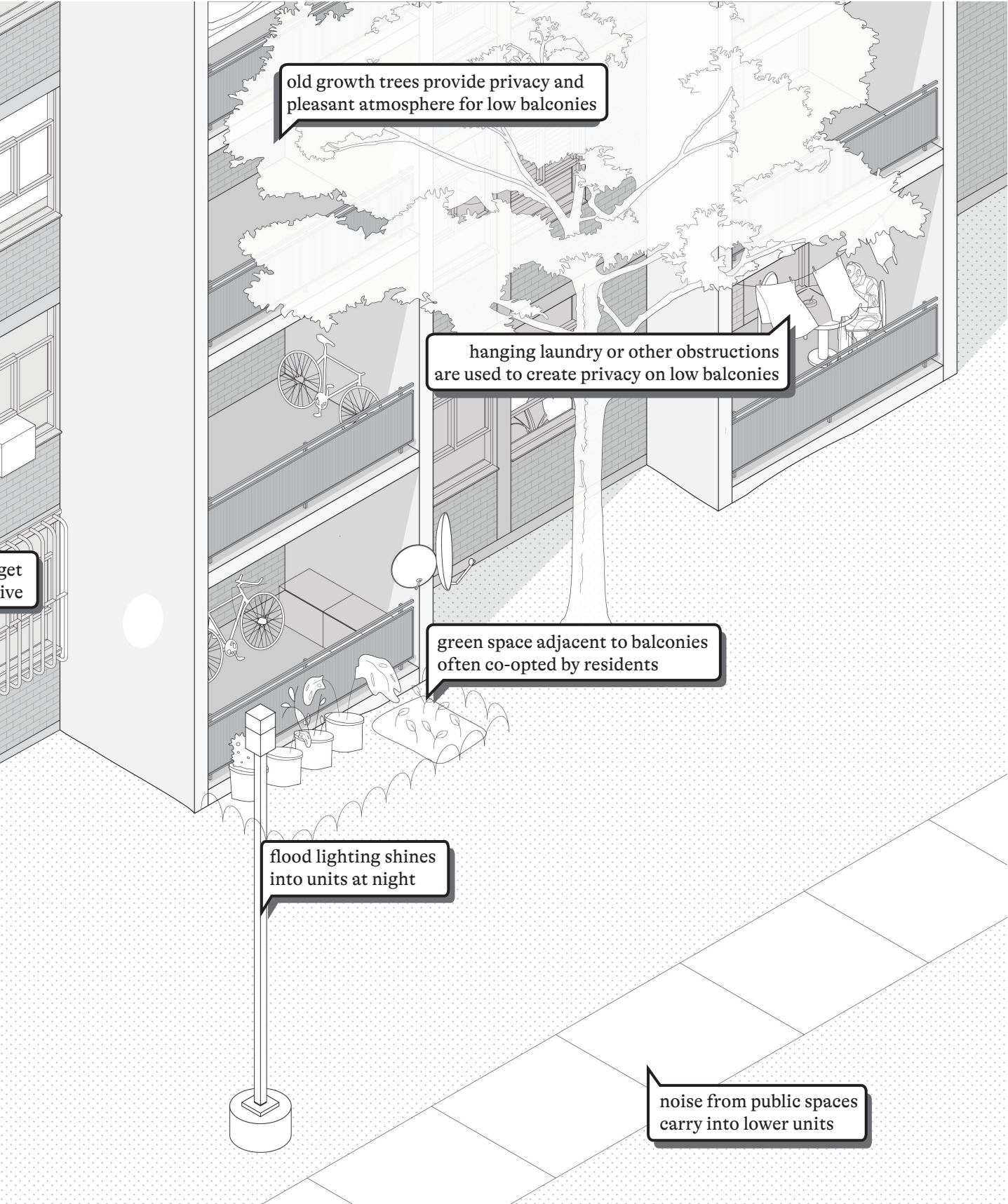
provided programs too small to support scale of the buildings

community events held in out-of-the way spaces don't attract as many residents

breaks in fencing create a sense of formality when entering development



[fig 21] tenant comments mapped onto standard post-war tower, ground level



old growth trees provide privacy and pleasant atmosphere for low balconies

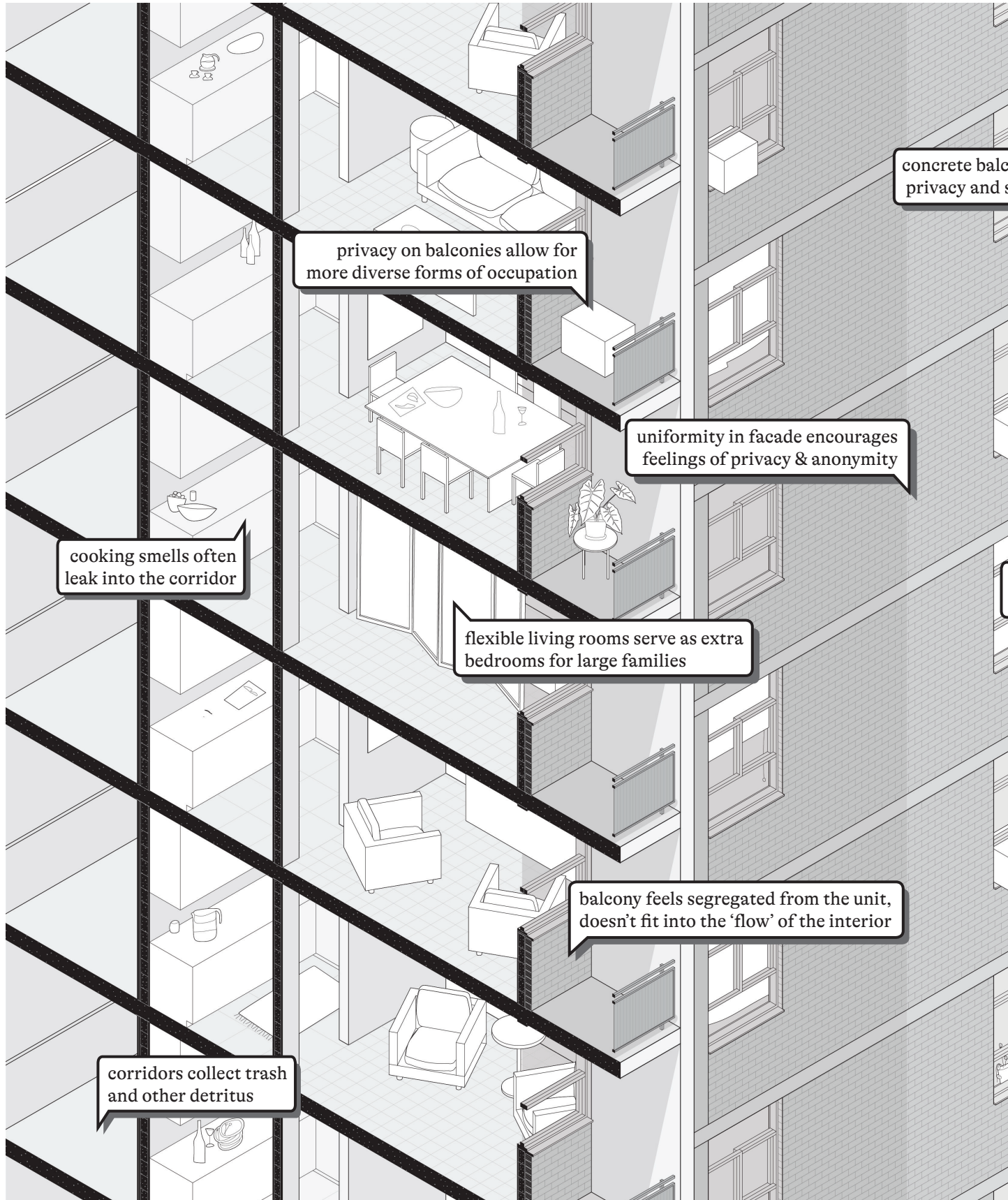
hanging laundry or other obstructions are used to create privacy on low balconies

green space adjacent to balconies often co-opted by residents

flood lighting shines into units at night

noise from public spaces carry into lower units

get
ive



[fig 22] tenant comments mapped onto standard post-war tower, mid-height



balcony fins provide
sense of security

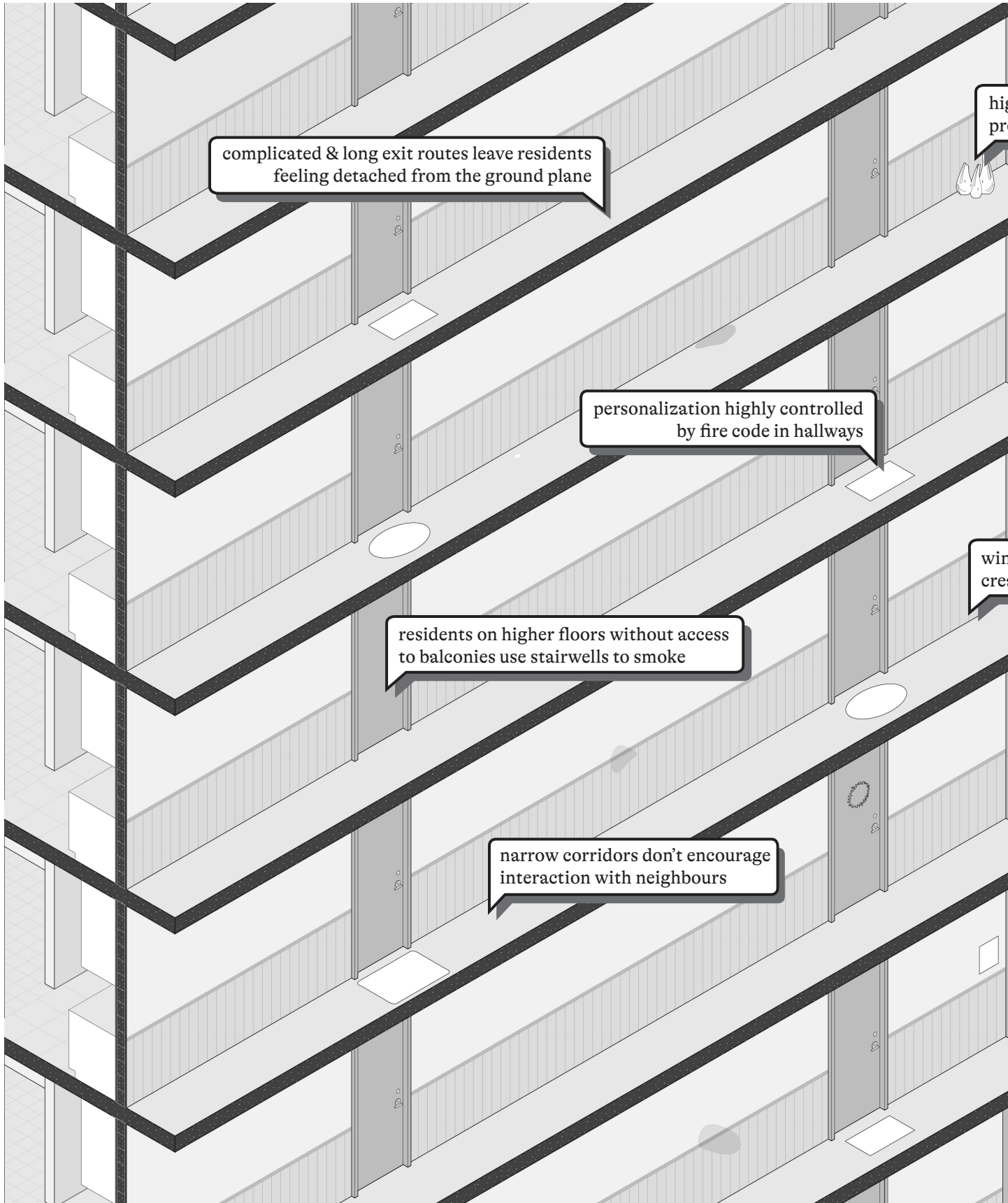
spaces with access to ample natural
light are used more frequently

balconies are visually private,
but not acoustically private

laundry must be dried in small
batches due to size of balcony

balcony serves as extra cold
storage in winter months

visible decorations
controlled by landlord



[fig 23] tenant comments mapped onto standard post-war tower, corridors



high-traffic common spaces host ad hoc programs like libraries, lost & found, etc

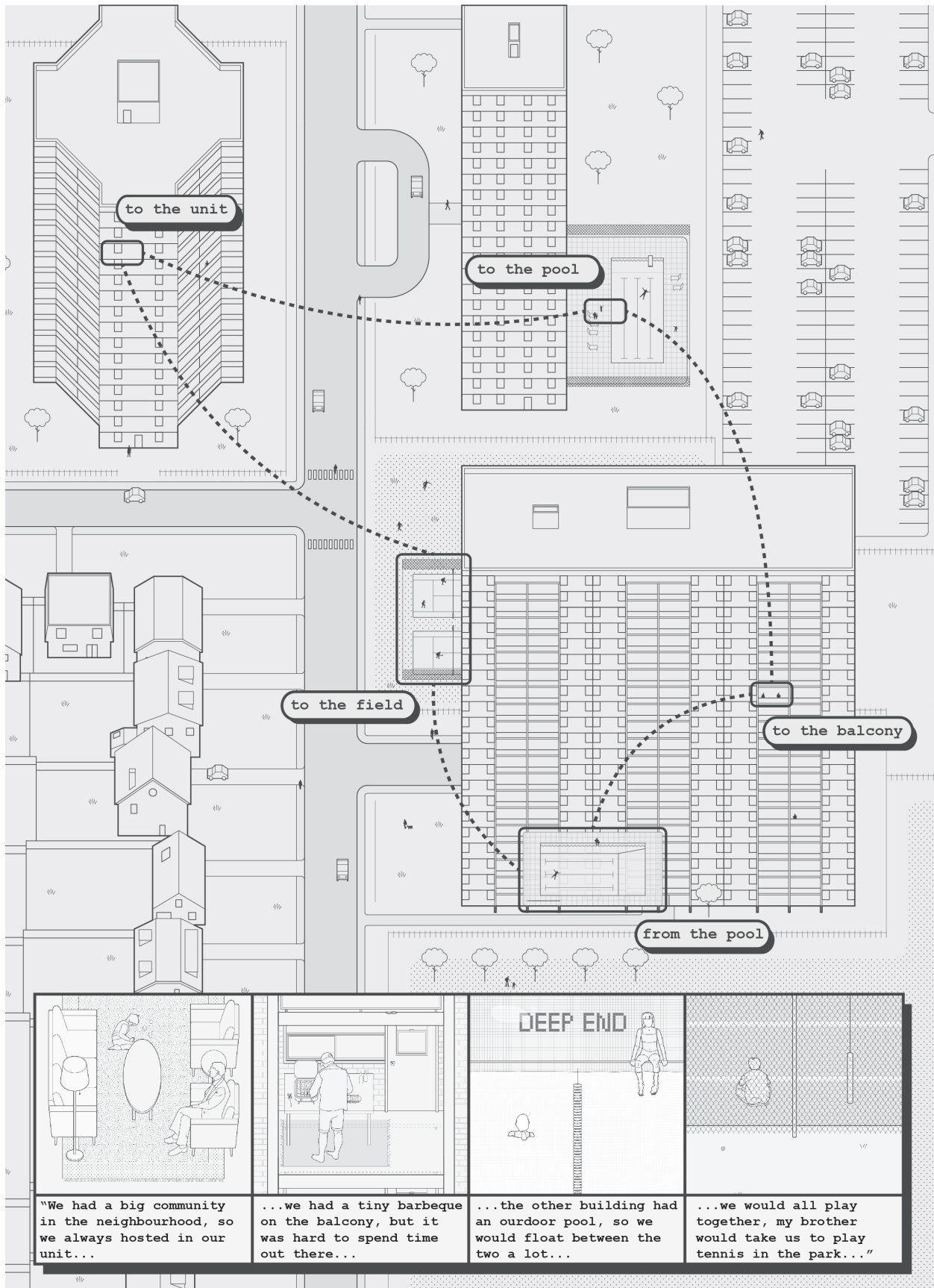
corridors encourage anonymity between neighbours

ending corridors, blind corners etc create sense of unease in common spaces

various detritus denote movement of people through shared spaces

poor acoustic separation between units

when no indoor communal spaces are provided, people will gather in stairways, exit landings, etc



[fig 24] gathering spaces throughout tower communities

A Conversation with Lis

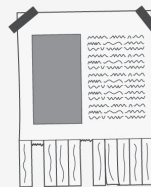
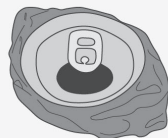
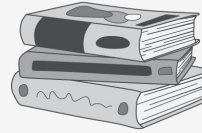
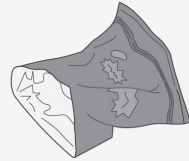
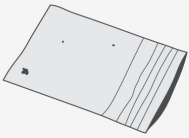
“We had a bunch of community in the neighbourhood, but we also had one family that lived on the third floor who were also Colombian, who we were very close to. Also in parallel buildings we had a community. I remember visiting other peoples buildings, other people’s apartments all the time. As a family with a big community we always hosted too - my parents liked to entertain people, but we didn’t have the space. We had a tiny barbeque that would go on the balcony but that’s it. One of the families that lived in our building had a daughter who was only a year younger than me, so we would always play in the pool together. One of the other buildings we frequented had an outdoor pool, so we would kind of float between buildings - one in the summer and one in the winter and sort of, trade amenities when appropriate. There was also an outdoor public pool that had a really nice park with a bunch of tennis courts - my brother used to take us there all the time.”

— ‘Lis’, a post-war tower resident

Lis and her family immigrated to Canada when she was a young girl, choosing to settle in their West Toronto post-war apartment neighbourhood because of the existing Colombian community throughout the buildings. While Lis, her parents, brother, sister and brother-in-law all shared a three-bedroom unit on the top floor of the building, she did not grow up feeling like the bounds of her home ended at her front door. Rather, she was grateful she had access to an extended network of communal spaces dispersed throughout the buildings; an extensive system of both public and private places, such as parks, sports courts, pools, and neighbour’s units. Her parents, who were uncomfortable with the idea of their daughter roaming the apartment complex alone, relied on the patchwork of public spaces to entertain their children. Places such as the building’s pool, the park’s tennis courts, and even neighbour’s units served not only as a place for the children to gather, but also allowed for a system of informal childminding to emerge.

While high-density living can be extremely alienating, the presence of informal networks of shared spaces allow for residents to appropriate and occupy the space as needed.

"The hallways - I don't know what it was about them, but you were never comfortable in them. Dimly lit, unpleasant to be around..."



"I always felt so out of place, each hallway had its own small, signifying marker. You can tell one apart from the others by little things, the scuffs on the walls, or the way the carpet is stained..."

[fig 25] signs of life in corridors

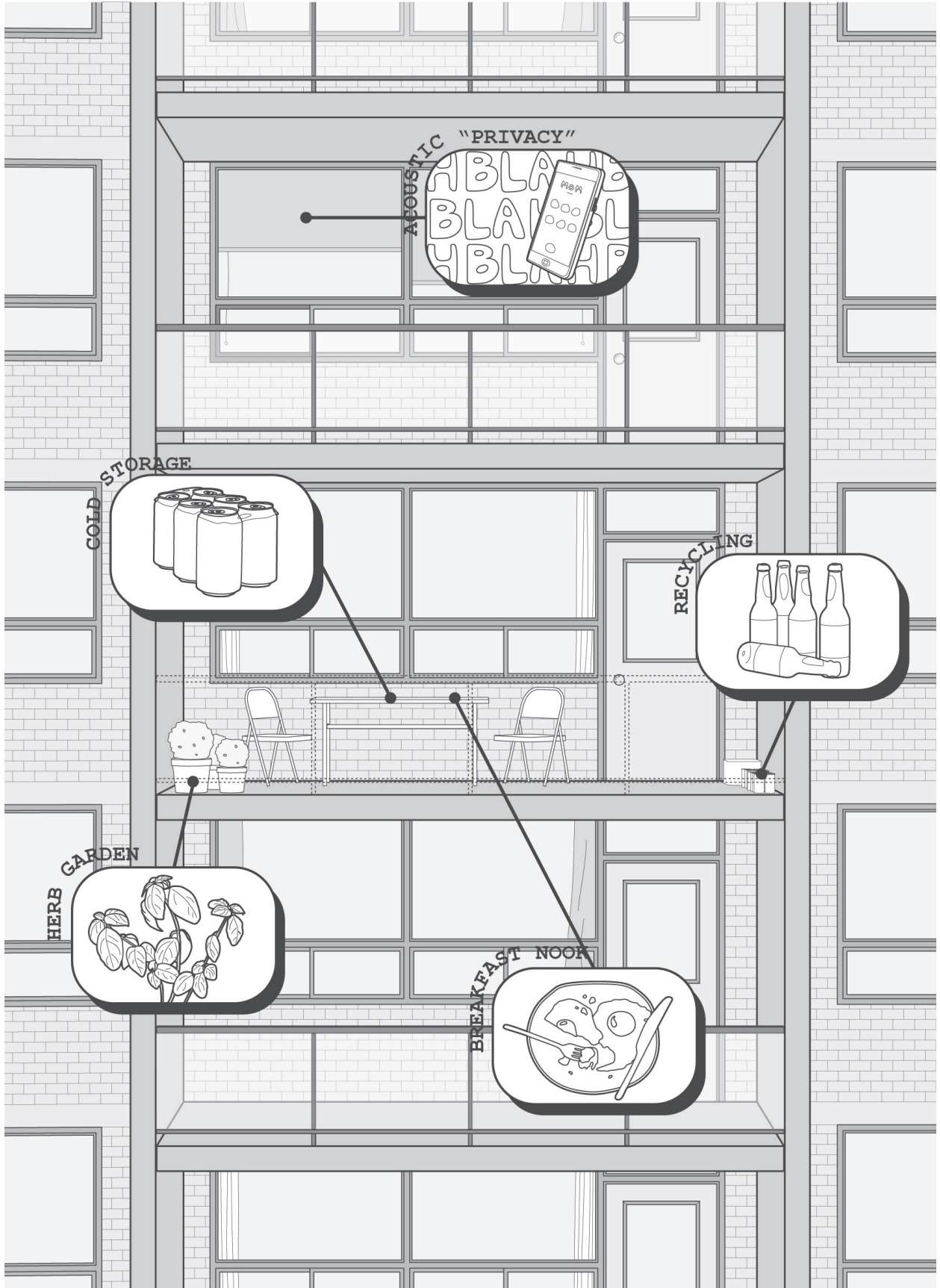
A Conversation with Sam

“The hallways...I don’t know what it was about the space, but you were never comfortable in them. Nobody ever stopped to chat, they were just aesthetically dreary places; dimly lit, unpleasant to be around. If you ever got off on the wrong floor and ended up on someone else’s floor, any floor but your own really...I can’t even compare it to anything. It’s not like being on someone else’s street. It’s really like being in a place you don’t belong. I always felt so out of place. And each hallway has its own small, signifying marker. You can tell one apart from the others by little things, the scuffs on the walls, or the way the carpet is stained. There’s a strangeness, a surrealism - it’s like you’re in a parallel universe and things are just a little bit different.”

— ‘Sam’, a post-war tower resident

As a teenager growing up in one of Toronto’s post-war apartment neighbourhoods, Sam felt like the tower encapsulated the type of boring, mundane isolation he’d come to associate with living in the suburbs. He felt disconnected from the city (the only reliable way to get downtown was a slow, infrequent bus that stopped at the end of his road), from his neighbourhood (the tower was surrounded by a patchwork of complicated fences and inaccessible open fields), and, most immediately, from his own building. The labyrinth of identical corridors, stairwells, and unreliable elevators that made up the circulatory system of the complex lent the tower a type of inescapable anonymity. As a child, Sam made a point to try and visit each floor’s corridor, only to be confronted with the dizzying reality that they all looked the same, save for some almost imperceptible feeling of uncanny ‘otherness’.

However, it was also in these high-trafficked areas that residents created a type of informal, temporary goods exchange. The stairwell on the tenth floor could be home to a collection of free children’s books, while the space outside the elevator bank on the fifth could host a small rack of gently used kitchenware. The anonymity of these spaces helped facilitate these discrete interactions — objects appeared overnight, and were usually gone within a few days, often without anyone seeing who took them.



[fig 26] versatility of balcony spaces

A Conversation with Rick

“During the summer, I’m out on the balcony. I’m out there a lot, it’s a big one with a beautiful view. Another thing I absolutely love about it is the privacy - I can see the closest building, and they’re so far away. I walk around here any which way I want. Even in the winter, I can use the balcony as extra cold storage - it has huge use all year round. I plant things out there, I like to grow little lettuces and herbs and things like that. I don’t really see other people use it like I do, having lunch or dinner or watching YouTube - really living out there. People mostly use them to smoke, or take private phone calls which drives me insane, because they tend to speak really loudly and don’t realize how easily sound travels. It’s a lot of drama.”

— ‘Rick’, a post-war tower resident

Rick moved into his one-bedroom St. James Town apartment when he retired in 2014, using the change as an opportunity to downsize from his old condominium. The balcony quickly became one of his favourite spots; fourteen stories in the air, the space had an unobstructed view of Lake Ontario and was virtually invisible from the street below. The nearest high-rise was a few blocks to the south — an unusual luxury in the hyper-density of his neighbourhood. The privacy this set up afforded him allowed Rick to use his balcony as a true extension of his unit; in the warmer months, the space served as a dining room, herb garden, hobby space, reading nook, recycling area. When the weather cooled, Rick converted the balcony into extra storage space, even using the large patio table as an extra freezer shelf, if the temperature outside was cold enough.

In early 2019, the landlord had started a total renovation of the building’s balconies, replacing the old concrete balustrades with new glass railings. Although the new changes make the space feel bigger and lighter than it was before, the ongoing construction challenges drove a lot of existing residents out of the building for good, giving the management company an opportunity to jack up the rent. While Rick still considers his unit to be quite private, the new glass balcony enclosure leaves him feeling more exposed than before, even fourteen stories up.

At the end of this process, it was clear that although the thresholds discussed exacerbated some of the tower's significant problems, they also held tremendous potential. In these spaces where the mechanics of domestic life bumped up against the challenges of hyper-dense living, there is an opportunity to reclaim these boundaries for the resident. I was interested in how these previously overlooked areas help facilitate notions of agency and ownership among tenants, rather than help foster feelings of isolation. I became extremely preoccupied with how these thresholds could expand, thicken, to create highly adaptable spaces that begin to help mitigate the dissonance between the scale of the post-war tower and that of the individual resident.



[fig 27] typical post-war tower facade



[fig 28] Jane Falstaff Towers, as seen from Jane St

Architectures of Agency

The Jane Falstaff Towers

It takes thirty stops on the 59 bus from Lawrence West Station to reach North York's Jane Falstaff Towers (fig 28). One can see the very tops of the apartment buildings from the bus stop over a kilometer away, looming over the otherwise low-lying residential neighbourhood. The development —a collection of three concrete structures —is owned and managed by the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC), North America's second-largest social housing provider. Finished in 1970³⁷, the apartments were constructed as part of a wave of frenetic building that transformed the area into a booming metropolitan community.

In the early 1960s, the Ontario Housing Corporation (OHC) and the North York Planning Department devised a proposal that would see the rapid development of existing farm lots into new suburbs as a response to the region's explosive growth. Although the official plan was not approved until 1969, many of these new suburban neighbourhoods were constructed throughout the 1960s, typically consisting of an elementary school and associated parkland at the center, surrounded by a wash of detached single-family homes. Higher-density housing, consisting mostly of flying-form concrete towers built in the modernist style, were relegated to properties adjacent along major roads, many of which were widened and repaved to accommodate the influx of vehicular traffic to the area. Jane Street was transformed into a high-density corridor, with over three dozen high-rise apartment towers constructed between Steeles Ave and Highway 401 in a ten year period. Many of these developments were owned by the OHC, and later by the amalgamated Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) upon the reorganization of the provincial government under Premier Mike Harris³⁸.

The development houses approximately 1,800 people on only 11 acres of land, but accounts for nearly 20% of the entire neighbourhood's population³⁹. The Jane Falstaff towers are currently designated as a 'renewal site' and is a part of the Social Housing Apartment Improvement Program (SHAIP), a provincial capital program that

[37] "Falstaff Towers - 40." UrbanDB. Accessed February 23, 2020. <http://www.urbandb.com/canada/ontario/toronto/falstaff-towers-40/index.html#.YRr73ohKiUk>.

[38] *From Longhouse to Highrise: Pioneering Our Corner of North York*. (North York, Ontario: Downsview Weston Action Community, 1986) 27-30.

[39] "Rustic, Neighbourhood #28." 2016 Neighbourhood Profile. (City of Toronto, 2016.) <https://www.toronto.ca/ext/sdfa/Neighbourhood%20Profiles/pdf/2016/pdf1/cpa28.pdf>.

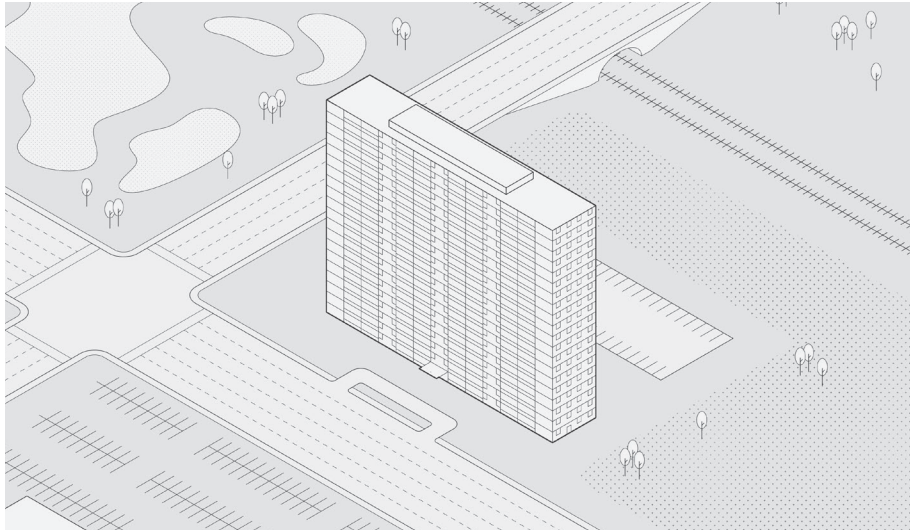
[40] Toronto Community Housing Corporation. "Board of Directors Meeting - Agenda, Public Session". (Toronto Community Housing, 2020) 42-45.

[41] Jeff Crump, "Deconcentration by Demolition: Public Housing, Poverty, and Urban Policy." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20, no. 5 (2002): 581-96.

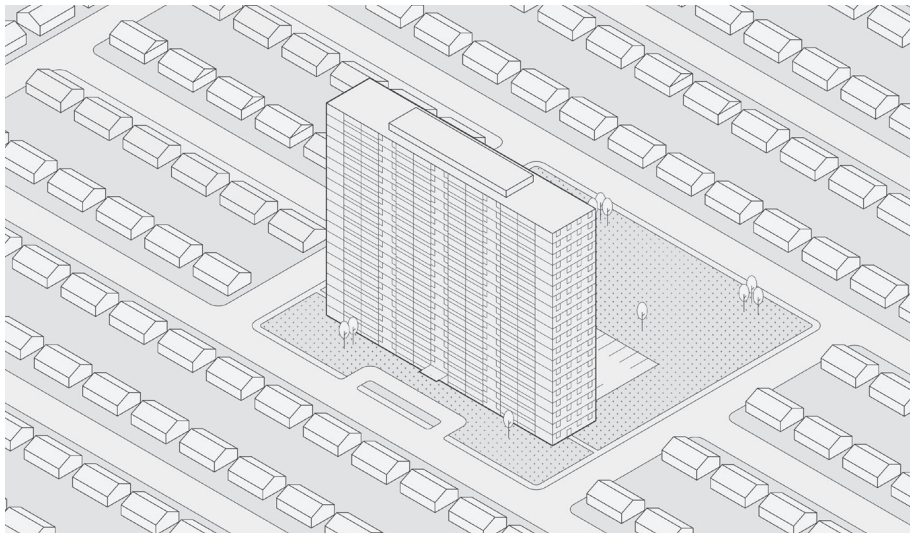
invests in energy-efficient upgrades in high-rise apartments. The current scope of this work includes the installation of new thermally-broken windows and doors, the addition of a new insulation and over-cladding system, and the replacement of existing balcony guardrails⁴⁰.

Bound by Highway 401, the Black Creek and a disjointed patchwork of endless bungalows and sprawling industrial parks (fig 34), the site itself is a conglomeration of parking lots, utility bunkers, dilapidated playgrounds and service roads; any available green space is wedged between throughways. The childcare center directly to the west is constantly at capacity, the small recreation center to the east is well-loved but often unable to keep up with the needs of the hyper-dense community next door. While the development is undoubtedly a significant artifact within the neighbourhood's residential fabric, the buildings seem to exist outside the typical boundaries of the community. It is abundantly clear where the Jane Falstaff towers end and the 'neighbourhood' begins, the property lines clearly denoted by several layers of fencing. This clear separation from the surrounding context is exacerbated by a myriad of factors, ranging from outdated site planning to complex socio-economic conditions. Further aggravating this separation is a history of violence in the development, encouraging outside perceptions of the towers as 'islands of despair'⁴¹.

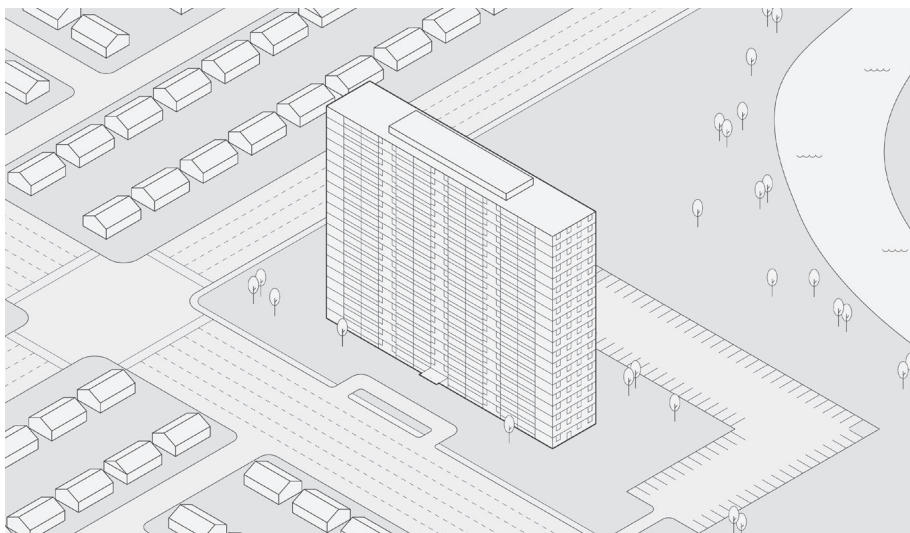
The Jane Falstaff towers exist as a hybrid of two common siting typologies of post-war towers within the city. The first typology is that of the 'Island' (fig 29), which consists of a post-war tower that is divorced from its context by snarled ravine systems, hydro fields, major roads, highways, large swaths of open space and vast parking lots. To access the site, one must confront a myriad of obstacles. The second typology is 'the Suburban Outlier' (fig 30), which is alienated from its neighbourhood by its own scale. Usually the largest building in the area, the outlier looms over sprawling expanses of single-family homes. The 'Hybrid' (fig 31), as the name suggests, exists as a confluence of the previously mentioned types. These buildings are usually cut off from their surrounding neighbourhood through both natural and infrastructure corridors, and exist as a hyper-dense blip in an otherwise low-density area.



[fig 29] the 'Island' post-war tower site typology

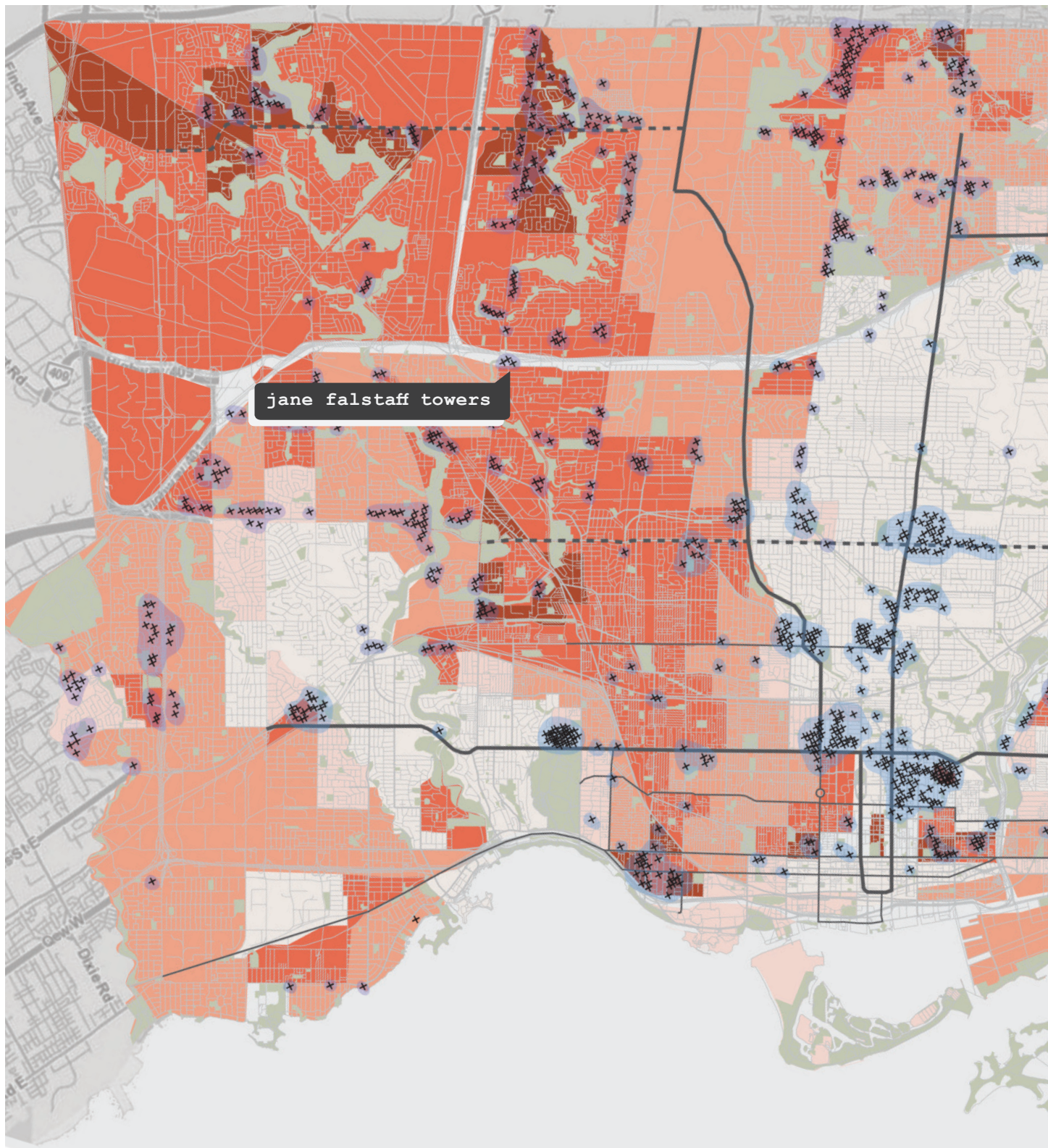


[fig 30] the 'Suburban Outlier' post-war tower site typology

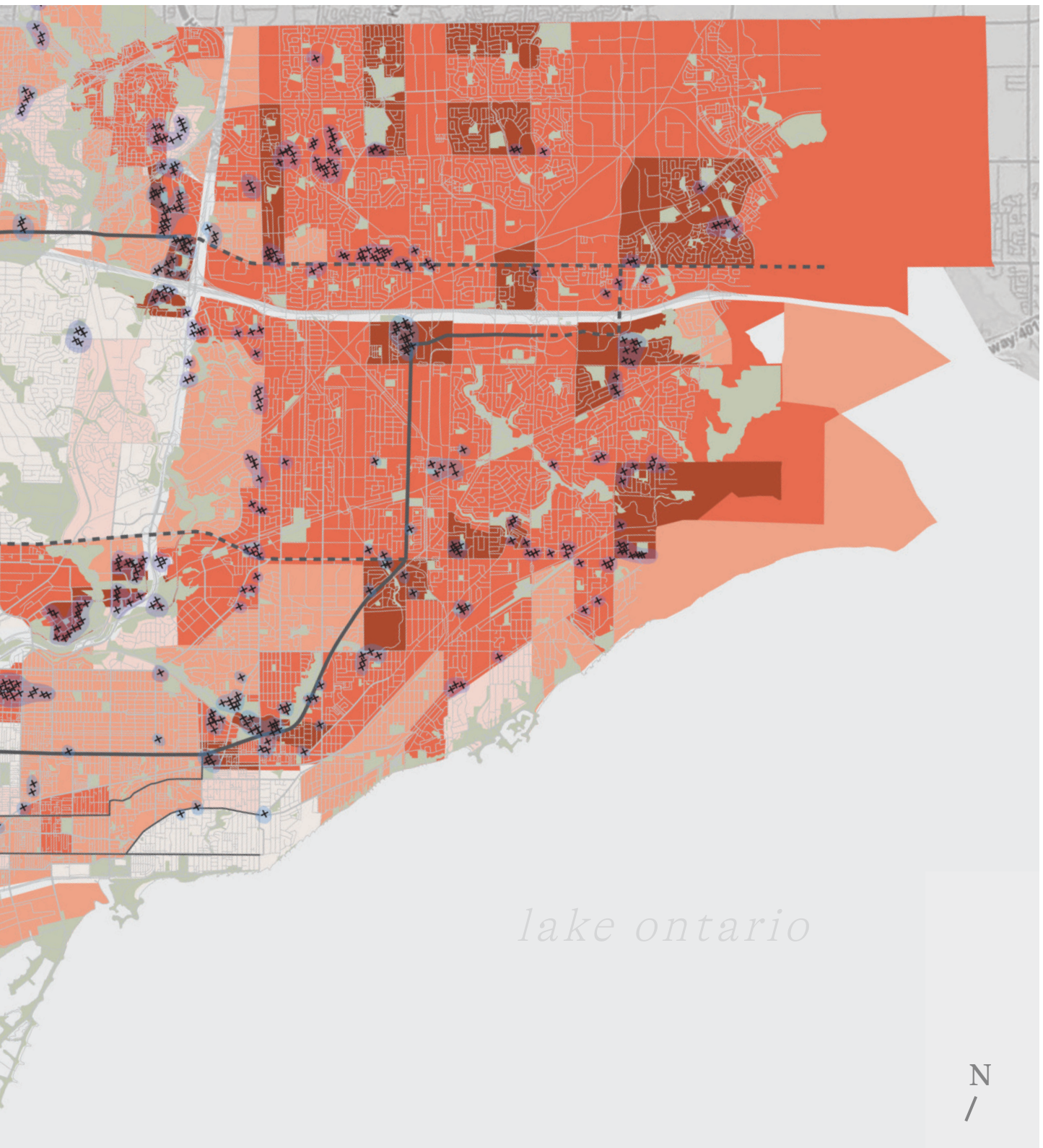


[fig 31] the 'Hybrid' post-war tower site typology

[fig 32] Toronto CMA average vs walkability map



- ✕ post-war residential tower
- streetcar line
- subway line
- - future subway line
- very low walkability, >20 mins to rapid transit
- low walkability, ~10 mins to rapid transit
- good walkability, <10 mins to rapid transit



- <60% below Toronto CMA average income (very low)
- >120% above Toronto CMA average income (high)
- 60-79.9% below Toronto CMA average income (low)
- 80-119.9% below Toronto CMA average income (middle)

[fig 33] neighbourhood map



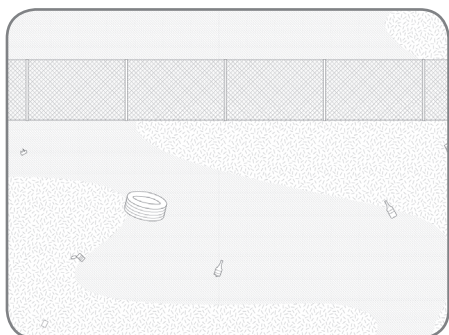
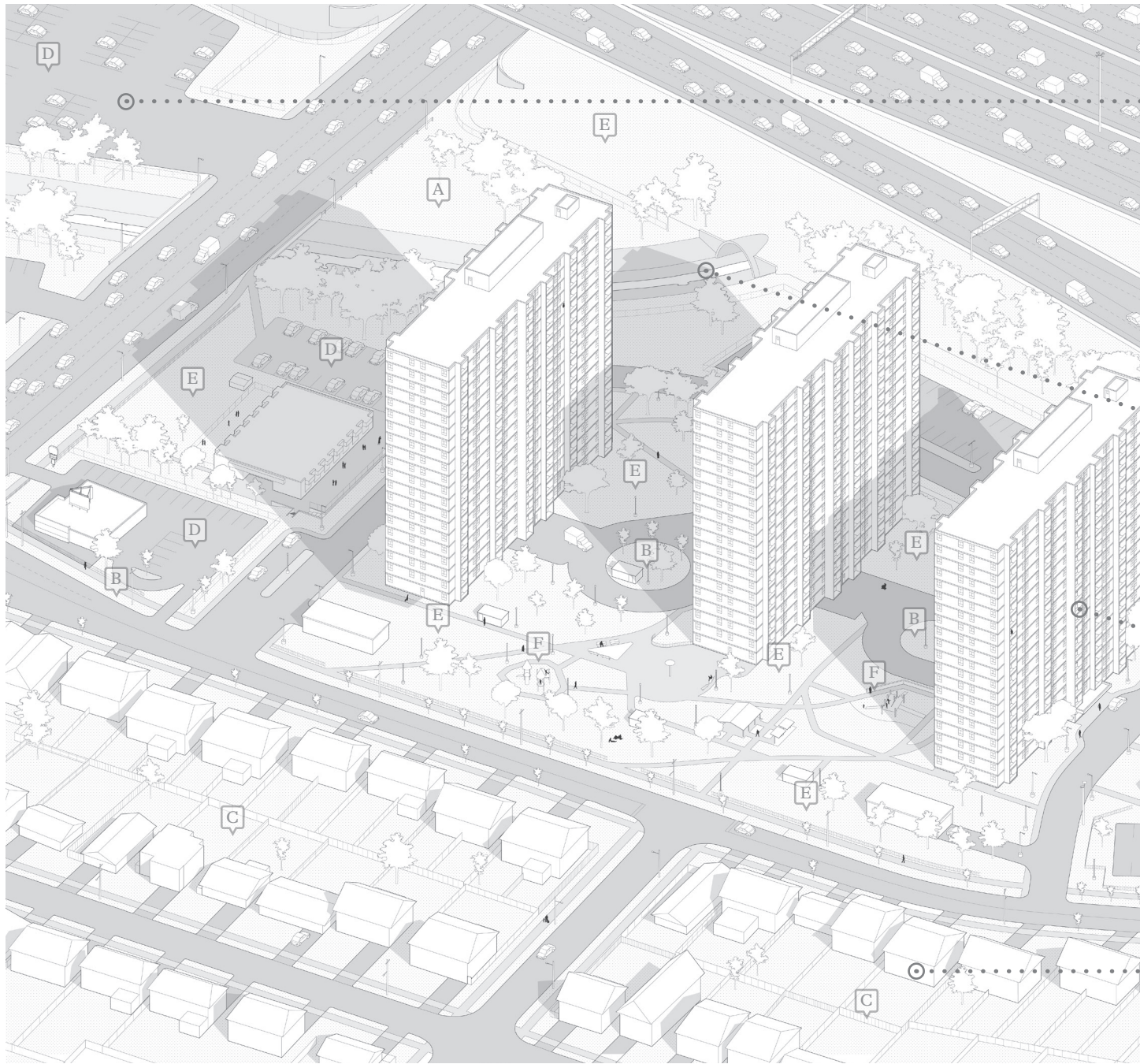
- ⊗ rapid transit stop w/ 5 minute walk radius
- ⊗ grocery store w/ 5 minute walk radius
- ⊗ school w/ 5 minute walk radius

- ▬ post-war residential tower
- designated open space
- ⋯ railway line

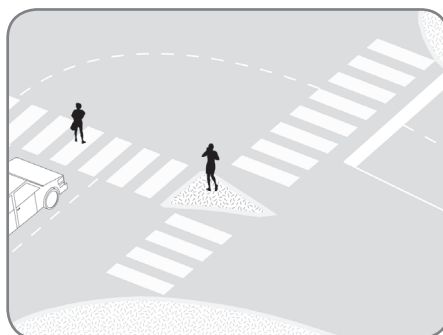


- bus route
- ▨ residential fabric
- ▩ industrial + commercial fabric

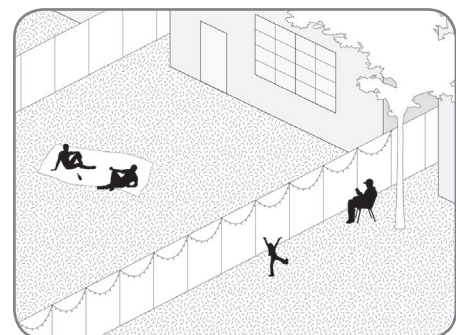
[fig 34] Jane Falstaff site analysis



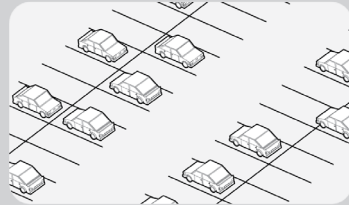
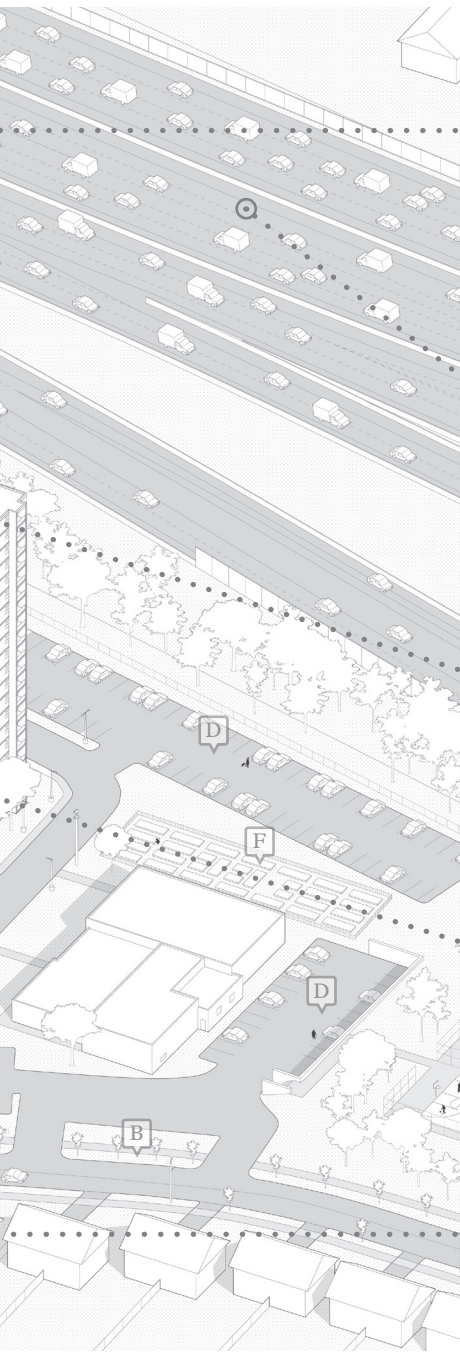
type a: abandoned lot



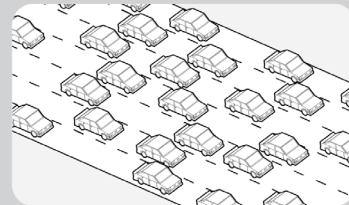
type b: liminal green space
(landscaped medians)



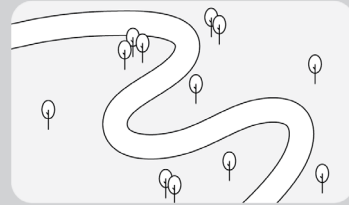
type c: private yards



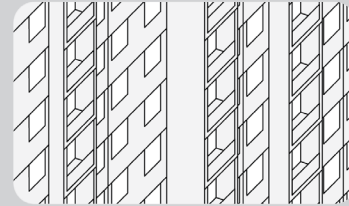
Industrial + Commercial Areas: Pockets of industrial and commercial land generate large expanses of parking lots, warehouses, and loading docks that deter pedestrian flow.



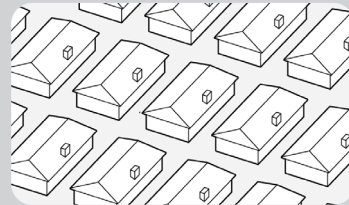
Major Roads + Highways: Multi-lane roadways not only create inconvenient and impassable site boundaries, but also contribute significant noise and light pollution to the development.



Natural Systems: Natural systems such as ravines create inaccessible site boundaries through topographical changes, lengths of protective fencing and untraversable running water.



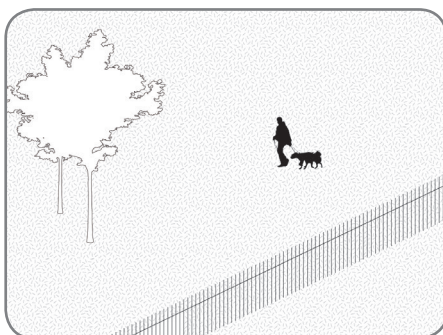
Modernist Design Principals: The post-war towers rigid aesthetic principals differentiate it from the surrounding neighbourhood.



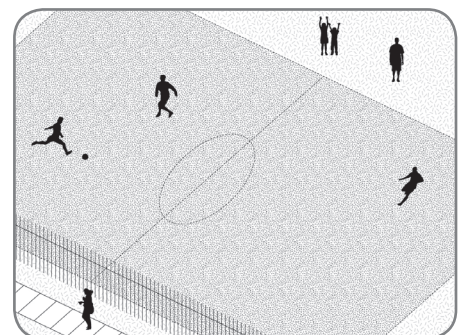
Residential Fabric: Large swaths of single family homes create a homogeneous residential fabric vastly different from the post-war towers.



type d: parking lots



type e: unprogrammed green space



type f: programmed green space



[fig 35] typical existing balconies at Jane Falstaff Towers



[fig 36] top: current overlapping efforts on east tower, bottom: ground plane between two towers



[fig 37] top: children's play area, bottom left: approach from daycare center, bottom right: picnic area



[fig 38] apartment window at ground plane

Three Architectures

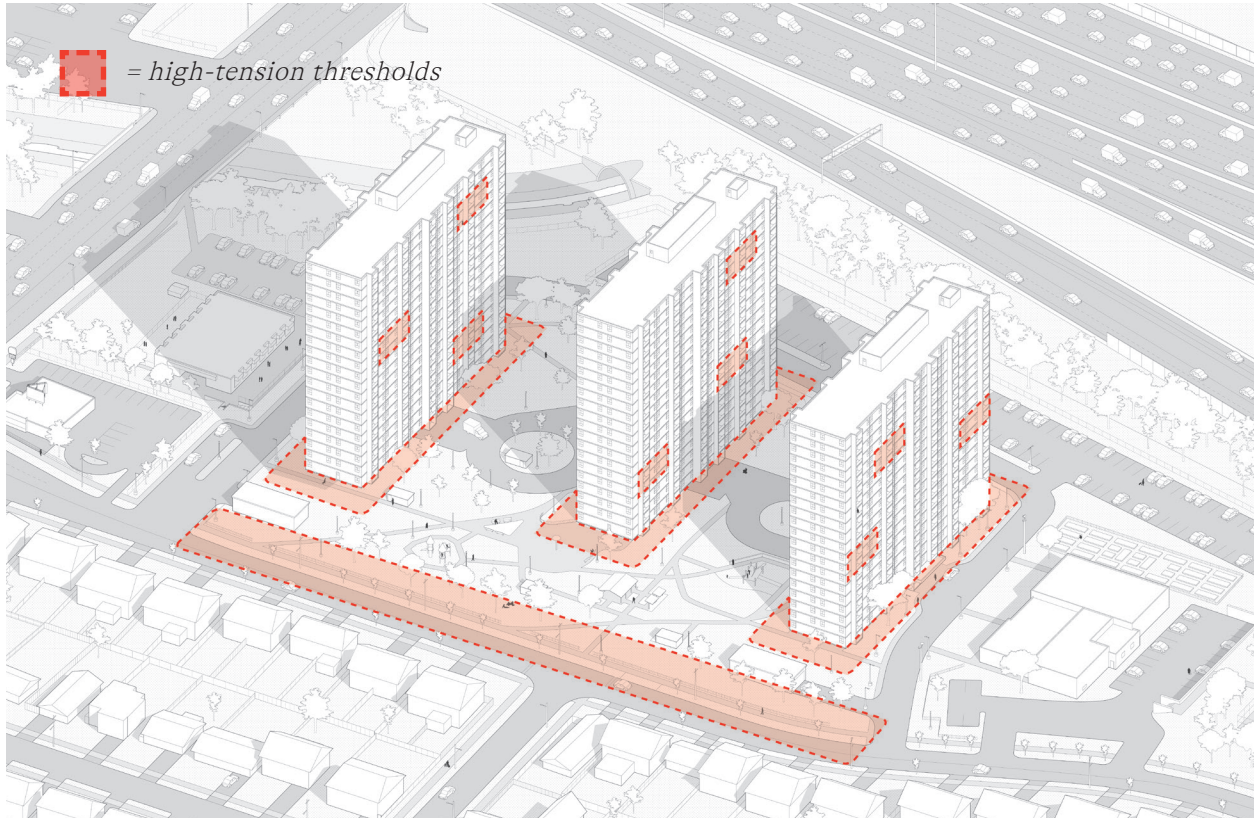
While the Jane Falstaff towers exist as a conglomeration of unique, site-specific challenges, the development is also fairly representative of many of the major typological problems that Toronto's contemporary post-war towers face. The development itself can be characterized by its collection of disparate and disconnected outdoor areas, inefficient balconies, and marked lack of accessible and abundant community space. Many of the visible tension points present on the site were most obvious at the thresholds identified through the tenant interviews discussed in chapter two; the public space surrounding the tower felt highly transient, with a multitude of pathways dissecting large swaths of unprogrammed lawn. Balconies were cramped and predominantly unoccupied, mostly used as long-term storage by residents. The few community resources provided adjacent to the site—a childcare center, small recreation center and public basketball courts—were often overwhelmed by the demand of the high-density population next door.

Although the Jane Falstaff towers are currently being reskinned to address a multitude of sustainability issues that commonly plague the city's post-war apartment stock, such as extensive thermal bridging at the floor slabs, insufficient insulation and deteriorating air and vapour barriers, the current renewal efforts stop at the envelope and neglect to engage the shifting needs of the tower's residents. While implementing the Tower Renewal Guidelines core principals (a focus on greenhouse gas reduction, housing quality, affordability, growth, complete communities, and culture) is fundamental to the ongoing survival of these buildings, it is also integral for renewal strategies to engage with the inevitable and unavoidable variability of tenant needs throughout the city's post-war apartment neighbourhoods.

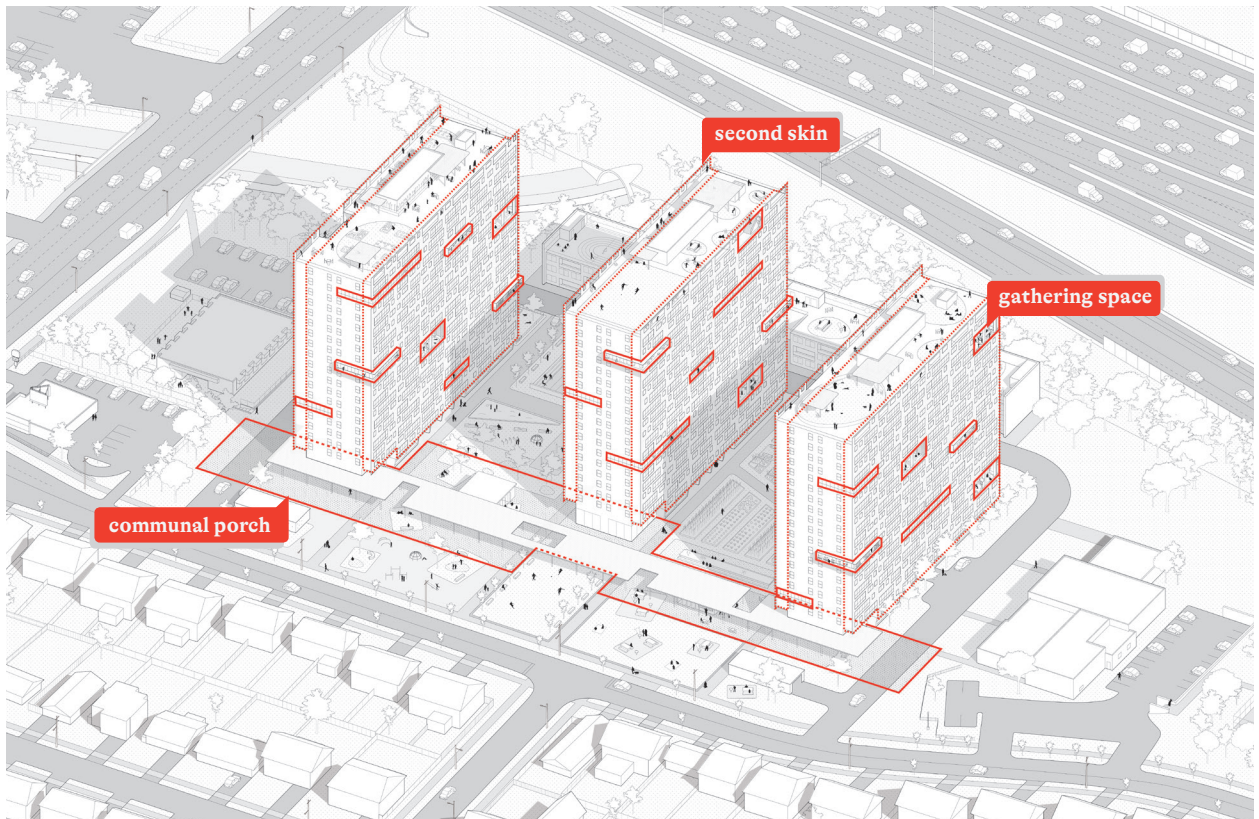
Demographics within Toronto's post-war towers have always been mutable; from the gradual shift of middle-to-low income residents to the more localized community shifts within individual communities, the city's post-war tower neighbourhoods have always served as a backdrop to change. A way to address this variability within the tower communities is to explicitly design avenues for tenant appropriation of space. The tower renewal initiatives are in a position to explicitly embed this ideology within the suburban tower neighbourhoods,



[fig 39] view from west parking lot



[fig 40] high tension thresholds on site, key intervention areas



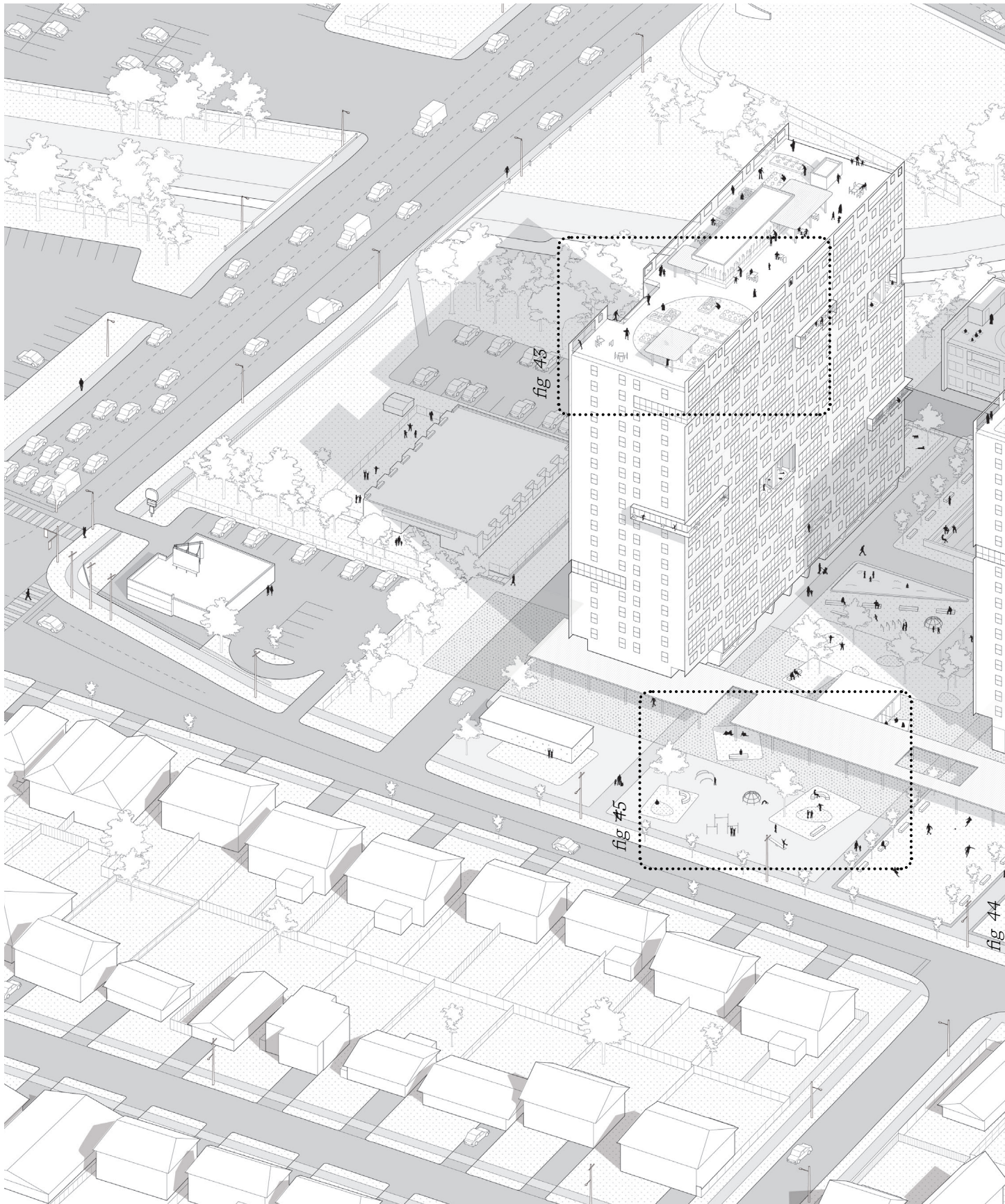
[fig 41] new architectures of agency

providing a structure for both present and future users to adapt their environment to suit their needs. This strategy gives residents a sense of agency over their own homes, and has the potential to create a network of independent, versatile neighbourhoods that grow and change with their populations, avoiding the traditional trap of obsolescence and eventual demolition fifty years in the future.

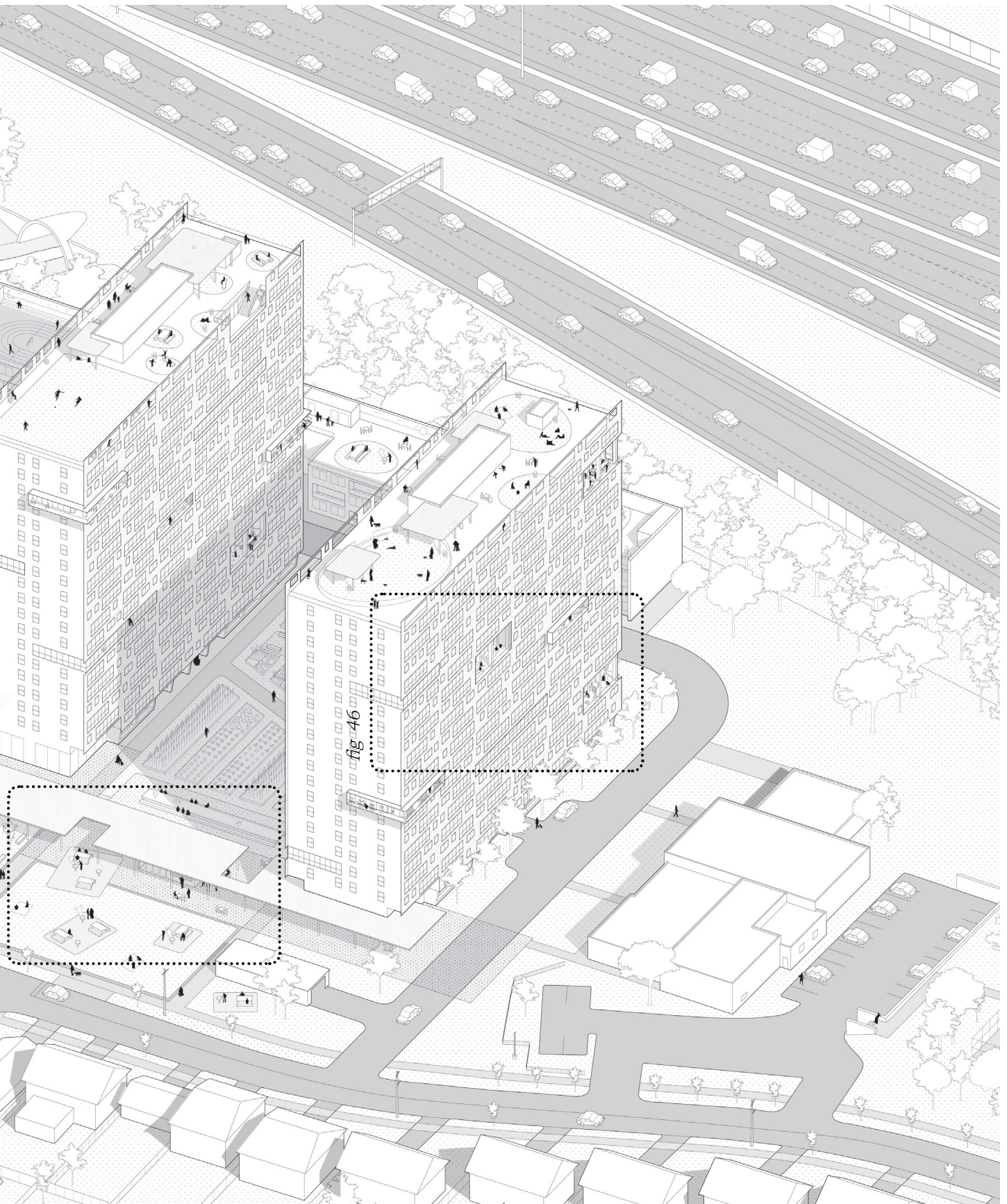
Ultimately, these interventions took the form of the development of three ‘architectures of agency’; strategies that would act in parallel to existing renewal approaches while facilitating and supporting the continual appropriation of space by residents (fig 40). Agency, in this case, refers to a resident’s ability to meaningfully change, shape, and influence the architecture they inhabit. The built environment is never neutral; it reflects the values of those who conceive it, build it, finance it, not necessarily those who live in it. This relationship inherently fosters estrangement, separating a place’s continually changing populace from the actuality of their environment⁴². Agency over one’s domestic space provides the resident with a form of independence, turning architecture into a tool for living rather than a cage to live within. The *architectures of agency* deployed on site would be introduced at the common thresholds identified through tenant interviews, expanding and adapting previously liminal areas into vibrant and flexible spaces (fig 40).

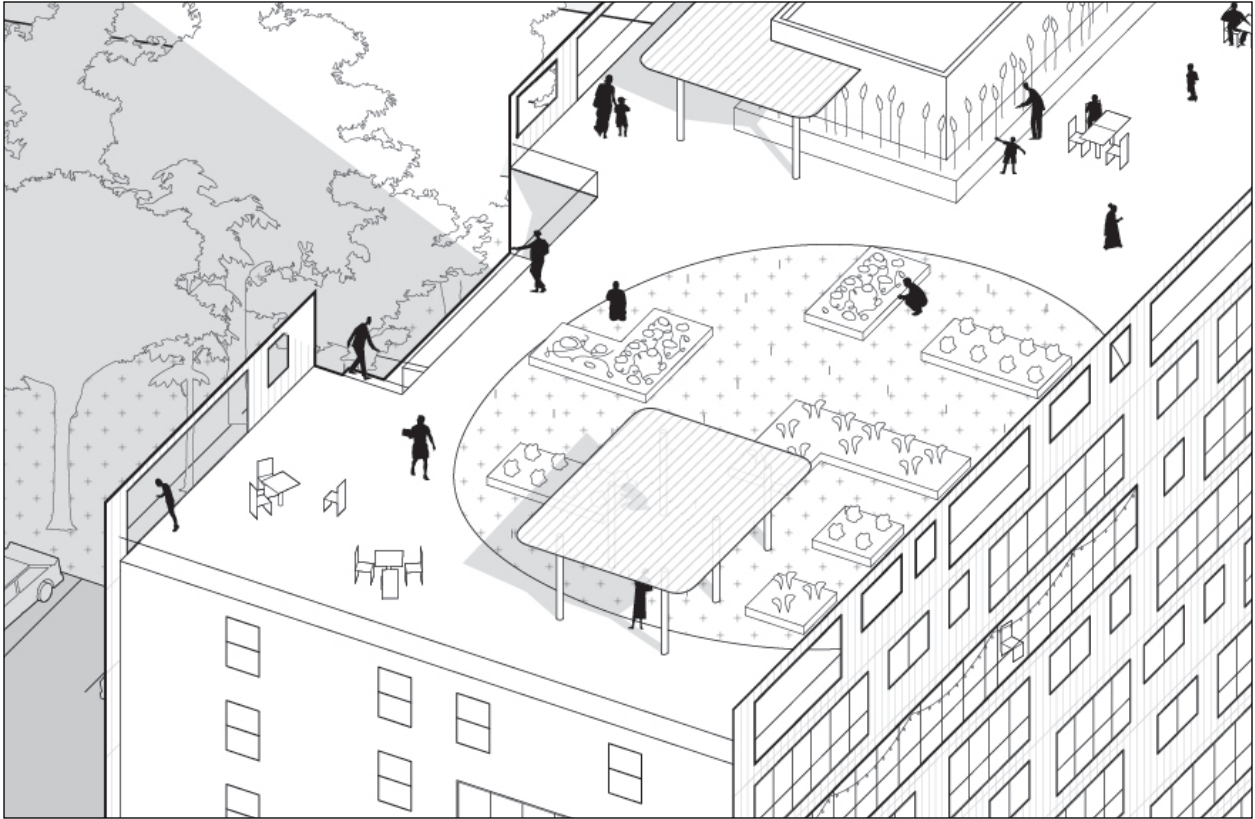
The first architecture is that of the communal front porch that negotiates the space between the post-war towers and the neighbourhood, clearly delineating a gradient of public, outdoor programs. The second is the development of a resident-scale second building skin, which addresses sustainability concerns while creating a flexible and adaptable buffer between the individual unit and the public. The third is the addition of a crucial missing shared programming within the hyper-dense apartment blocks, supporting a network of communal spaces throughout the buildings and activating once sterile corridors.

[42] Giancarlo De Carlo, “Architecture’s Public.” Essay. In *Architecture and Participation*, edited by Peter Blundell-Jones, Doina Petrescu, and Jeremy Till, (London: Spon Press, 2005) 3–22.

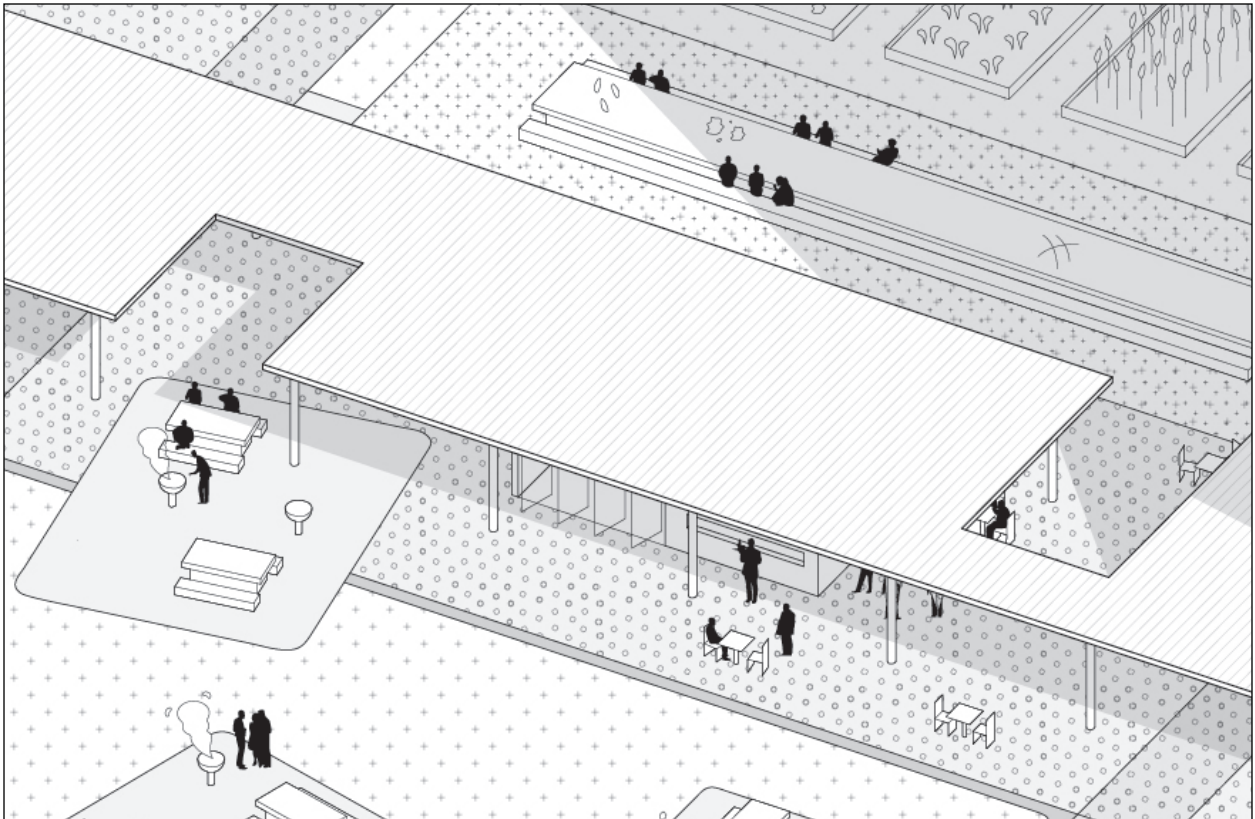


[fig 42] axonometric of proposed 'architectures of agency'

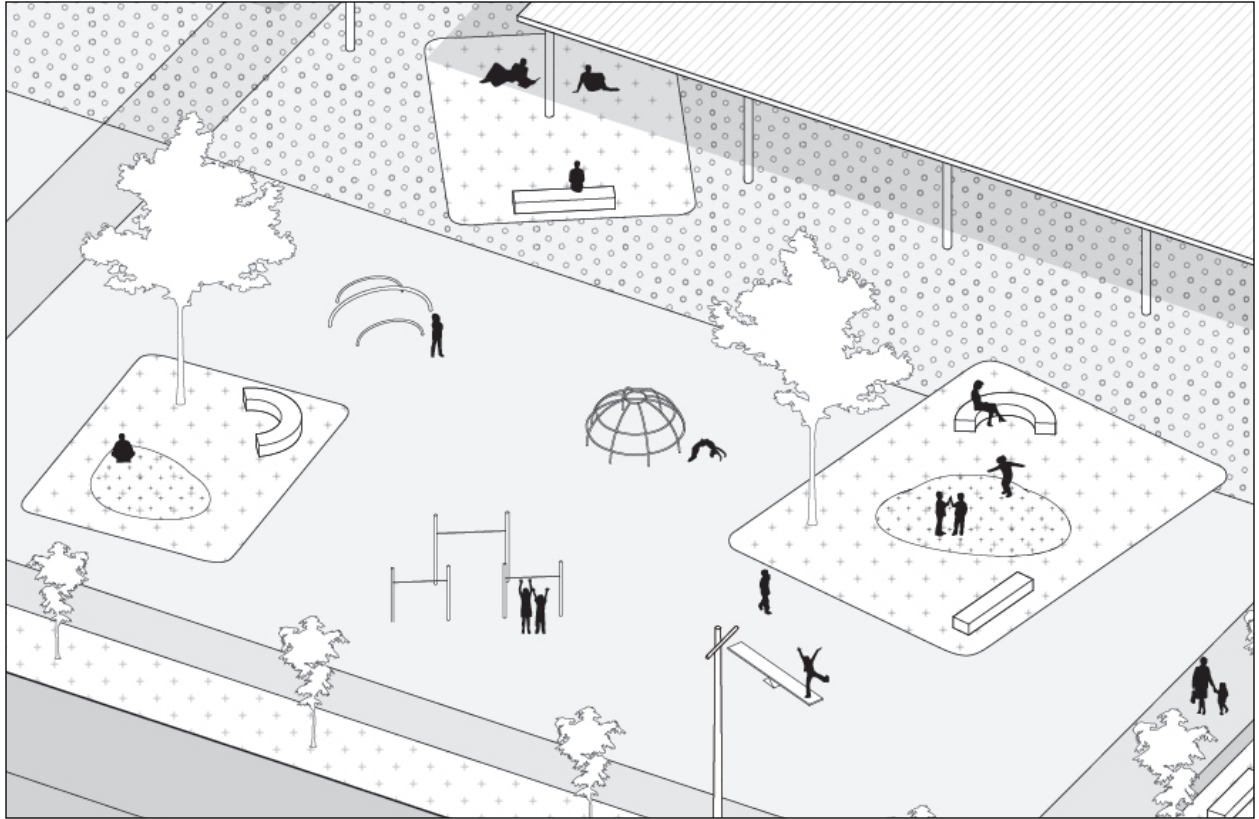




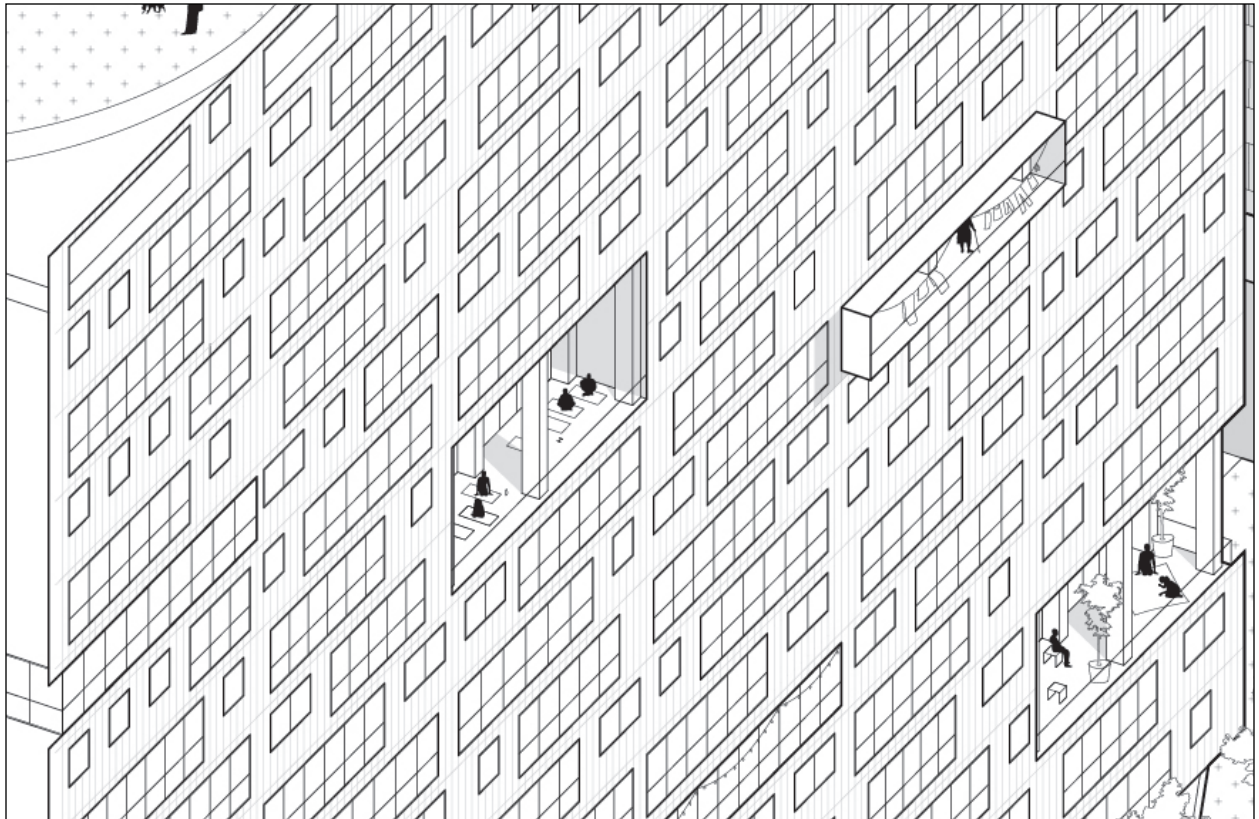
[fig 43] detail of axonometric at roof, additional gardens



[fig 44] detail of axonometric at canopy, tenant-run kiosk



[fig 45] detail of axonometric at front sidewalk with children's playground



[fig 46] detail of axonometric at facade

The Porch

The introduction of a new communal front porch condition on the site begins to address the disconnect between the development and the neighbourhoods (fig 45). The relationship between the tower and the street was a fraught one for many of the tenants I spoke with. Sites with multiple buildings often felt like there was a lack of community ‘front door’, a clear separation between the public realm on the ground floor and the more private, domestic realm of the residences. Additionally, many people struggled with the lack of distinct ownership over shared space, with it often unclear what differentiated the grass of a public park from that of a private garden. Residents would frequently construct make-shift fences to delineate D.I.Y community gardens from the rest of the ground plane, but these constructions were subject to the whims of management and were often heavily regulated or removed. This ambiguity lent a sense of hesitancy to much of the ground plane, with both community members and residents alike tentative to fully activate the space.

The addition of a front porch to the site marks a clear yet permeable boundary between the neighbourhood and the development (fig 47). By setting this threshold back from the public street, it organizes the ground plane into three main zones: a public “front yard” condition, the occupiable threshold of the porch, and a more private “back-yard”. Vehicular traffic is pushed to the periphery, with only a few necessary service roads cutting strategically through the site, helping reclaim the ground plane for pedestrians.

The porch connects the three buildings through distinctive hardscaping, an overarching canopy, and the addition of several programmed pavilions. The front two existing units of each building are replaced with publicly accessible programs, such as a new location for the Falstaff Service Organization, a community food pantry, and a tool library and workshop teaching space. Two smaller pavilions are inserted in between buildings, consisting of a meeting hall which has the capability to host various workshops, classes, and lectures, as well as a tenant-run kiosk, which can serve a variety of potential small businesses.

Throughout the conversations I had with tower residents, the



[fig 47] view looking through proposed porch towards meeting hall

desire to have access to a space where one could repair household objects, learn or solicit fundamental repair skills and have access to basic tools was extremely common. The addition of a workshop and teaching space on the ground floor allows for residents to have additional agency in the ongoing maintenance and adaptation of their own living environments.

The tenant-run kiosk introduces retail space into the ground plane, while also providing economic opportunities for residents in the development. The space can serve as a place for residents to sell handmade goods, food and beverages, as well as offer other unique services. The community food pantry begins to address resident concerns of food insecurity, as well as supplying a space for education around basic food skills and nutrition.

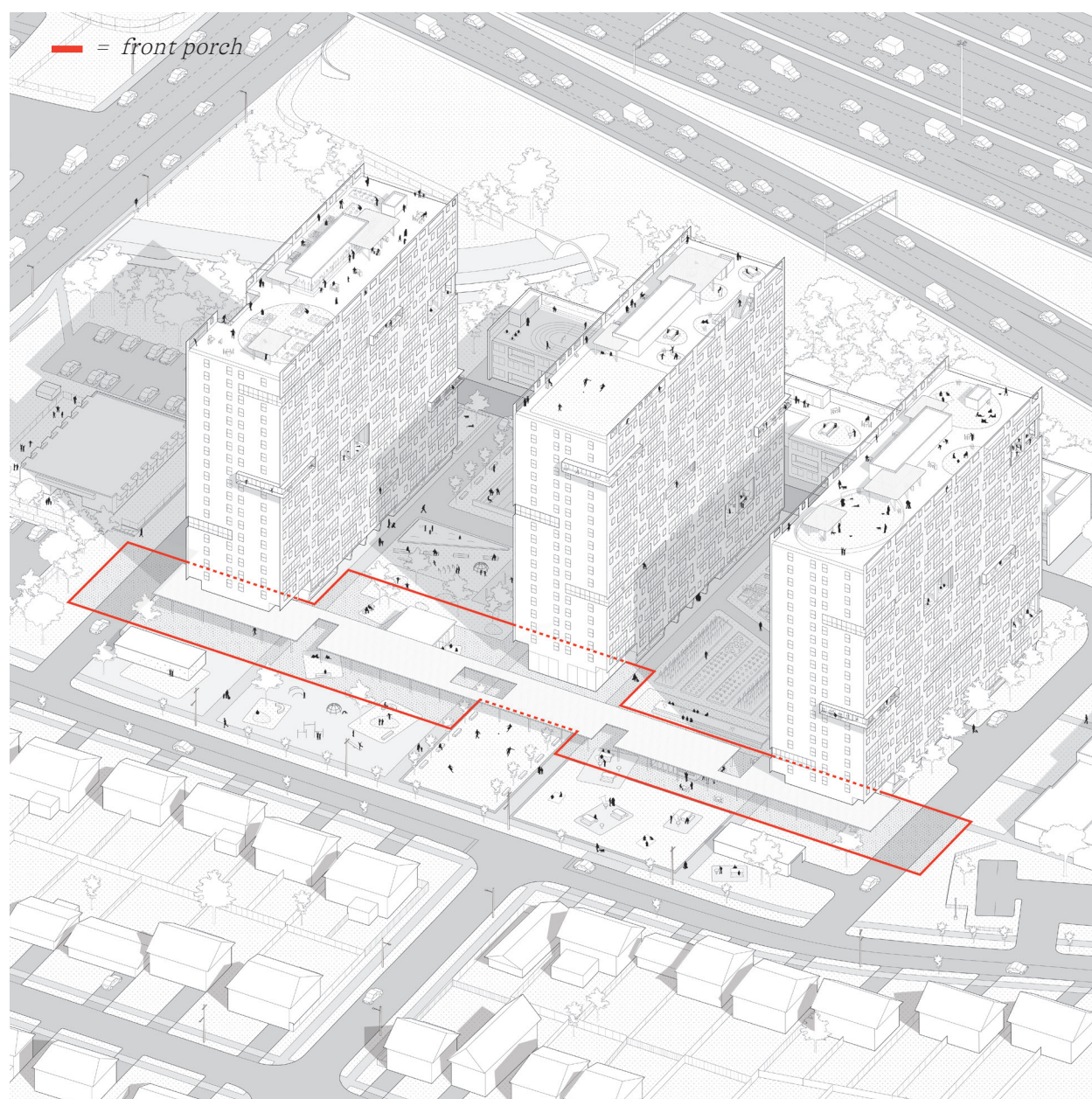
The Meeting Hall creates a space for the community to gather, facilitating programs such as ESL classes, tenant rights workshops, as well as the place for temporary local voting stations or health services such as flu shots, among other things. Each new pavilion contains facades that open up onto the public area, allowing the program to expand onto the porch and activate the space.

The porch, while acting as a 'front door' to the development, also defines a new, occupiable threshold that separates the public park off the street from the quieter, more private back-yard condition in the rear. The addition of fifty-four new units at the back of the site not only more than replace any units that are knocked out for the addition of public programs, but also help create a more sheltered courtyard condition between the buildings. These additional units would be built first, providing temporary units to residents who would otherwise be displaced during the construction process, ensuring all existing tenants can remain on site through the entirety of the renewal process.

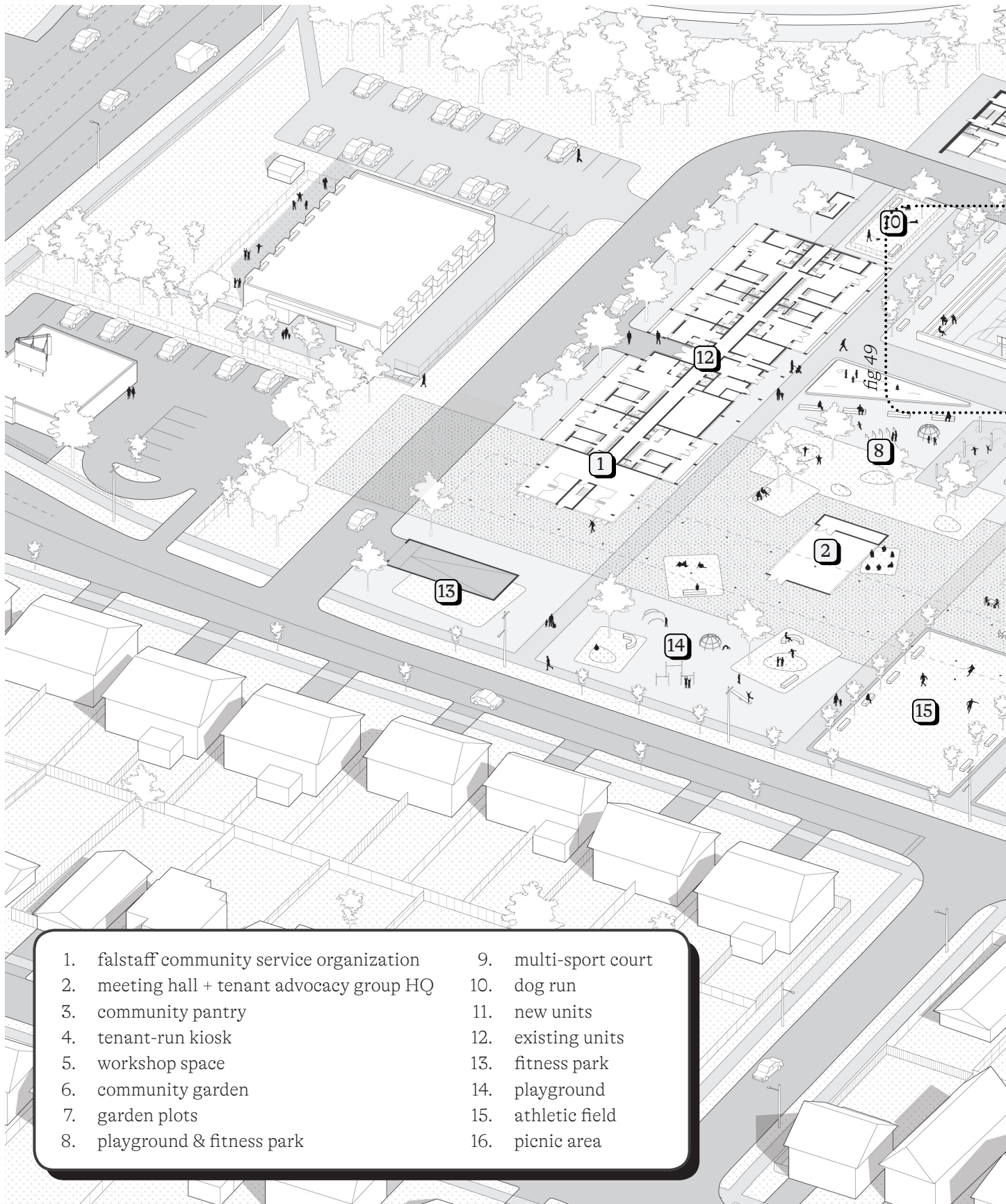
The courtyards hold programs more geared toward the scale of the individual resident, providing a place for the creation of garden plots, a community-run farm linked to the food pantry, dog runs, multi-sport courts, and children's play areas. These courtyards provide tenants with the infrastructure to easily adapt the program, allowing for the transformation of space based on changing tenant needs. Garden plots can be added or reduced based on demand (fig 50), the ratio of

‘programmed’ space to ‘free space’ easily variable. The multi-sport court can serve as a flexible, paved space that facilitates many different athletic games with amphitheatre seating that supports a variety of large community events and performances (fig 47).

Throughout the interview process, social programs like these were highly desired, with residents lamenting that on the rare occasions these programs were supplied, they were too small to serve the needs of such hyper-dense communities. The courtyards embrace the idea of the multiple, providing these necessary programs at a bountiful scale.

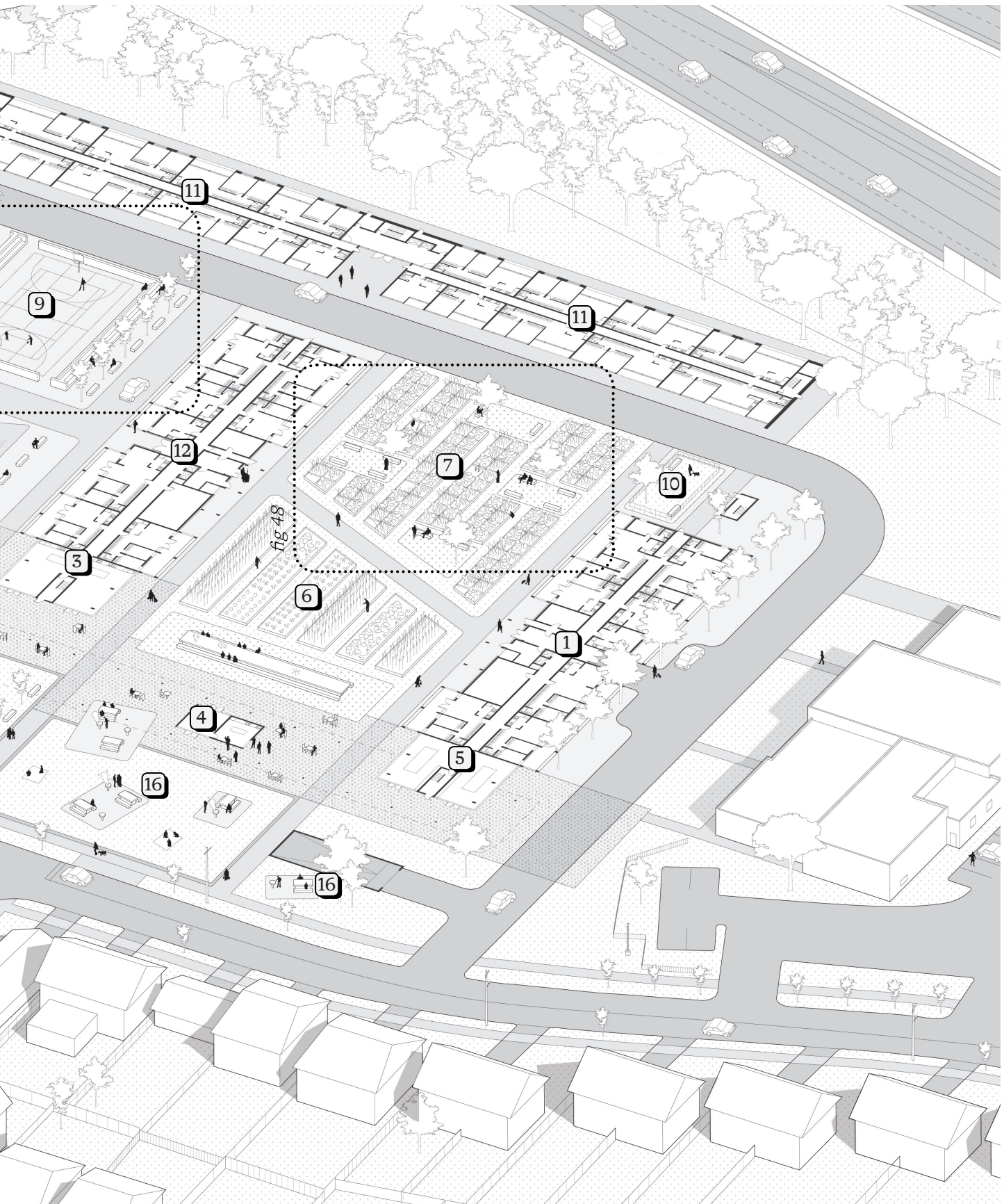


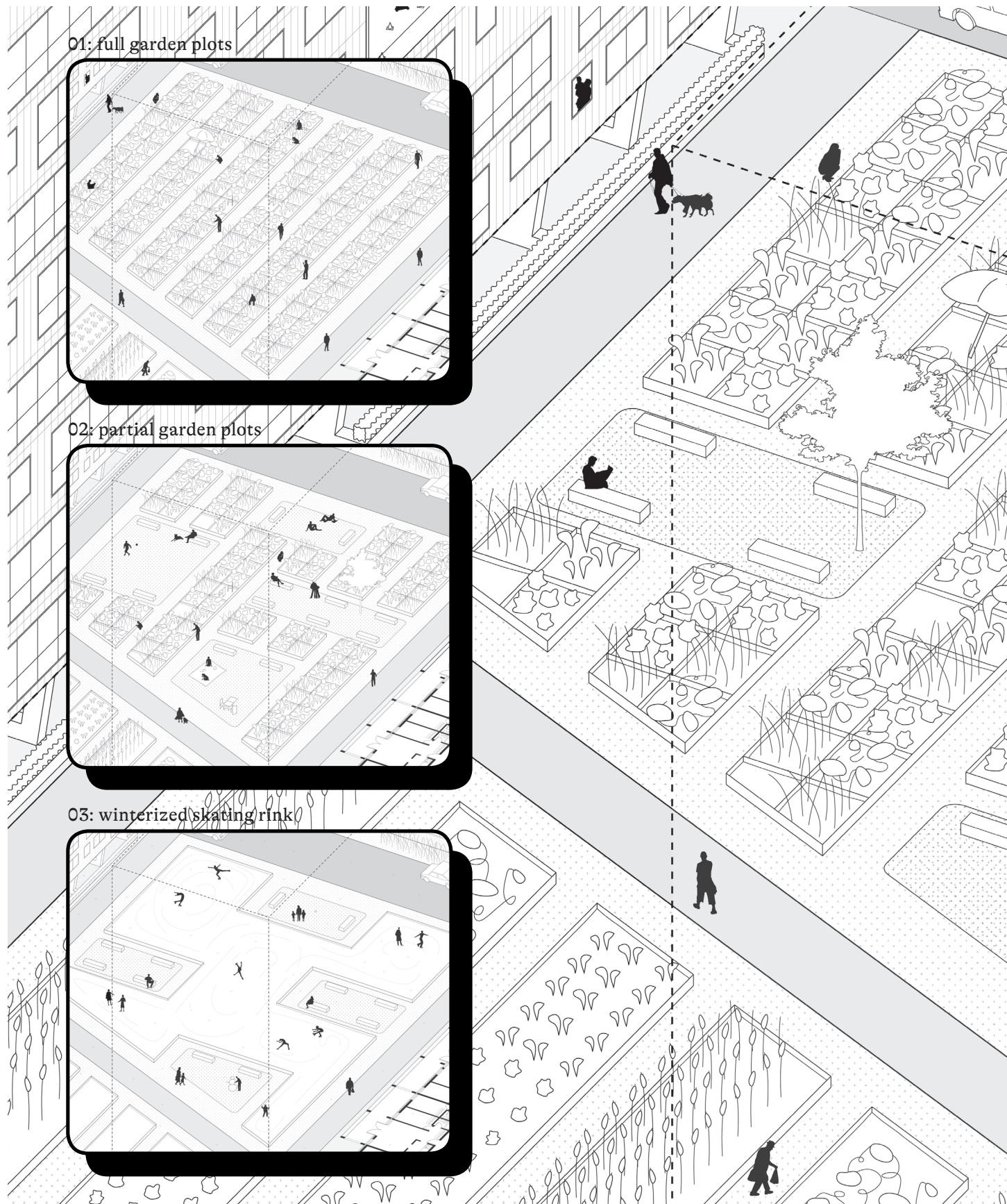
[fig 48] location of proposed porch on site



- | | |
|--|----------------------|
| 1. falstaff community service organization | 9. multi-sport court |
| 2. meeting hall + tenant advocacy group HQ | 10. dog run |
| 3. community pantry | 11. new units |
| 4. tenant-run kiosk | 12. existing units |
| 5. workshop space | 13. fitness park |
| 6. community garden | 14. playground |
| 7. garden plots | 15. athletic field |
| 8. playground & fitness park | 16. picnic area |

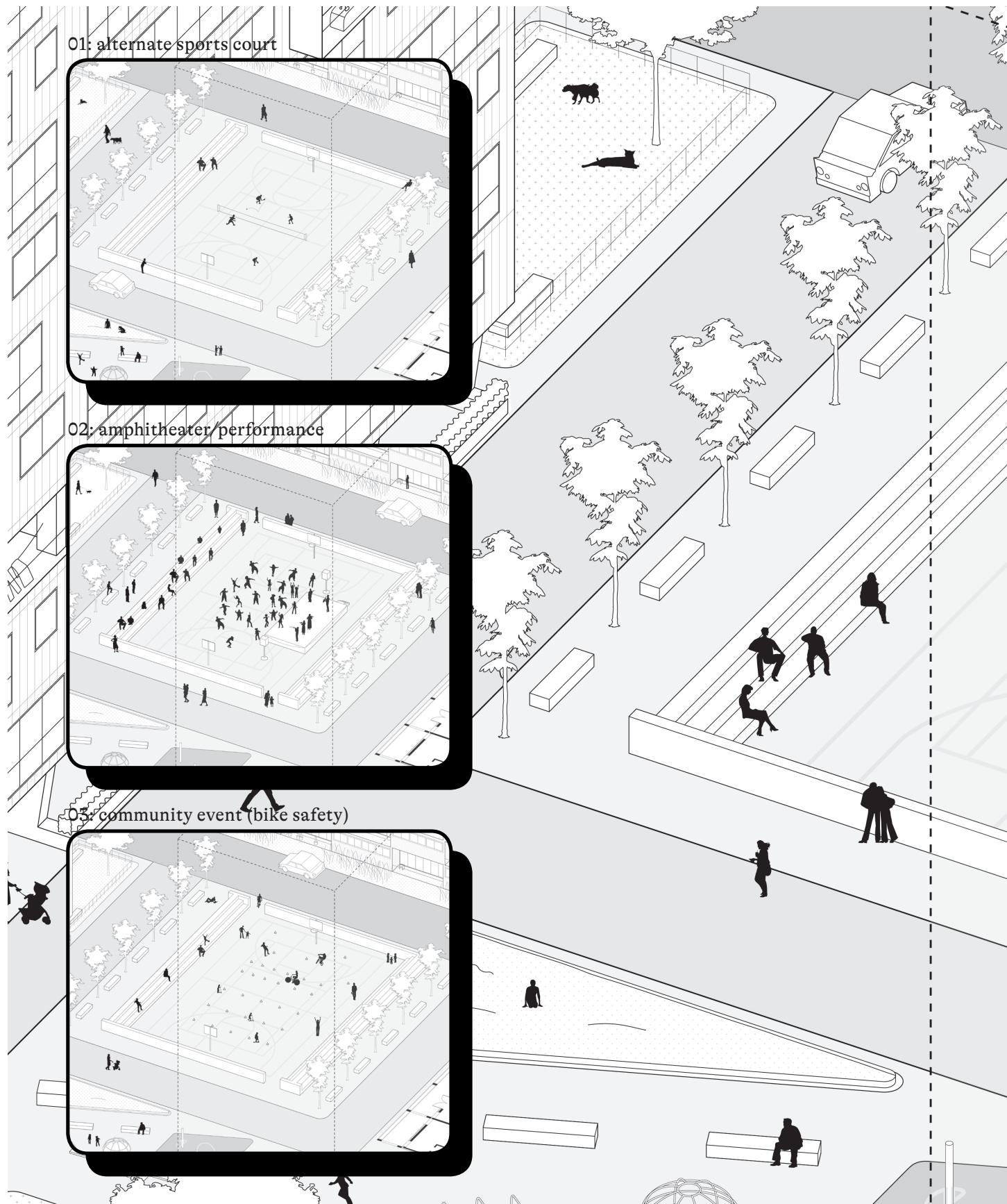
[fig 49] axonometric of proposed ground plane



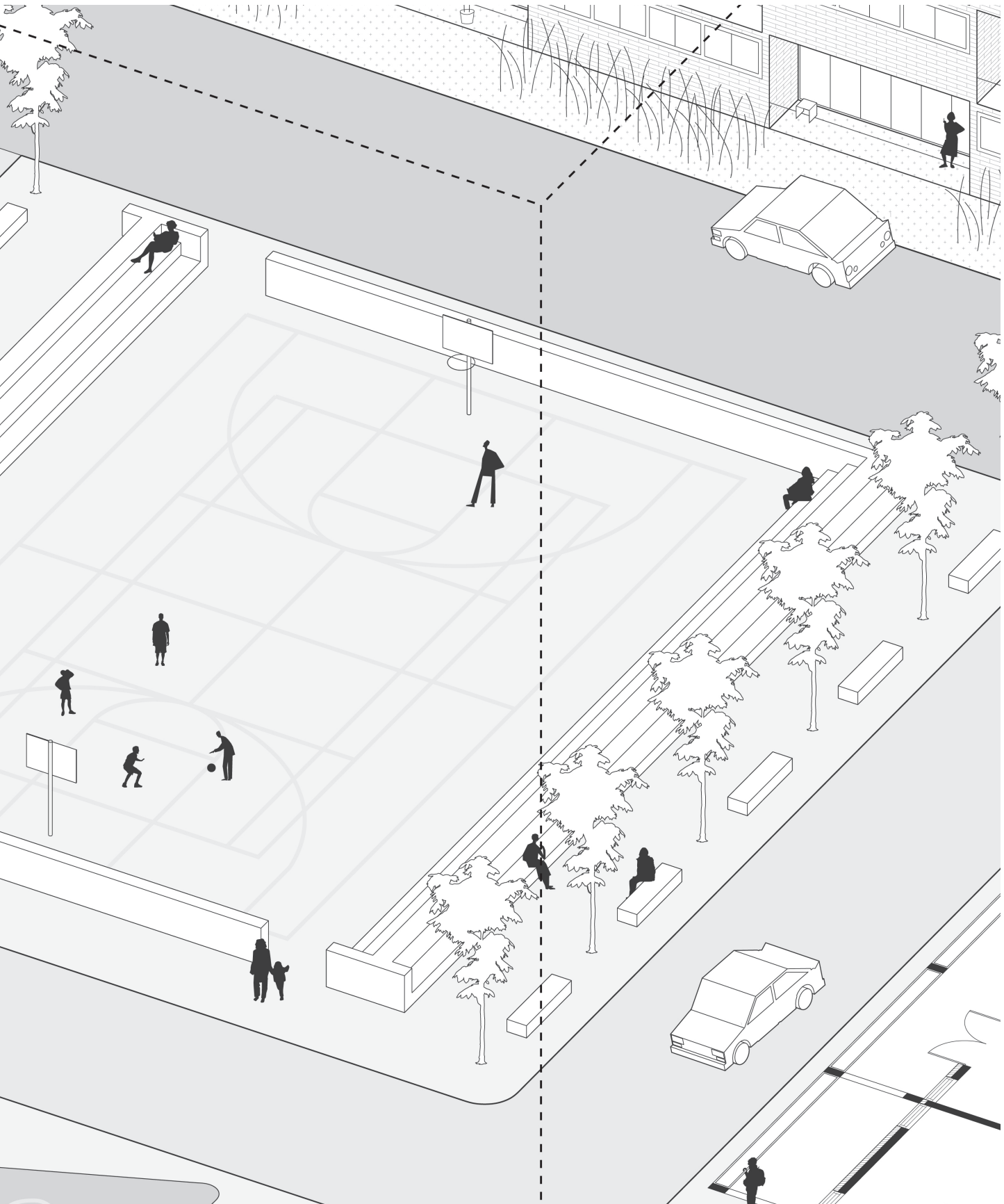


[fig 50] axonometric of proposed ground plane, detail of community gardens





[fig 51] axonometric of proposed ground plane, detail of athletic court



The Spare Room

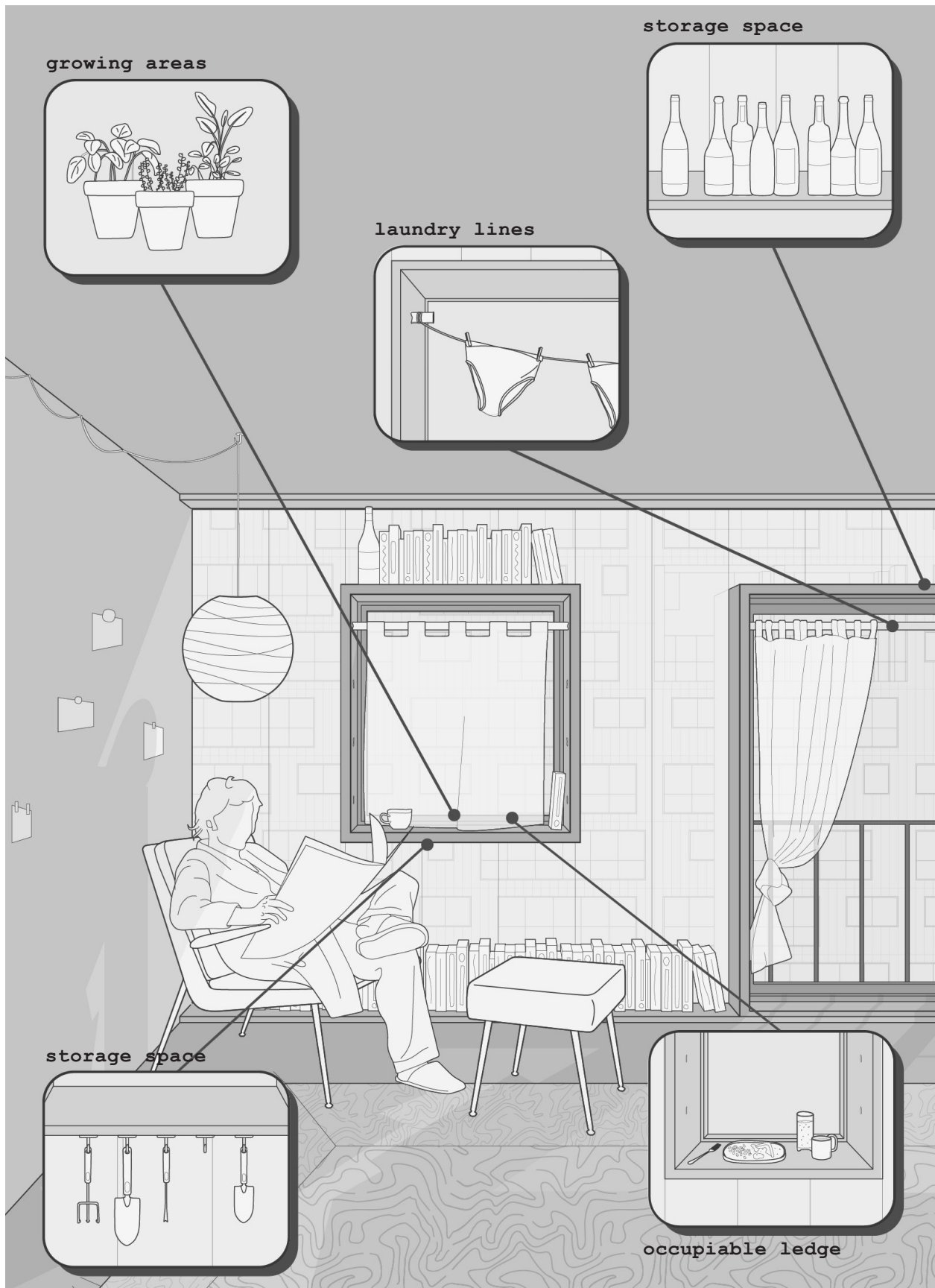
The threshold between the residential edge of the tower and the public realm was one that was discussed at length during conversations with residents. That boundary is extended and made occupiable through the introduction of a 'spare room'; a three meter deep prefabricated balcony extension that acts as an overladding strategy to not only address the multitude of sustainability challenges post-war towers face, but also add much greater flexibility to each dwelling through extension of space (fig 53).

When speaking with residents, many of the issues that arose dealt not with a lack of space, but rather quality and flexibility of the space provided. As many of these towers were originally built for an emerging middle class, unit sizes are typically much larger than many of the new-builds we see today. The expansion of the area beyond the first skin of the building's envelope thickens the threshold between the unit and the neighbourhood, allowing a softer transition between one's domestic environment and that of the public realm.

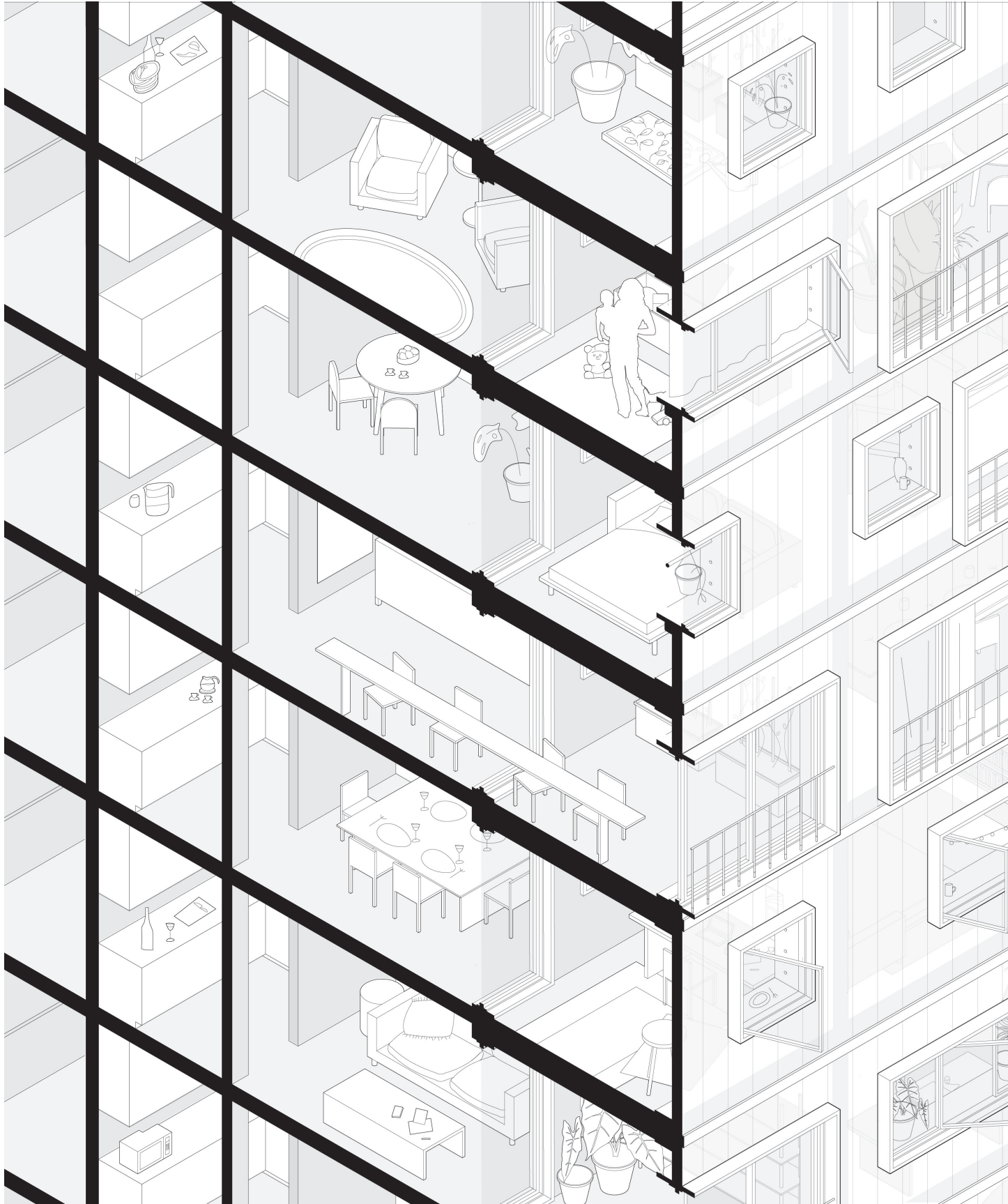
The narrow doorways that used to connect the balcony to the unit are replaced with larger lengths of thermally broken sliding doors that allow this new space to be better connected to the rest of the unit, enabling more flexible and versatile occupations. These new 'spare rooms' would help facilitate a variety of programmatic variations, from extra sitting rooms, home offices, children's playrooms, large dining areas, private gardens, and flexible sleeping spaces (fig 54).

Each new opening is fully operable, allowing for residents to choose between a more open, classic 'balcony' configuration or a sealed 'sunroom' condition, depending on season, programmatic requirements, and changing whims. Additionally, all openings are surrounded by a generous, 30cm deep sill, enabling residents to occupy and adapt the facade in a myriad of ways (fig 52).

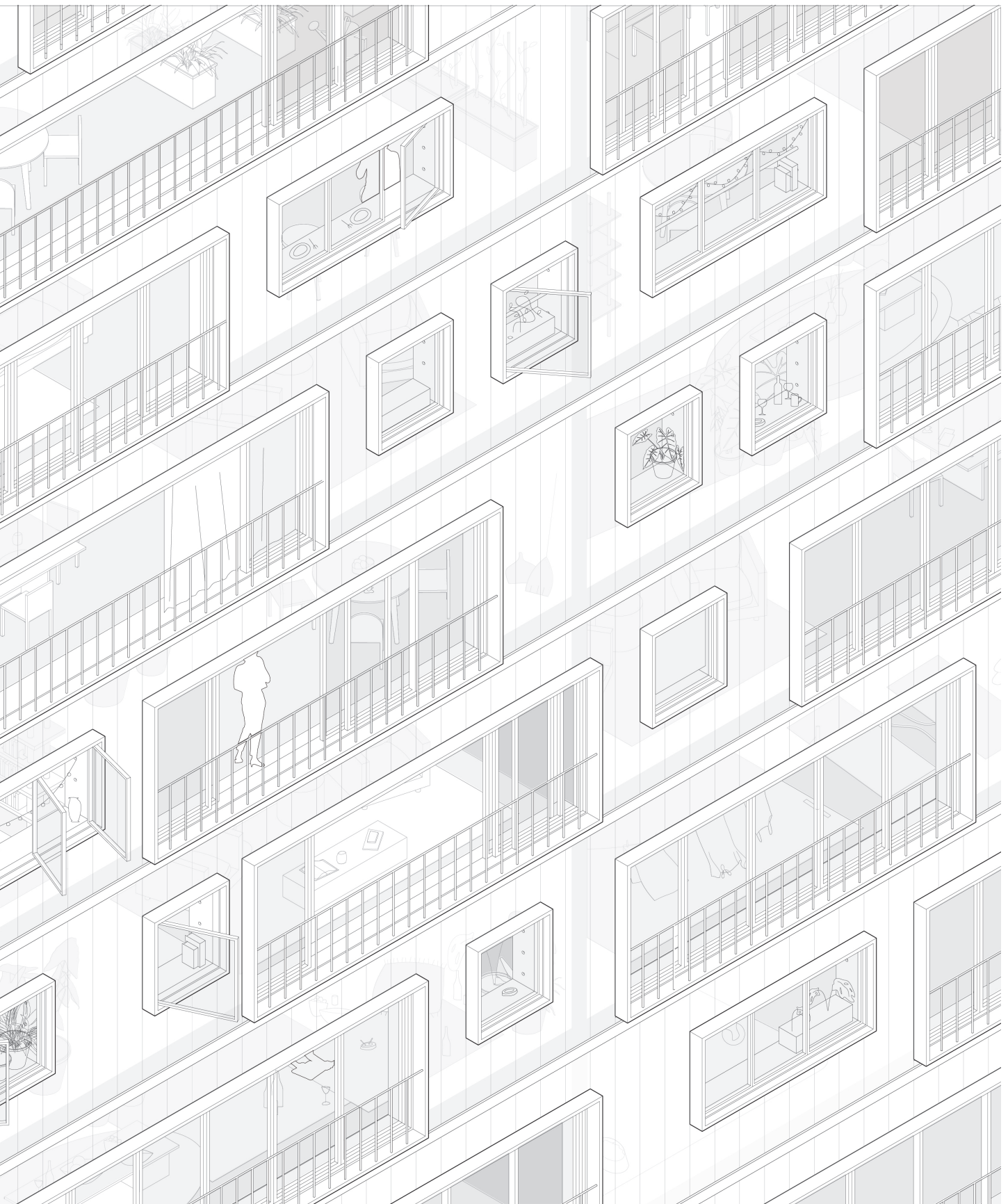
At the ground plane, the threshold is mediated through the introduction of private gardens that are shielded from the courtyards through the overhang of the new balcony extensions above as well as by large, versatile planters that line the pathway (fig 55). This new highly flexible space can serve as anything from an extension of one's living room to a private garden plot, depending on the desire of the resident.

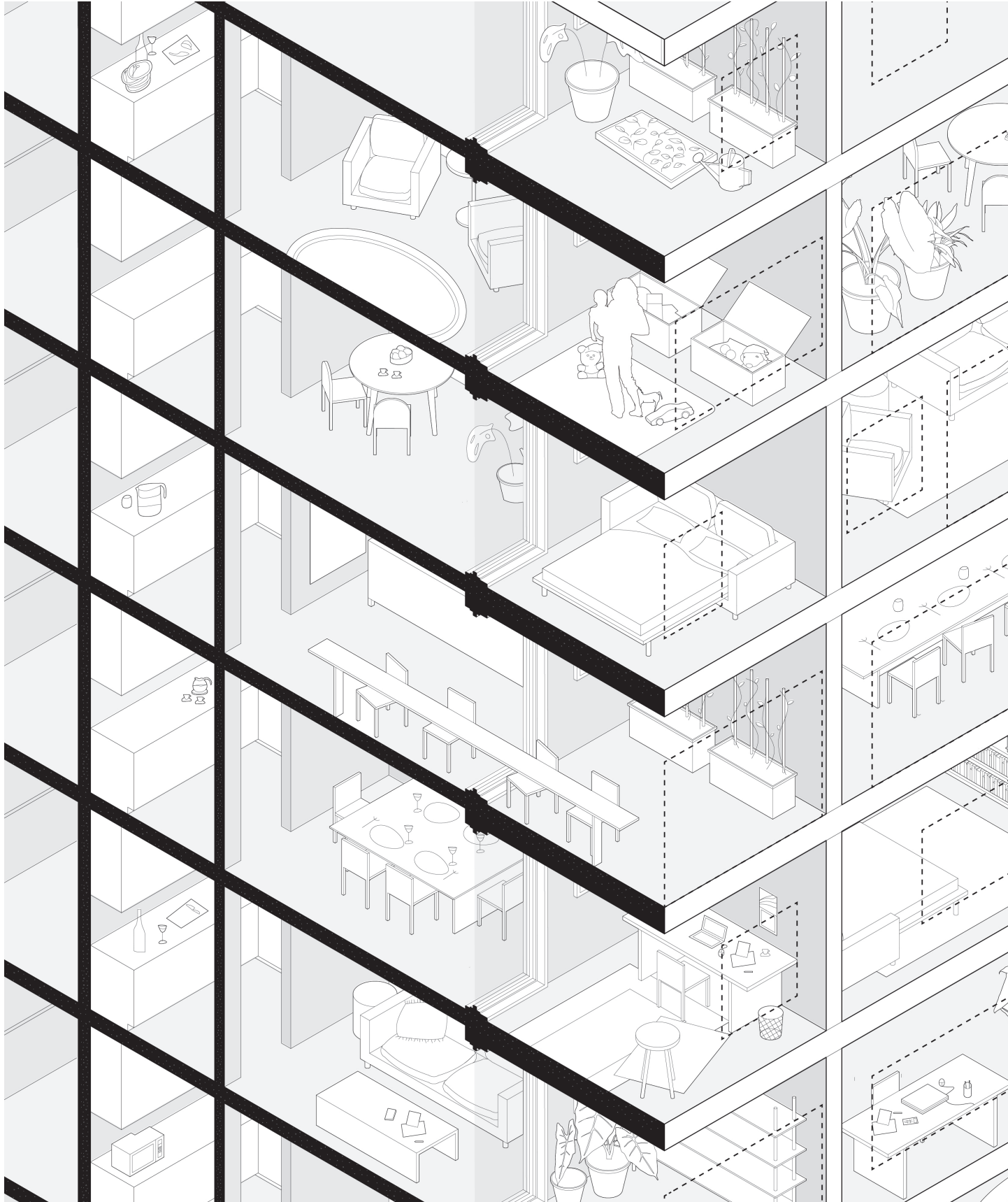


[fig 52] view from inside 'spare room' looking out to neighbouring building

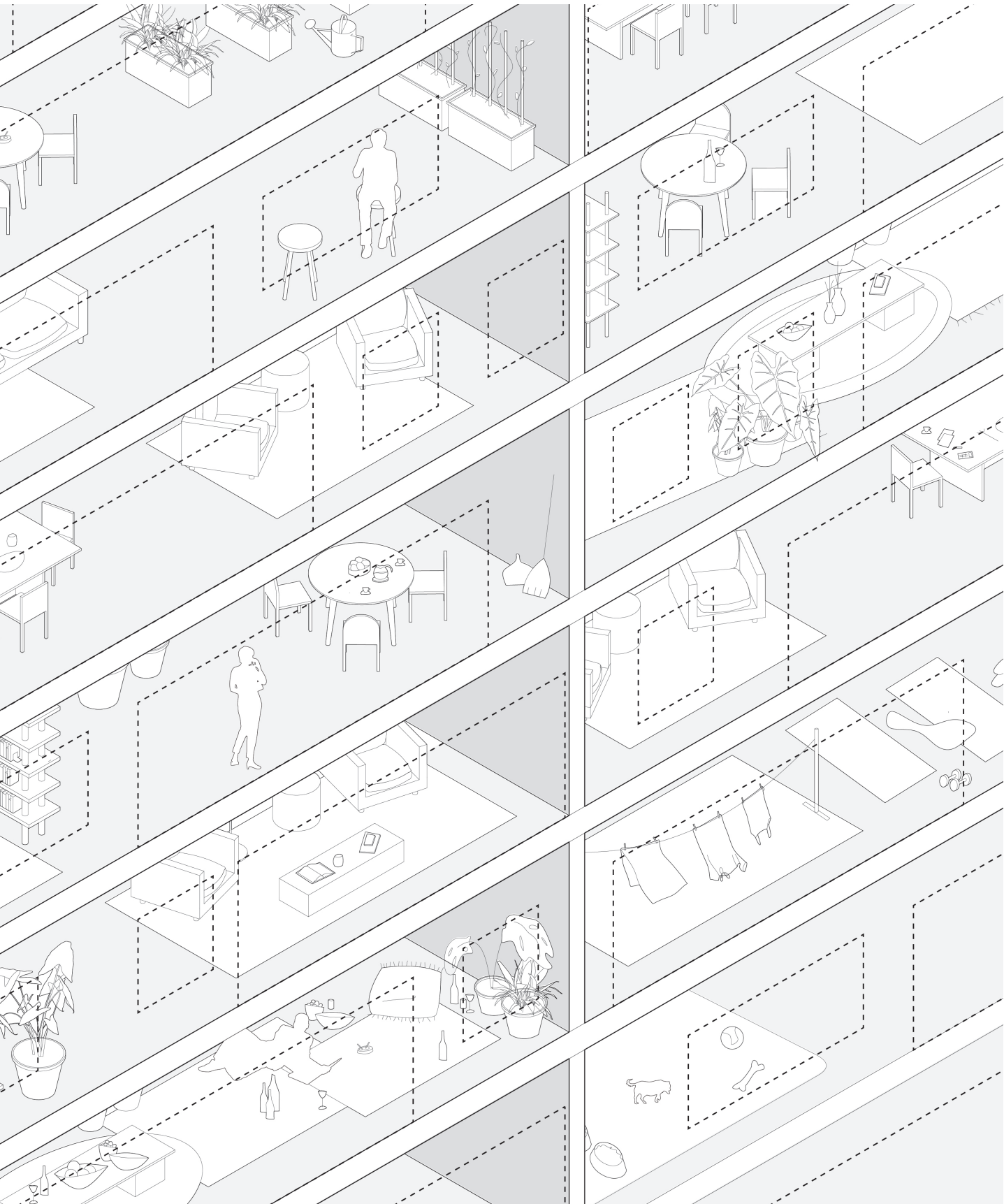


[fig 53] axonometric section through new balcony extension



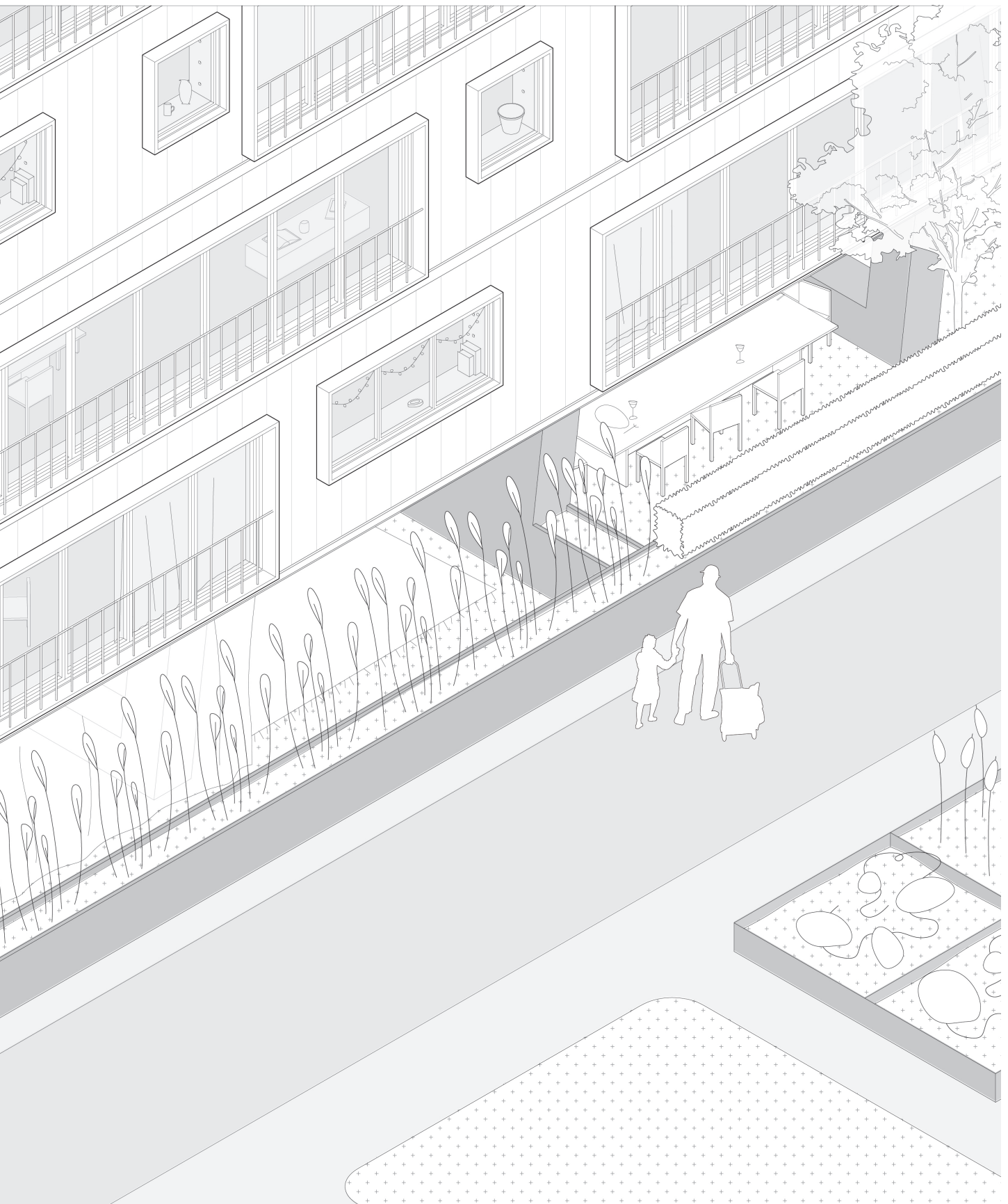


[fig 54] axonometric section through new balcony extension, new space arrangements





[fig 55] axonometric section through new balcony extension at ground plane

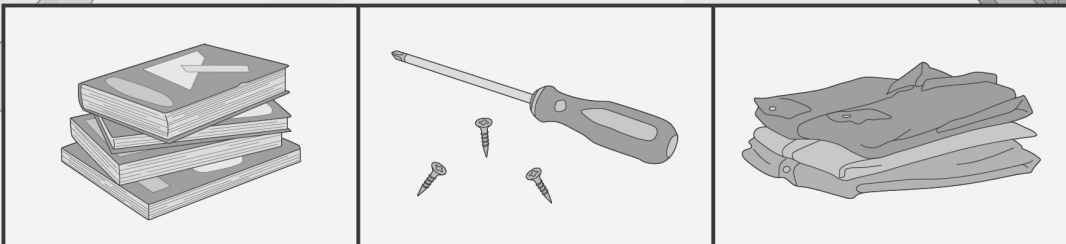


The Gathering Space

Throughout the interview process, residents spoke of a distinct lack of desirable communal spaces within the residential block of the tower, creating hyper-vertical living environments that help foster feelings of resident alienation. This isolation was often at its most perceivable in the corridors, the threshold between the unit and the building both highly territorial and completely anonymous. Through the introduction of a network of shared social spaces throughout the building, stacks of identical corridors are interrupted by a lively network of communal rooms (fig 55). These spaces, shared between floors, stretch from the hallway to the edge of the facade, perforating the otherwise private space of the residential block. Each new space, regardless of size, is equipped with the basic infrastructure to help facilitate a wide range of highly requested programs, like child minding areas, hobby zones, athletic spaces, communal kitchens, computer labs, etc (fig 56-58). The programming and evolution of these gathering spaces would be organized and overseen by the existing tenant community group, which consists of current residents of the development. The introduction of these new spaces not only inject communal programming into the domestic realm of the towers, but also bring light and activity into the corridors, as well as activate and break up an otherwise overwhelming facade.

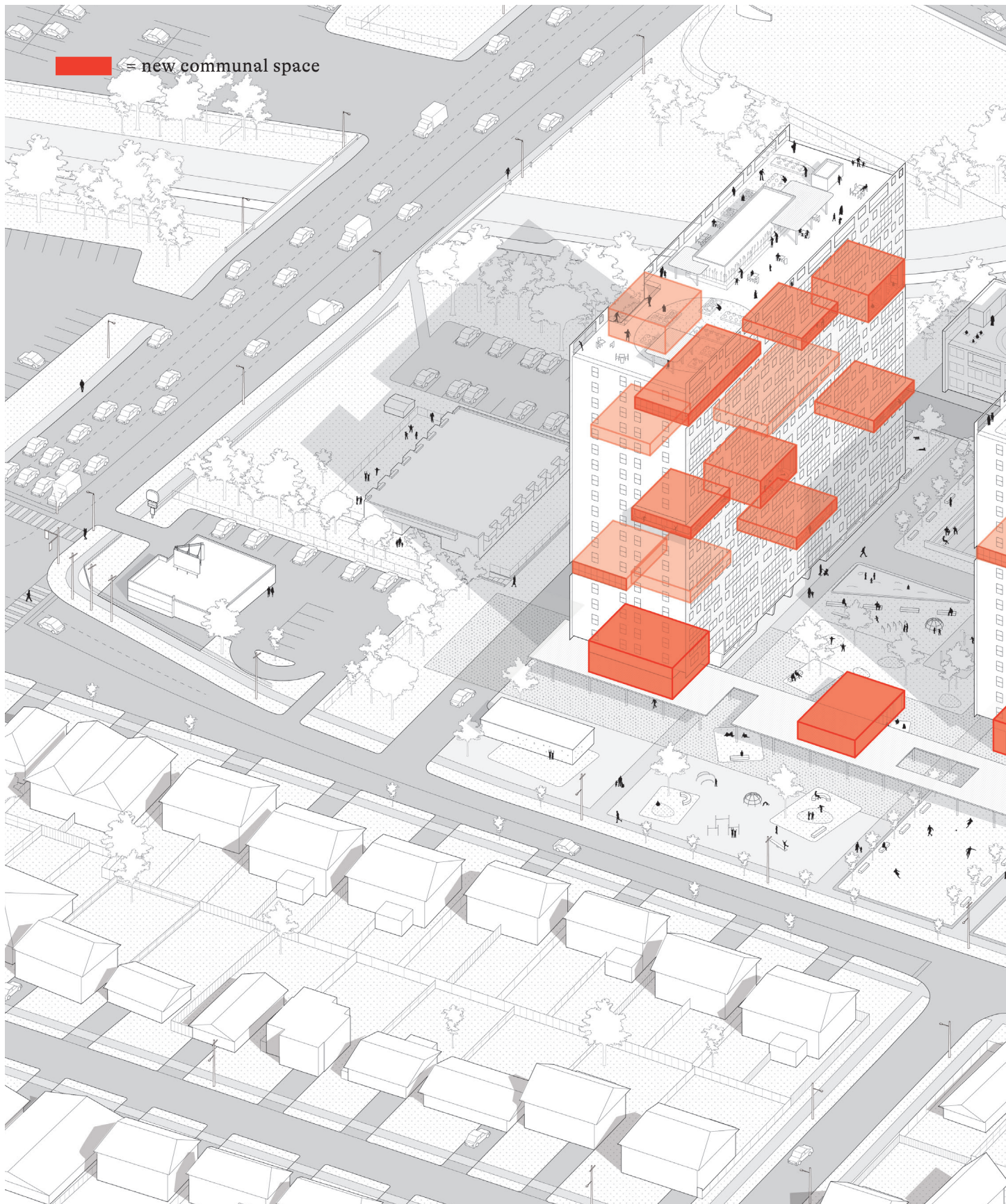
The boundary between each gathering space and the corridor is negotiated by a deepened threshold marked by simple storage and display strategies, as well as sliding glass doors which create a movable wall, allowing the program to strategically spill out into the corridor when desired (fig 54). The addition of 30cm deep shelves, community bulletin boards, and seating areas not only help provide an acoustic barrier between the gathering space and the corridor, but also support more informal activities, from anonymous book and clothing exchanges, advertising for various community services, etc. The dispersion of the gathering spaces throughout the building supports the creation of smaller, micro-communities within the hyper-dense developments, helping alleviate feelings of resident isolation due to the scale of the tower communities.

The threshold between the gathering space and the corridor mediates the space between private and public: serving as a place to wait for the elevator, a shared pantry, a community bulletin board...

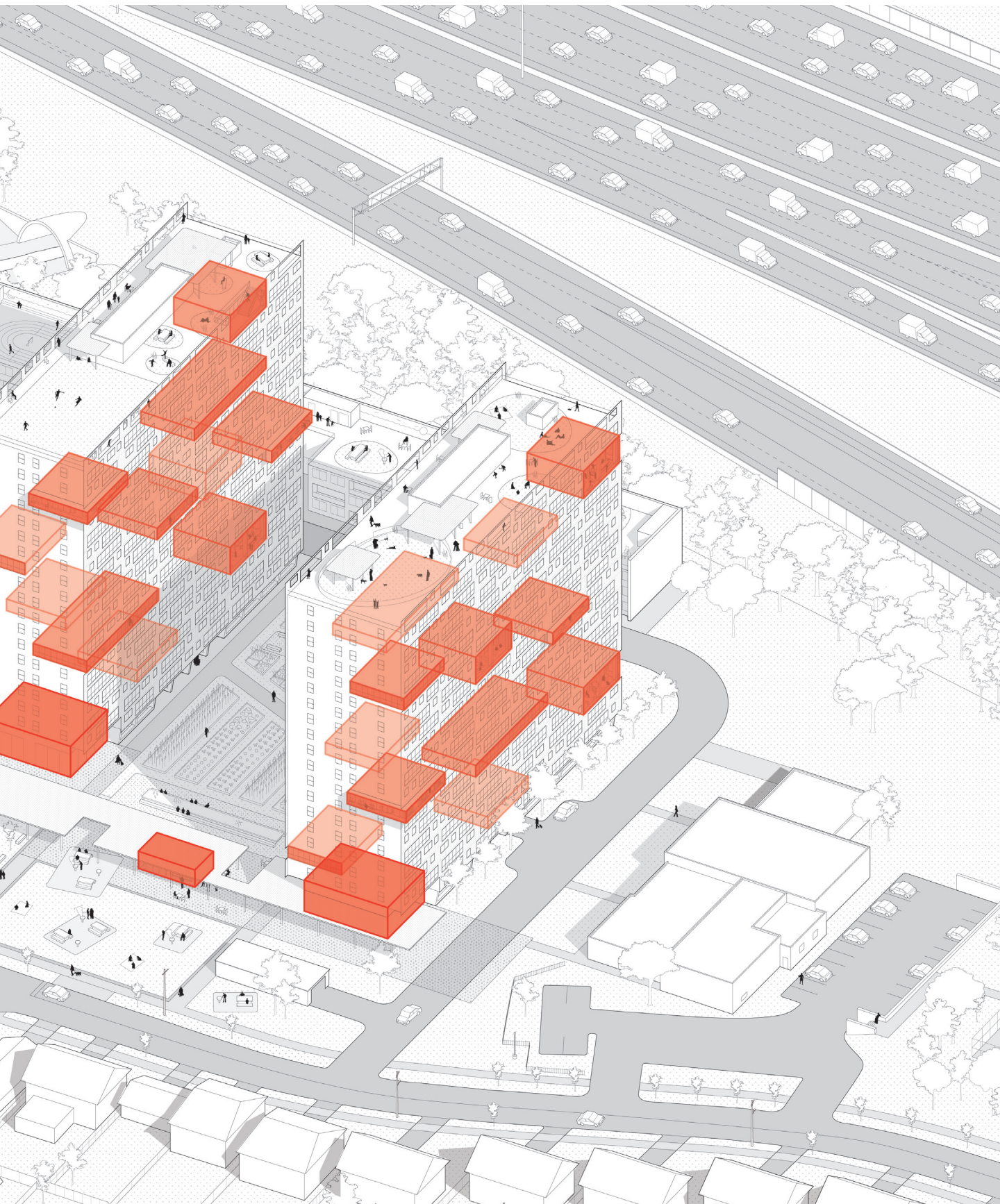


...informal book exchange, tool library, clothing donation drop off... the boundary becomes occupiable and serves as versatile community infrastructure.

[fig 56] view of corridor at gathering space



[fig 57] axonometric of proposed interior communal spaces throughout development





[fig 58] section through tower at new laundry room + hobby workshop communal space

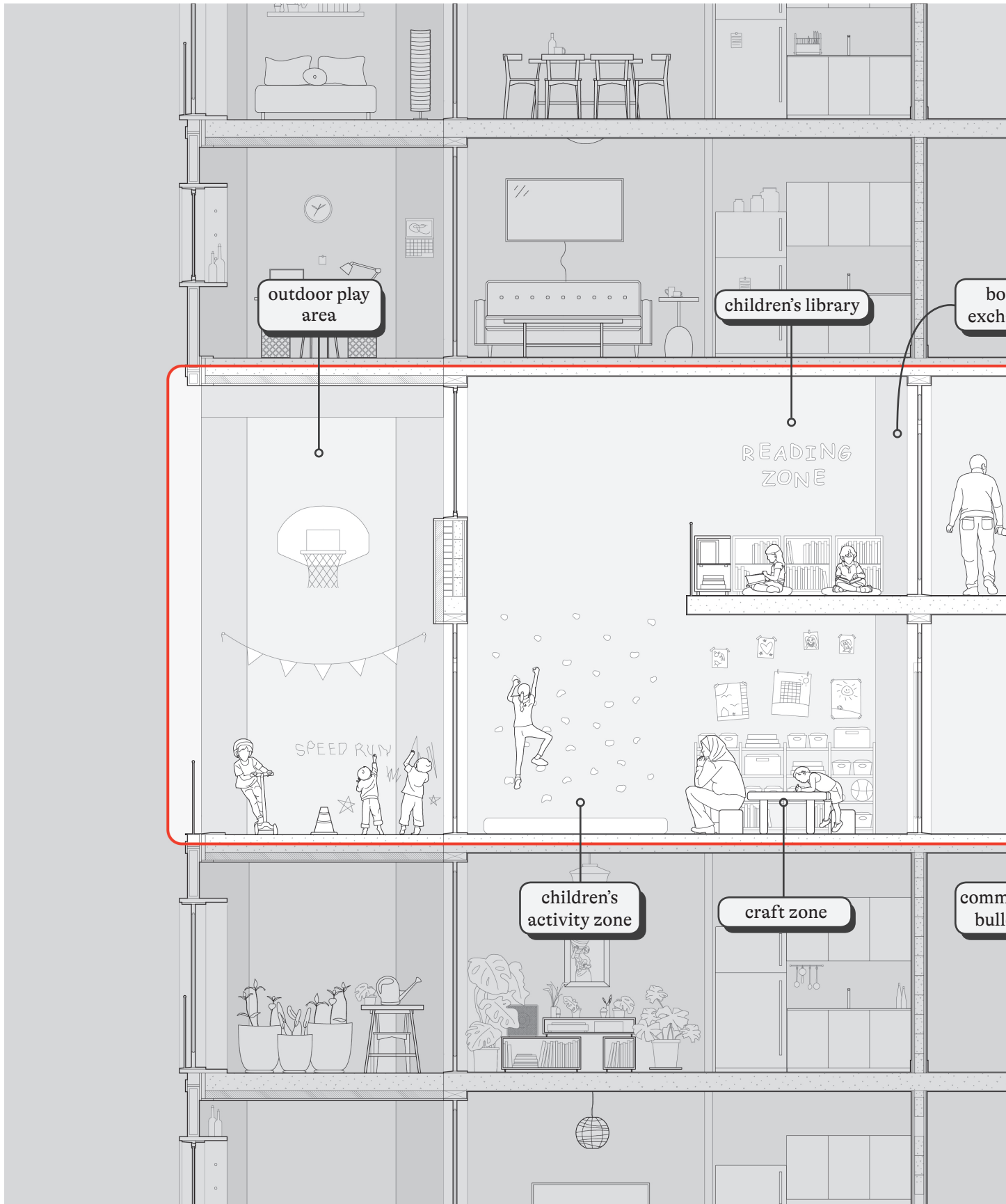


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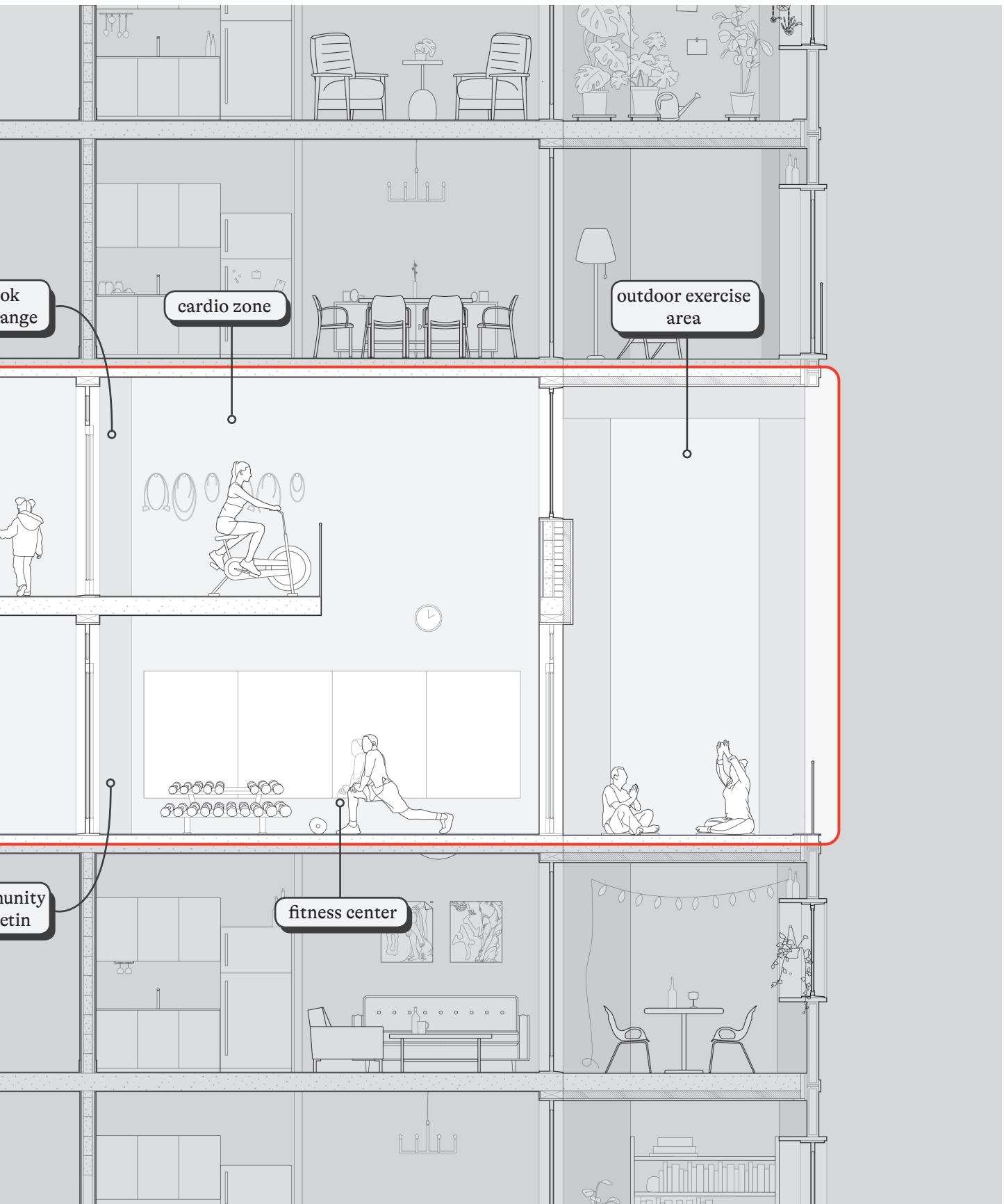
sewing + textile
workshop

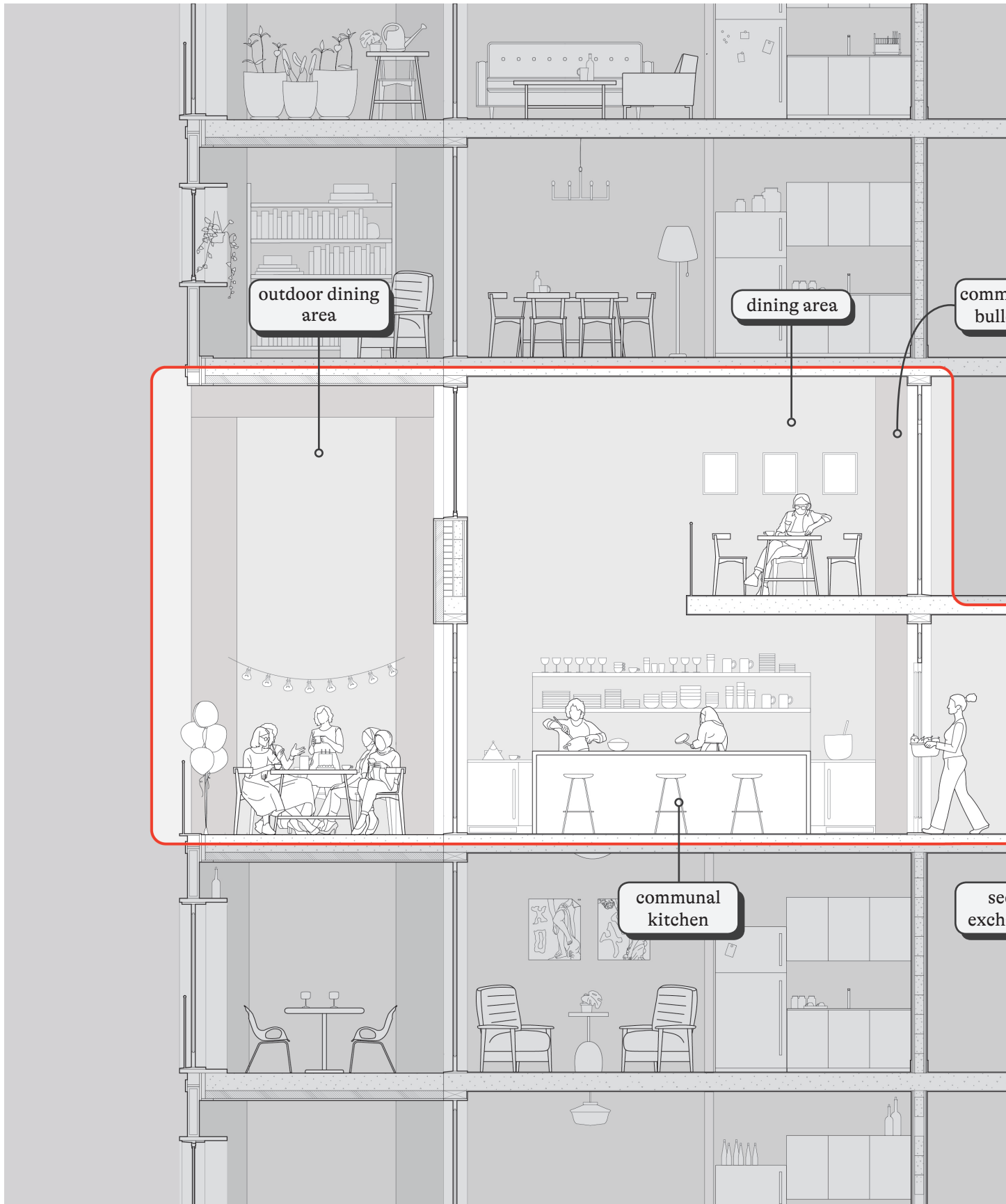
hobby meeting
room

community
meeting

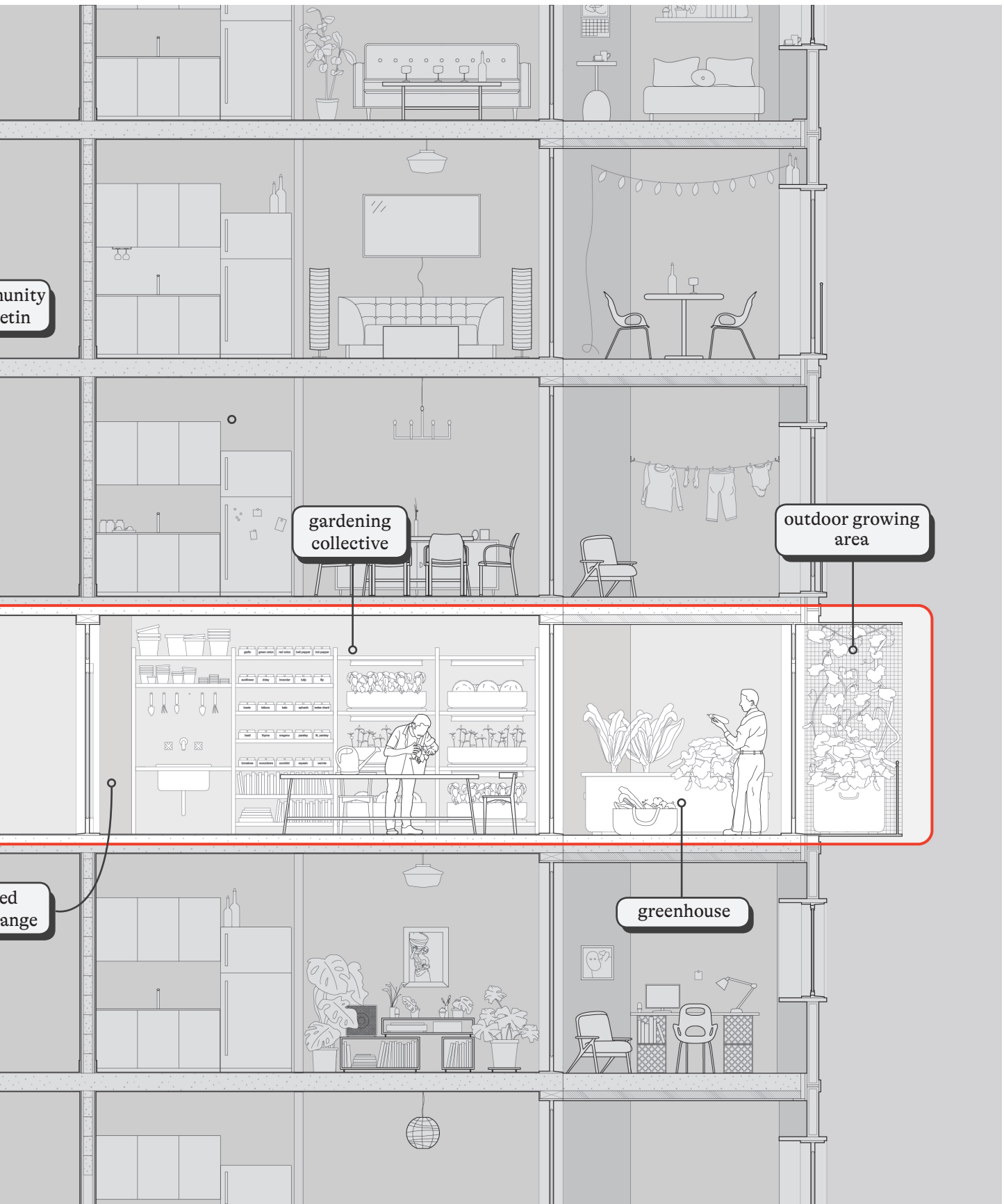


[fig 59] section through tower at new children's area + fitness centre communal space





[fig 60] section through tower at new communal kitchen + gardening collective space



community
kitchen

gardening
collective

outdoor growing
area

greenhouse

bed
range

The goal of this project was to investigate how the renegotiation of key thresholds within post-war tower developments could serve as a framework for resident appropriation and activation. Oftentimes, evidence of resident adaptation of space, especially within highly visible areas, feeds into narratives of decay, decline, and socio-economic despair. The most common types of domestic ornamentation, such as laundry lines, satellite dishes, makeshift gardens, and stored bicycles, are frequently viewed by outsiders as a manifestation of a disorganized and overcrowded interior life within the context of low-income housing developments, rather than an inevitable and integral byproduct of everyday living. While public perceptions of disarray and deterioration are not solely responsible for the downfall of many social housing developments, they help generate incomplete and misleading portraits of life within these towers, directly impacting resident life. The consequences of these pervasive narratives have been played out in post-war social housing developments across the globe; the demolition of London's Robin Hood Gardens began in 2017 after a decades-long disinvestment campaign that resulted in the government-run English Heritage agency declaring that the estate "fails as a place for human beings to live"⁴³. Closer to home, urban researcher Martine August has been documenting the disconnect between the discourse surrounding the now-redeveloped Regent Park and the lived experiences of its former residents.

[43] Fabrizio Gallanti, "A Brutal End for Robin Hood Gardens: Examining the Demise of a Modernist Housing Estate." *Kvadrat Interwoven*. Accessed July 20, 2021. <http://kvadratinterwoven.com/a-brutal-end-for-robin-hood-gardens>.

Fundamentally, these 'signs of life' most frequently occupy the threshold conditions throughout the post-war tower developments, existing within the boundary spaces where ideas of formal ownership are at their weakest. The siting of the *architectures of agency* throughout the major thresholds within the post-war towers was meant to capitalize on already existing notions of agency within these spaces and further enable individual users to exert control over their own domestic environments. While aspects of these interventions help residents and the public demarcate and occupy previously enigmatic thresholds—the porch now creates a clear yet permeable front entrance, the dispersed gathering spaces negotiate the area between the corridor and the unit—they also inhabit and transform once ambiguous spaces within the development. While this ambiguity

has led to certain sets of issues, it has also provided residents with an opportunity to adapt space in unconventional ways that design cannot anticipate. While these interventions aim to provide a basic infrastructure for residents to use as they see fit, it is important to ensure they don't overwrite the residents ability to alter their built environment in new and unexpected ways.

Ultimately, the development of *architectures of agency* was meant to serve as an avenue to help codify the realities and accompanying accoutrement of everyday life into the built environment in a way that was easily controlled and changed by individual residents. Through the thickening, occupying, and altering of key thresholds identified through tenant interviews, the design interventions aim to help mitigate the dissonance between the resident and their home.



[fig 61] existing tower with building renewal banner

Conclusion

The confluence of human desire and the domestic realm can be witnessed best in the informal adaptations of one's living space; living rooms transformed into extra bedrooms, balconies into gardens, corridors into covert markets. While some desires can feel universal to a community or a place, they are influenced by a collage of individual lived experiences, shaped by the unique facets of one's life. Desire isn't static — it mutates over time, evolving with us. While architecture can begin to accommodate for broader commonalities in desire, it would be unrealistic to expect a shared built environment to effectively predict and make room for all the permutations of need that come with its users, both current and future. Historically, the architect has acted as the hand of an often unseen but resolute authority, implementing an overwhelmingly top-down approach to design that leaves the resident as a passive inheritor of an unfamiliar space. This process is highly evident within Toronto's post-war tower stock, where resident alienation is prevalent at all scales of development, from neighbourhood to unit. Critically, architecture must be able to meaningfully make room for change. At its very core, flexibility is about the provision of the right type of infrastructures that can enable a wide spectrum of uses, occupations, and programs. This infrastructure must also be able to be manipulated by individual residents or resident groups in order to foster feelings of agency and ownership of one's built environment.

In practice, this type of self-sustaining architecture takes many forms. From the atelier d'architecture autogérée's transformative community gardens to Lacaton & Vassal unit extensions, these projects all capitalize on the residents ability to easily adapt and transform one's living environment. Part of the success of these projects lies in their innate ability to help re-scale the site to that of the resident. The concept of recalibrating otherwise unapproachable spaces to the scale of the individual user, especially in the context of Toronto's hyper-dense post-war tower neighbourhoods, becomes integral to the rehabilitation of many of these developments.

Throughout the duration of this project, I spoke with many

residents of Toronto's post-war tower neighbourhoods, both past and present. While this series of one-on-one interviews allowed me to have nuanced conversations about desire, agency and everyday life with a wide range of people, they were by no means comprehensive. Early on in the project, the COVID-19 pandemic put a stop to in-person meetings and greatly complicated my ability to forge new relationships within the post-war tower neighbourhoods, as many key community organizations hadn't made the leap to online yet. The original conception of this process was much more preoccupied with engaging in fewer, large-scale discussions to better understand how the broader needs presented themselves throughout the city's post-war tower neighbourhoods. The role of these community discussions was later filled, in part, by a few conversations with key community advocates who were based within the relevant post-war tower neighbourhoods.

This shift in focus from group to individual interviews allowed for conversations to center more on resident's specific relationships with their units, buildings, and communities. Ultimately, the project's ethos of hyperflexibility and adaptability was deeply informed by the conversations had with individual tower residents.

The long-term sustainability of the city's post-war tower stock is not only reliant on the necessary environmental and systems upgrades, but on the implementation of specific social and architectural infrastructures that enable residents to continually adapt their domestic environments. While some of the Tower Renewal Partnership's strategies have been incorporated into official city programs, oftentimes the project's more comprehensive retrofit approaches are extensively value-engineered, with budgets not allowing for more drastic interventions. While limited financing is available through provincial and municipal programs, current enterprises are heavily focused on pressing sustainability and efficiency concerns. With a repair backlog of more than \$1.6 billion dollars⁴³, it is difficult to imagine a reality where future renewal strategies have the resources to enact comprehensive, site-wide change. The interventions deployed throughout this project aim to serve as a toolkit for thinking about the codification of resident agency into renewal strategies, not as an exact blueprint for duplication. However, while the architectures of

agency developed within this thesis resulted in extensive interventions throughout the existing development, the strategies explored can be adapted, and most importantly scaled, to a variety of the city's post-war towers. The addition of an inhabitable second building skin can exist as either a more comprehensive balcony extension, as discussed in this thesis, or can be reformatted to include just the deepening of the sill at existing openings, or enclosing the footprint of the original balcony. Retail and other public programming can be introduced to existing, under-utilized spaces on the ground plane and throughout the buildings under the city's new Residential Apartment Commercial Zoning by-laws, and can be partnered with existing and independently-funded community organizations. Highly requested programs like community gardens can be integrated into necessary water collection and stormwater management strategies. Ultimately, any provision of avenues of appropriation and agency within tower retrofit projects would be at their most successful when developed in parallel to existing guidelines, goals and benchmarks. Current Tower Renewal initiatives are in a position to explicitly embed an ideology of flexibility within Toronto's suburban tower neighbourhoods, providing a structure for both present and future users to adapt their environment to suit their needs.

Although Toronto's post-war tower stock has fallen victim to a decades-long campaign of disinvestment, it exists as one of the regions most plentiful and valuable housing typologies. The ageing tower developments have provided affordable housing to millions of people over their lifespan, serving as the backbone to many neighbourhoods across the city. The high-density neighbourhoods have allowed for the concentration of various communities, allowing these groups to establish strong and integral social networks. However, the city's post-war towers have reached their durability threshold, and are in desperate need of intervention if they are to keep serving their existing and future residents.

As discussions of 'regeneration' and 'redevelopment' arise, ample consideration must be given in regards to the inclusion of infrastructure and spaces that enable residents to have agency over the place they are meant to call home.

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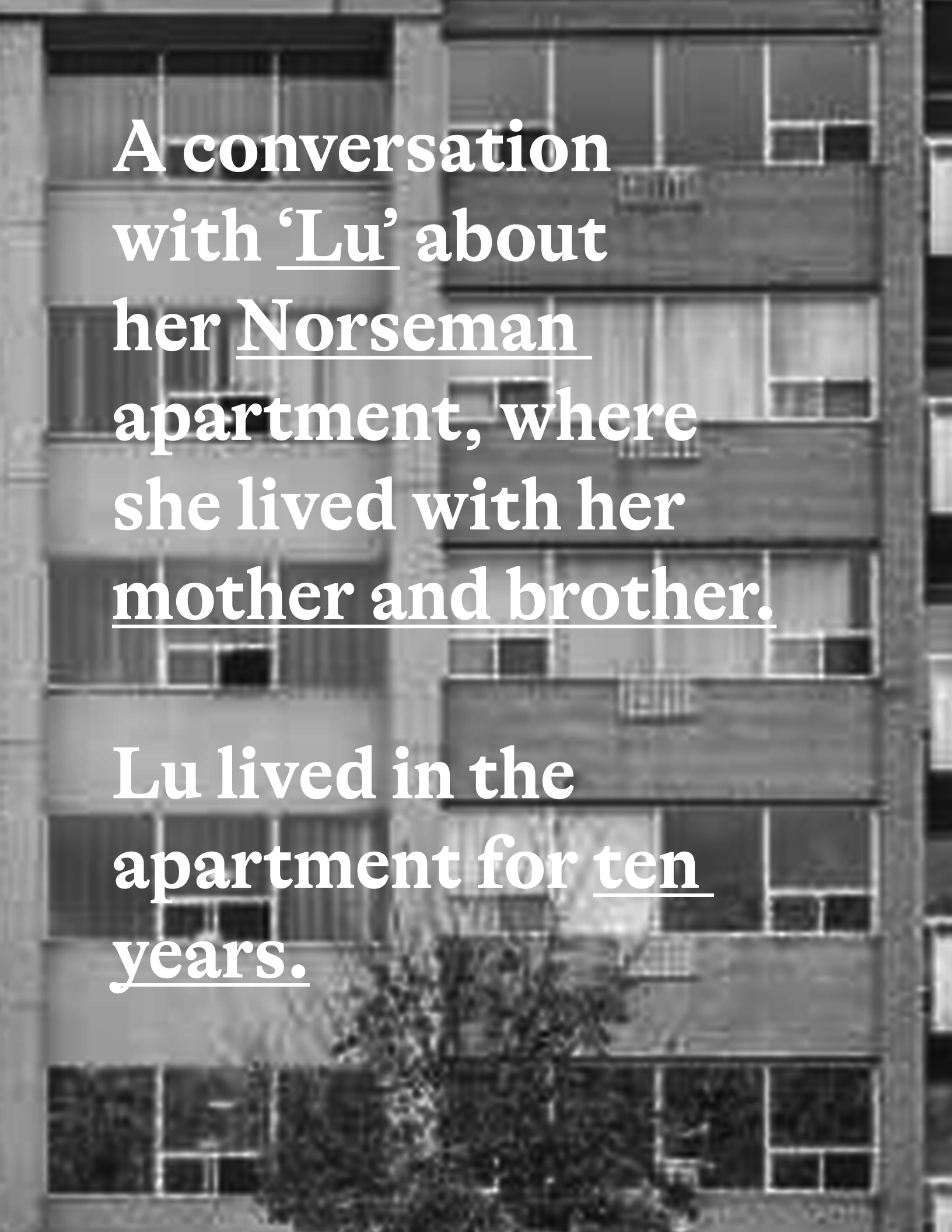
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Appendix

The following are the complete, transcribed conversations with fifteen of Toronto's post-war tower residents and two community advocates. All names and overtly identifying details have been changed or omitted. Conversations are presented in the order they were conducted.

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**A conversation
with 'Lu' about
her Norseman
apartment, where
she lived with her
mother and brother.**

**Lu lived in the
apartment for ten
years.**

interview 01

I understand you grew up in this apartment - do you remember how many years you lived there for?

So we moved there in 2002 - well, it was after my parents got divorced, they got divorced when I was 7 years old - they sold the house we were all living in at the time, and then my dad moved to an apartment in High Park, and my mom moved into this apartment building, and we lived there until she bought her condo in... 2012. So 10 years.

So you were all living together in a house before the move -

- yes

- what type of house was it?

It was a bungalow - it was actually very close to the apartment building. Before that we had lived in a whole bunch of apartment buildings, but that was the first house that we lived in. It was a bungalow with three bedrooms, it was me, my mom, my dad and my brother.

So when you moved into the apartment with your mom and brother, where in the building was your unit?

It was on the ground floor, in the corner.

Did you still have a balcony, on the ground floor?

Yes, we did. We didn't use it a whole lot, but we had one.

And you all rented that unit?

Yes, we did.

Did you have any pets in this apartment?

So we had birds... I actually don't remember when we had birds, this might have been later...

no, it was later. Ok, so we got a cat when I was 10 years old, so three years after I moved in we got a cat - Milo - still the love of my life.

Still kickin'?

Oh yeah. And then I think, I don't remember when we got the birds, but we did have birds at some point.

How many bedrooms did this unit have?

It was a two bedroom.

And how many people were in the apartment on a regular basis?

It was me, my brother and my mom that all lived there full time. Me and my brother would alternate - so, my brother would go to my dad's on Tuesdays, I would go to my dad's on Thursdays, and we would both go to my dad's on alternate weekends. So I would say like, 80% of the time all of us would be in the apartment.

Did you and your brother share a room?

No! When my brother was little, he and my mom shared a room, and then I had my own room, always. And then when my brother got older, my mom would sleep on the couch, on the pullout.

Ok, so when your mom and your brother were sharing a room, were they sharing a bed or -

- they were sharing a bed. He was maybe two years old when we moved in, so he was quite little, and then when he got older they obviously stopped and he got his own space.

Did you feel you had enough space, growing up in this apartment?

I did... like I had a door to close. I mean, now that I think of it my mom didn't have a door to

close for a long time which is crazy. I had a door to close, I had a space that was mine. We had -- well, living in the apartment I live in now, the old place felt a lot bigger, there was a lot of room to move around and do things. I don't have that space here. The only thing is that we all shared a bathroom, but I guess that wasn't that big of an issue. Also because I was young, it wasn't like I was hanging in there putting on makeup or whatever for a long time.

Did you feel like you were lacking any specific types of spaces? Is there anything you wished you had?

So we didn't have our own laundry. Whenever we wanted to do laundry my mom had to take it to the communal laundry building which I know was up a flight of stairs and took a long time to go up and down and do multiple loads. That was an issue for her. There wasn't a laundry room on every floor, because I remember there definitely wasn't one on our floor, I think there were at least two or three in the building. The building was eight floors, so I think there was one on the top floor she used to go to, and there was one on the... third floor? So it was a process. There was a lot to drag around.

I did sometimes wish there was outdoor space. We had the balcony, but I mean, that's a balcony, kids want to be playing on a lawn. The building adjoined a major road, so we were never out there playing.

Was there a lawn around the building?

Yeah, but we didn't really want to. It was weird, in the way that people who have houses, that's their lawn, it was like... you never saw anyone out there. So I wouldn't have wanted to

go out there and play. It didn't feel like a shared space.

So it was just this empty space that nobody -
- yeah, nobody used it.

Was there any green space in the back of the building as well?

Yeah, so the building was tucked into the bottom of a hill, so in the back there was a covered parking garage that was cut into the side of the hill, and it was actually really nice. On the hill there were wildflowers, I would go out there and pick wildflowers for my mom. But there wasn't any green space back there, it was just the parking lot.

But that hill wasn't a place where you or your brother would ever spend time.

No, I mean I would run around there sometimes, but there's nothing to do... I mean, it's just a parking lot, you could get hit by a car.

What was the busiest space in your home?

So, the way it was laid out there was a hallway when you first walked in, and the bedrooms were down on the left side of the hallway, and on the right there was an open living/dining/kitchen that was all one big room, so we spent most of our time in the shared living space. We would sit on the couch and watch TV together, my mom would be cooking, then we would go over to the table for dinner. So that was definitely the most... transitional space. We all kinda milled around there. I actually really miss that space now... that apartment feels so much bigger and roomier than what I have now. I miss having a dining room. I want a fucking table, I want a place to put my stuff!

Would you say you spent the most time in

that open living room?

Uh, yeah. But I really loved my room, obviously. I've always been a person who liked my alone time, so being able to go into my own room and have my desk and my books and my bed, and be able to be by myself - that was really important. I would say I spent the most time either in my bedroom or in the living room, with my family.

When your brother got older and your mom moved to the pull-out couch, did that effect how you used the living space?

So she would go to bed pretty early because she would go to work pretty early, so you wouldn't go into the living room after 10... when you see jokes about people getting midnight snacks, I just don't do that. I never did that, I would never want to go in there and make noise. She's also a light sleeper, so it was not conducive.

How many years did she sleep in the living room for?

Oh, it was a while. I don't actually remember when all this happened, but it was for a long time.

Did you guys entertain a lot?

I had my friends over a fair bit. My brother had friends over too... or he had like his one friend over a fair bit and they would do, whatever, video games or boy stuff. I would have my friends over for sleepovers, we would watch TV late at night, in the living room. So you know, my mom and I would switch rooms for the night. I had friends over after school - we made banana muffins, watched TV... just generally dicked around.

Did your mum have a lot of people over too?

So, they're not her second cousins, but my

dad has second cousins through marriage who actually live in Etobicoke, quite close to us. And she was friends with one of the women in that family, so she would come over. But for the most part my mom is the type of person who likes her own space and likes to come home and decompress and not really -- well, she's not a really social person. Which is fine!

Did you find that the layout of your apartment helped or hindered you having your friends over?

I think it was more of a negotiation to have friends over, because it was a relatively small space... sound carried pretty well in our apartment. But you had to be more mindful of space... we didn't have a finished basement we could like, fuck off to. I always felt more aware of what we were doing in the space, what noise we were making. I still had people over, I was just more aware.

Did you guys add anything, like more storage, to the apartment after you moved in?

No. So there were hall closets for coats and stuff, a linen closet near the bathroom, both the bedrooms had their own closets. There was enough storage in the kitchen for all the kitchen stuff... We had a chest of drawers and trunks throughout the house, but we didn't build anything. It was all just furniture, and what they provided us.

So you felt you had enough storage in the apartment?

Yeah, and again, the rooms were bigger, so there was plenty of room if you needed to add drawers or anything.

Did you wish you could add anything?

What did I want... I think I always wanted to paint. I don't know if we weren't allowed to or if my mom just didn't want to because she knew it would be more work. I wanted a dishwasher. We didn't have a dishwasher for a long time, so when we got one it was a big deal. It was funny because my mom didn't even like using it that much... it wasn't one of those ones that was hooked up to the water system, so when you wanted to use it you would have to roll it over to the sink. I remember the first time she did it, she was pulling it out and singing: duh duh-duh-duh duh-duh! Like, here it is! I died laughing. It was so good.

Do you remember if you guys changed the furniture layout at all? From when you first moved in?

I moved my furniture around in my bedroom a lot. I was kinda into interior design, so I was like, 'I'm gonna move things around!' In the actual apartment, no. There was a certain way that lent itself to the furniture we had, and a certain way that things made more sense. So it didn't completely feel like we could. For example, the couch had to go along this one wall because there was a doorway in the other wall and the other wall was empty... so you kinda had to have things a certain way. But in my room... I moved stuff around a lot.

How often's 'a lot'?

Like once a year. Pretty regularly. Honestly I think I just got bored every once and a while, and I wanted to change something. You know how some people give themselves bangs when they're bored and watch a change. It was the same. I want a change, I'm just gonna move my

fucking bed! I did that a lot...

Do you think you would want an apartment that allowed for more flexibility in furniture placement?

I can't remember that occurring to me honestly. I did have free reign over my room, which was just a box, so I don't think I had that much of an issue with the layout of other spaces. I had my domain.

So you had that balcony on the ground floor - did you guys use it often?

My mom would go out there to smoke. She quit smoking five years ago, but she smoked pretty regularly back then. She would out there and use it, but we didn't go out there all that much. There wasn't much out there. We had some furniture. It wasn't a very nice place to sit just purely because it looked out onto the road. It was also on the ground floor so it's not like it had a view. So no, we never really went out there.

So it's main function was more of a smokers veranda.

Yeah, I can't remember anything else... I would go out there maybe once a summer to sit, but I never really enjoyed it. For the most part it was just her.

Is having access to a private exterior space something that was important to you?

Well... my dad eventually bought a house and he had a backyard. But I didn't really spend that much time there either. So I think maybe it's just not something that's ever been that important to me. Although in the place I live now, I do like to go out to the patio a lot, but I think another aspect of it is that this patio is very accessible.

It's literally right outside the living room. While at my mom's, it was accessible but it wasn't nice, and at my dad's it was fine but it wasn't super nice and it wasn't as accessible.

Do you think you would have rather have a larger apartment with no balcony, rather than have that balcony space?

I've thought about that... with her condo, the one she has now, there's a balcony that no one ever uses. With that apartment, I feel like we would have gotten more use out of the extra space. Because no one used it, it was dead space.

So I take it you didn't really have that much decoration out there then.

We had a little Ikea kids table, and a little red chair. I think we had some chalk?

Would you describe that as more functional or aesthetic?

Honestly, it was stuff that used to be inside that we got sick of. The table and chairs used to be in the house, and then we put them outside when we didn't need them. I think that was it for what was out there. Maybe we had some plastic chairs? Mostly it was stuff we didn't want anymore.

Were you able to identify your balcony from the street?

Yup.

Was that something that was important to you?

That's actually funny that you say that. When I was a kid I insisted on buying these pink, sheer curtains from Ikea, because pink. I had my heart set on them and I was really stubborn about it. But one night I had been at a school thing and one of my friend's mom drove me home, and

as we were driving by my mom had turned on the light in my bedroom, and I had realized that the curtains were so sheer that at night when the light was on, if you walked past, you could see exactly into my bedroom. You could see everything. And I became so self-conscious, like oh my god, what have people seen? Who's been looking into my room, i've been changing in there! So, point is, I could identify my room from the street.. pros and cons. I always knew which one was mine.

You mentioned you had laundry rooms. Were there any other communal spaces in the building?

So there was nothing on the roof... I tried to go up to the roof once and it was locked. There were no gardens then, but now when I drive by the people who live in the unit where I used to live and the people on the other side now have some garden space by the balcony. There was a little mail room. Passed the mail room, once your past the second locked door in the building, in the hallway there was a little bit of a foyer, where there were chairs and tables and stuff. I think there was some kind of free library situation there, where people would leave books and take books. There was some type of - I don't know if it was official or not - but there was a place where people would leave things for others to take if they didn't want to throw them out.

Was that lobby spaced used at all? The actual furniture?

It wasn't often you would see other people there. It was more like you would see the presence of another person. They would leave a

book and someone would take it, so you would know there were people coming through. There was some type of other space when you first walked in, there was a door to the garage, I think that was a garbage room of some sort. I never saw anyone sitting in the actual lobby though. It was just empty armchairs and a little table.

Were there any communal spaces that you wished you had?

When we first came to Canada, there was a family friend we stayed with - wait, is this true? Maybe we had an apartment in the same building. Anyways, they had a party room, and I thought that was the coolest thing. A place like that would have been nice to have because hosting in your apartment is one thing, but hosting in a party room that has more space, and is more intended for gatherings, as opposed to - we didn't have that many people over, ever, but a separate space would have helped. Some kind of outdoor space would have been nice. I don't know if I would have used it, again, but theoretically it would have been nice to have.

You mentioned you would be aware of people moving throughout the building by the appearance of objects in the lobby, but did you ever run into people in the hallways?

So, no. But one time, me and my friend decided we were gonna sprint down the hallway and back, and as we were doing that someone yelled at us, stop running in the halls! That is the one main interaction with another person that stands out from my time here.

Oh! You know what? The apartment manager lived in unit 101, and he was a really nice guy.

He had a kid that was older than us. He was always wearing a blue shirt, and he had a bit of a belly, and brown hair. My mom had to deal with him a bunch.

Did you ever want a separate communal space to interact with your neighbors?

Honestly, no. I think I was fine with the 'head down, go to your own place' attitude.

Did you find that isolating at all?

No, I wasn't very curious about the people there. I think part of it was that I was having my social needs met elsewhere, at school. I never saw any kids around, so I guess I figured everyone around me was old and boring.

Was there any sense of community in the building?

Not to my knowledge, but that being said my mom was not the most outgoing person. So it's possible that if there was something going on she just wasn't interested in it.

Were any of these functional communal spaces, like the hallway or the laundry room, personalized by your neighbors in any way?

We definitely didn't. Wreaths, maybe... Other people had - hm, I can't remember very well. I feel like other people had personalization on their balconies but also the only way you would see that, because of the way the building was arranged - on the other side of the street was a ravine - you couldn't really see anything else that was going on, unless you were standing at the front door you know, kind of looking up. And I was so rarely in that position.

When you did see these signs of other people, did you have any strong feelings towards those?

I think I was one of the people with more - like,

you know with the curtains, no one else had pink sheer curtains, or interesting curtains. I think I saw the other decoration in the building as more bland, and a little more functional, so I wasn't curious about it because it wasn't very interesting. But if someone else in the building had pink sheer curtains, I feel like I would have remembered that. I was more or less like, not curious about the other people in that place... I lived there for a long time, which is weird. It feels like I associate that place much more with my early childhood. But I lived there until I was 17 years old. Which is crazy when I think about it - I have hardly any memories of it from high school. I remember being a child there but I don't remember being a teenager there.

I lived there for 10 years. I had a lot of memories of that place, a lot of good memories of that place. But they were mostly internal memories, about my family, within the apartment. I also don't think about it that much. I remember the couch that we had. We had this red couch for a very long time. We had a green plaid couch before that, and then we got this red couch. We spent a lot of time on that couch. I remember the table in the dining room, because we sat there a lot. I have more memories of the furniture than the apartment. My room, I had my bed - it was this old wooden bed. It would have held up to a tank - it was good, solid lumber. We had to get rid of that bed recently, and that made me really sad. I slept most of my life in that bed, I had it for years and years.

I do remember the apartment got a lot of light. The master bedroom had a north facing window and an east facing window, and when

you would go in there it would be flooded with light. It just felt - it was nice. It was a nice place.



**A conversation
with 'Lex' about
her Midtown
apartment, where
she lives alone.**

**Lex lived in the
apartment for two
years.**

interview 02

Ok, so how long have you lived in this building for?

I know it's basic but... 2015? Yeah, I think we moved here in 2015, my parents started renting it. And then I moved in full-time 2018.

So was it originally you and your family that moved into this unit?

It kind of sat empty. It was all my parents furniture from their house and they would use it for a few weeks or months every year to come visit my grandmother. They moved back to the U.K in 2012.

So the whole apartment was storage for a while?

Pretty much. It was also a permanent residence. Because all their accounts were still in Canada, and my sister had left and before they were using her address as permanent residence, so they switched it to this.

What floor is your apartment on?

Third floor, looking south with a beautiful evergreen outside.

And you have access to a private outdoor space?

Yes, a very very big balcony. I think it is 1.4 m deep, by 7 or 8 meters long. Wait, that's too long. Maybe 5 meters.

Do you have any pets in the unit?

(Laughter) I just have my plants. For now.

And how many bedrooms does this apartment have?

One bedroom.

How many people live in the apartment with you on a regular basis?

Just me.

On a semi-regular basis?

Also just me.

Do you feel like you have enough space in this apartment?

I have too much space.

Do you feel like you're lacking any specific types of spaces?

No... there's a lot of space in here and I feel like I can do a lot of different actives at once, and I've been able to do a lot of weird things in this apartment. At one point I had 10 palates stacked up in the corner and was sanding them all down. I've done plant sales from this apartment... done clothing drives. In terms of space I think we're pretty good.

Which space do you use the most in your home?

I use my desk/kitchen table a lot. I used to have a separate desk and kitchen table but I don't need that so I think having a single surface for both of those activities is super useful. It's just about making the piece of plywood big enough. I use the little island balcony door for a lot of activities. Drawing on the island, all the plant drawings I do. I sometimes have a yoga mat there to do yoga. Sometimes just plant care... lots of plant care. Yeah I find - I can send you photos - but this apartment has been laid out many many different ways. I think I spent a few weekends just being high and just shifting furniture around. The set-up that it originally was was more akin to my grandmother's, which

you'll see. But I like my current layout with the kitchen table near the door. But also the balcony. For me, I spend, when I can, between the months of May and October - I'm always on the balcony. Carpets and cushions and food and eating and drinking and smoking... reading.

In which space do you find you spend the most time?

Balcony, first. And then I guess living room.

Would you consider those your favourite spaces in the apartment?

Balcony. And then that nook by the balcony door, mostly because it has the most plants per capita (laughs).

Do you entertain a lot in your home?

Yes.

Do you find the layout of your apartment helps or hinders having guests?

I find I am one of the few people of our friend group who have space to entertain, and that's why I find I'm very lucky and fortunate and can and want to entertain a lot. Because of the 'L' shape of the apartment, I can set up a table, usually on the floor on crates, in a few different orientations and it can fit 10-12 people. I think the biggest dinner I've had is like 14-15.

How does that work?

More informal seating. And I put two of the milk crate tables end-to-end and everyone is on the floor.

Have you added anything to your apartment since you've moved in?

So for a while I wanted to make an entire

wall near the windows a range of desks at different heights, because I really wanted to inhabit that space. But that was before I kind of shifted the apartment around. I added hanging rails on the ceiling for the plants... It's hard because I can't drill into the walls too much, I'm not allowed shelves. I realized I'm only going to be here another 8 months before university. I wanted to do hanging racks for planters along the window, because you're allowed curtains and railings, so I thought... plant curtains? You have to tell the landlord everything you're going to do - they do apartment checks twice a year. I was a bit nervous about that rail but they didn't seem to care.

Do they have a lot of rules for what you can and cannot do?

You're not allowed Christmas lights on the balcony. Things hanging around the windows. I have bouble-y lights, and they're ok when they're behind plants or along the edge of the railing, but they can't be visible . You can't enclose the balconies, which is very common in Italy.

How often do you change the furniture arrangement in here?

Probably once every six months. the current configuration has stayed for a year.

Is that because it's the optimal arrangement?

I've found it works quite nicely. It's a less formal dining situation, but really most of my friends, if they're coming for dinner, they don't mind sitting on the floor. It's really only when my grandmother and my parents come

to dinner that I'll set up the table cloth and the table and make it a real adult space.

The one thing that we do find though is that the lighting no longer matches the use of space, so when I do eat at the dining table there's no chandelier above it.

Would you say you have a typical day in the apartment?

Wake up, make my soft-boiled egg and a cup of coffee. Depending on my day, I usually start by looking at my plants, making rounds, figuring out who I need to wash who I need to water, picking off dead leaves. On any given week I'll spend about 4 hours tending to the plants-

-per day?(!)

per week. But then some weekends I'll spend the whole day washing plants, if I have nothing else to do. I have my breakfast, I do my laundry or chores - if it's a Saturday it's a chores day - it's odd because Summer Me and Winter Me are very different people. Summer me is like 'have my egg, eat my coffee, and then I find an excuse to be on my bike exploring the city. Like, oh, let's just go here, here and here. For no reason. I love to be outside on my bike on the weekends. Or suntanning and reading a book on the balcony. I don't really have a typical day... work is pretty simple. I leave for work around 8:30, come home around 8. I usually work till 7 and then it takes 45 minutes to get home. Cycling is quicker - 25 minutes there, 35 back - because it's downhill and uphill. Come home, then I would eat dinner and then work on my plant book, or watch TV.

Plant book?

Oh, I started making a care guide for all the different species. I wanted a reason to draw all the plants. Then of course, knowing me, I wormholed, and now it's an excel spreadsheet of 150 species with their Latin names and traits. I've got all the research and the page layouts - I have it all in Mr. Men size pages, which is good. So now I just have to draw 120 plants! It's really fun though, come home and - each one takes about an hour. So I usually set the light table up on top of the island - I have an old homemade light table. The idea was that it would be a little free Christmas present, but it's taking a lot more time than I expected. Maybe I'll just bind them myself? I don't know how to publish things...

So you mentioned you spend a lot of time on your balcony.

Yeah.

How often would you say that is?

All the time I'm home... I spent probably about 6 hours a day out there in the summer, between drinking my coffee with the tree... there's a woodpecker I really like and some squirrels. But that tree makes a huge difference. If I had to look at the ugly condo across the street I think I'd find it a whole lot less appealing. But you feel like you're in a forest. It's very private. Like, I'll even suntan naked on the balcony, because no one will see me and that is the joy!

Have you ever slept out there?

I did once, it was when my parents came for two weeks in the summer. It was also the hottest two weeks of the year. I was on the couch and my mum is menopausal, so she had

all three - no, four - all four fans on her in the bedroom, and I was dying of heat because we don't have air conditioning. So I decided to sleep outside. Put some yoga mats then some blankets and a sheet over me, but all night I was freaking out that I was getting eaten alive by mosquitoes. It was really nice, but... I would love to put a bug screen or something. But that would count as enclosing.

What's the balcony's main function in the summer?

Extended living space. It's deep enough that you can sit and somebody can still walk by. My sister had a balcony that was two meters deep and we could sit two people facing each other around a circle and that was like, incredible. But this balcony is deep enough that... well I wouldn't want it any shallower. There's a little margin for pots and space for stuff and then chairs and living space along the living edge. I also put the island out there all summer use it as a desk. Mixed music out there in the summer.

How does it's function change in the winter - do you use it at all?

Sadly not. It's just... empty. Which is a shame, I'd love to find a way but it kinda then turns into ugly storage.

So you don't really use it for storage space in the winter?

I try not to, because then I have to deal with that in the summer. Most people in this building I think mostly use it for storage-junk space. I don't find there are too many other neighbors out there as much as I am.

When you're out there do you have a sense

of other people?

I don't hear anyone else. Generally noise is pretty good throughout the building. I mean, it bleeds a lot in the hallway, and then the shared wall... my neighbor always knows which music I'm listening to. It's bad, I didn't know that.

Would you say having access to a private exterior space is important to you?

Yes. Wouldn't want to live anywhere without one.

Would you rather have a larger apartment instead of a balcony?

No. But also this balcony is very big for me, but there are also people in the building who are living three people in the same space, so...

Would you be more interested if it were an enclosed balcony?

Yeah. Yeah I'd be into that. Semi-enclosed, as long as you get the ability to open it all up, you get the ability to use it further into the shoulder seasons, which is nice.

Do you like to decorate the balcony?

With plants.

If your building didn't have such strict aesthetic rules, do you think you'd decorate it more?

Yeah. Which is probably to the detriment to the external building. But if I could, I would have a lot more of those like, metal profiles drilled into the ceiling so I could hang more plants. I would have things to hang.

So how much of the current decoration you have is functional vs aesthetic?

It's kinda just what I've been handed down by generations... it's just stuff that's been in my apartment and I've moved it other places. The

big bread rack in the corner was always inside and I put it outside. So I don't know, what do you mean by that question?

I guess I mean, how much of the stuff you've chosen to populate your balcony is just for pure decoration, and how much of it is to facilitate how you'd like to ideally use the space?

100% pure use. But also I haven't actually bought any of the stuff that is out there, if I had it would be a bit different. I mean, they're big garden chairs that definitely suit a house and not a small apartment. They're massive, they don't need to be that big. But generally, everything that gets put out there is just plants and medians for more plants. But I guess the bauble lights are pure decoration.

Can you see the decoration from the street?

Partially. Usually there are green leaves in front of it.

Are you able to identify your balcony from the street?

Yup. It's very lush.

Is that important to you? Being able to pick out where your apartment is?

No. Yeah. I do love being close to the ground.

Why?

Because I use the stairs. And I find it makes me feel like I'm much closer to the street. I like the idea that I can just pop down the stairs and I'm out. I think there's some type of mental hurdle for even my grandmother, even living on the 11th floor, going oh, I need to take the elevator down.

Do you like how uniform the facade is?

I don't mind. I find it gets a bit boring. But the building isn't that tall and it isn't that big so I find I'm like, ok cool. There's uniformity in this one and there's uniformity in the one next door but they're each different so it's cool. I don't think I would say the same if it was a condo. I think by 11 floors by 6 units wide, it's a nice, smart clean building. If this exact building was going to be repeated x5 in a park, I wouldn't be so into it.

Do you have access to any communal spaces in this building?

Laundry room. Parking lot, and that weird waiting zone next to the front door.

Is anyone ever in that space?

I've seen a few people in there. It's weird though because you can't even see the street from it, because it has weird slit windows so it really is useless. But they spent a lot of money doing the interior, but it seems uglier than it was before. And it's big - it's a studio apartment.

Are there apartments on the ground floor?

Yes, and they actually have bigger gardens that I always spill stuff onto... which is a hazard. I've dropped a beer bottle... I wish there was something to protect the gardens down there, like a mesh or a canopy. But yeah, they all have walk out gardens. At the back there are these weird at-grade parking lot walk outs that are a little strange.

Do you wish you had any other types of communal spaces in the building?

I would love communal spaces! I would love to be able to help garden. I mean, I love

these green things but if I was able to work in a garden I would prefer that so much better. I think it's a shame there isn't a little bit of an European flair, or like, you could have a little plot... I mean, it's a huge property. The landlords do a lot, and spend a lot of their summer gardening and making it look nice, and weeding and cleaning. But I wish there was a space where I could have my own...

Unless you were in a smaller building situation - I feel like I don't really know my neighbors. There's a few people in the building that I recognize in the laundry room but it's weird, I find I really don't know my neighbors. So if I was in a building maybe half the size maybe I would have a chance to know my neighbors, and then I'd like to share more space with them.

Do you want a closer connection to your neighbors?

I would. I think having a neighbor next door that you know is the best thing in the world. I don't know how I'd meet them. One thing that is nice is that we have an informal book exchange in the laundry room. I think it would be fun if it was a full bookshelf with books you could trade. People leave random stuff they don't want in laundry room. Also the trash here? Amazing. People are always dying - I guess it's coming to the end of the lifespan of the first round of residents. But I got a great lamp in the trash.

How often do you think you see your neighbors?

People on my floor... like, the woman that lives across from me is a bit of a hermit. She

orders Swiss Chalet every night at 11.

She has it figured out.

I'd say once a month, I see my neighbors.

Would you say you like interacting with your neighbors?

I do. They're really awkward. That's why I also like to avoid elevators. Elevators in apartments are the worst. There are a few people I bump into on Sundays in the laundry room and I'm much more friends with them, and I like to chat. Everyone knows me in the building knows me because of my grandmother.

Because she's lived here longer?

Because she tells people about me. I'm also the only one going upstairs in like, socks. With like, a cake in my hand. People are always really confused when you get in the elevator at one floor and get off at another. Like, you're in the elevator without a coat?

It's really nice having my grandmother in the building. It's a pretty good set up for an elderly person who is getting towards going into a home. But I don't know what other types of space I would need, because this apartment is so generous. Gardens, maybe a library, laundry room. Barbecue? That might be nice. But it would be dirty sharing it with this many people.

Do your neighbors personalize any of their semi-communal spaces, like hallways?

By fire codes we're not allowed to put anything on the doors, but people do. My grandmother has a little wreath she hides from the fire people. We can put flowers outside... it's usually just flowers on balconies and stuff

like that.

Do you care about this decoration?

Nope. Don't care. And I do prefer the buildings looking clean. The building isn't the best with maintenance. Like, it's ok but... next time I'll do any renovations myself.



**A conversation with
'Al' and 'Si' about
their Midtown
apartment, where
they live together.**

**Al has lived in the
apartment since
2019. Si moved in a
few months ago.**

interview 03

Ok, to start us off, how long have you guys lived in the apartment?

I have lived here since last January, so... a year... about a year and -

- you were also taking care of it like, in November.

Earliest was in October, before he died.
So, a year and three months?

And S, when did you move in?

This January, but I'd been visiting.

And where were you guys living before that?

Cambridge.

Cambridge.

What floor is the -

- sixth.

And how bedrooms does the apartment have?

This is a one bedroom.

How many people live in the apartment on a regular basis?

Two.

Do you have anyone in and out on a semi-regular basis?

Yeah. We have a family friend who stays about a week every month.

Who's Garret's friend.

And then probably friends that stay on weekends.

Maybe like, once a month.

And when they stay, do they sleep on the couch?

Yeah.

Pullout couch.

Do you feel like you have enough space in the unit?

Absolutely.

Yeah.

Do you feel like you're lacking any specific types of spaces?

I mean, I think because we're both creative it would be nice if there was -

- a dirty space. Or like, -

- I think in the summer that can be the balcony, but -

- like a garage, essentially. It's like where you can make dust, noise, -

- where you can rinse things that are messy.

Mop. I think our biggest concern is soundproof space. I guess that's the whole apartment in general, but like, this I think is way better than they build now, for sound between walls.

But like, if Al was to saw something or screw or anything, people would hear it.

Do you find you're aware of your neighbors?

You can hear - like, our upstairs neighbors, they have a shower every night at midnight and you can hear it. You can definitely hear people but like, it's only been upstairs.

What's the busiest space in the apartment?

I think we spend the most time in the living room. The bedroom becomes more important when Al's family friend comes. Like, if I was working on my laptop I would usually sit on the couch and do that, if he wasn't here. But

when he is here I'll go to the bedroom.

Is the living room your favorite space in the apartment?

I think so.

I think it's also because when you say living room, living room for this apartment is really like anything that isn't a direct programmatic label. Kitchen is kitchen, bathroom is bathroom, bedroom is bedroom, and the living room is everything else. So like, dining, living, working -

- but I even think that we don't spend as much time even sitting around the dining table

-

- we do! We sit there. We sat there for an entire night once.

Oh yeah that's true.

I sit more at that table than I sit on the couch.

Then we're different. I sit more on the couch.

I think that's just between us.

But I feel like if we're entertaining we eat at the table and then come -

- we sat there with Christina all night.

That's true.

S, is there a reason you prefer the couch and the living room?

I think it's because it has a lot of natural light, and also the biggest space - there isn't obstructions by furniture or - it's a big open space you can do things in.

Do you guys like to entertain?

Yeah.

Do you think the layout of this apartment helps or hinders having guests?

I like it better than one big room. I find that the condos I've been to -

- I think it helps.

We have a friend who has one of those bedrooms that's separated by glass doors - and it's honestly really nice having separate rooms. *Like, I like having a kitchen, a -*

- yeah, me too. Everything you're like, making a mess in, and even you're personal private space like you're bedroom is not part of anywhere where we ask people to go into. The divisions are really nice.

I think when we moved in we were thinking, like down the road if we ever renovated, we were like maybe we'll take out the kitchen walls. But I think now I actually like it separate.

I had thought in my head it might be nice if you cut out an opening that went around because it's a bit dark in there, but I don't think we would take down the wall completely. I like having the division. And it's also nice - this goes back to the sound thing - basically it's a cabinet, it blocks a lot of the sound. If anything, I would make something that closes the kitchen doorway off so you can capture your sound in a corner. We're also lucky, because we're on a corner.

Sorry, also, there's something I did forget about your other question. I do find the kitchen in this unit too small.

But wouldn't you say if it was better - I mean, it's got a really shit layout, the sink is in the center of the counter. If it was off to the side, to me, that would be enough counter space. And I like galley kitchens.

I think it's too dark for me. The counter space is also so minimal. Also, we do sort of have like, gadgets that take up the entire kitchen if you put them in there. So that's just one thing I guess. And I think C is going to design some stuff for vegetables on the counter and for spices. More counter space would be nice.

Have you guys added anything to the apartment, aside from furniture, since you moved in?

Well all of the surfaces - I guess they map out where I probably will make built-ins. But right now it's just existing components that we had, cabinets that I've added, and those are temporary storage things. And then we just cut more surfaces to make more ledges, if you will.

And then Kieth had a bookcase made.

It's mahogany.

Are there a lot of restrictions by the landlord, in terms of what you can add?

I have no idea. I haven't investigated. It seems like the process is that you put in a request form. But I presume that you can't change like, walls.

What would you ideally like to add to this apartment?

To be honest, not a lot. Most of it's removal.

We wanna do built in stuff in the bedroom. Build a library around the bed.

Thin shelves here and there. We have a lot of prints and thin art. Also like, flat file storage. And a desk for me. We like having our own desks.

So how many iterations did it take before

you got to this current arrangement of furniture?

Not that much.

No, it was a lot. When I first moved in here it was like, all of his shit everywhere as if he had just left. So there was my first cleaning pass. Then I moved things in the bedroom a little bit. Then I moved the dining table. Then we moved all of our stuff in here. In the meantime I gathered up all of his stuff and put it into boxes and put it in the closets. Then we moved all our stuff in here which meant the whole living room was filled with shit. Then I took all of his books off the shelf, put in all of our books. We got rid of all of the bedroom furniture that was existing.

Oh yeah, I forgot about that. That was a whole U-Haul of furniture.

And then we moved out all of his chairs, put all of our chairs in. Then over the break I moved all the furniture -- I would say at least five passes of different arrangements.

But I think it's like, we weren't just showing up and it was a different unit.

Yeah, totally not an empty unit. It probably would have taken like, two passes.

It's almost like moving twice.

How often do you use your balcony?

Not...much.

Not much but that's going to change.

So for us, the issue on the balcony is not the size or shape, it's more of a privacy issue. It used to be more of a solid material wrapping it, but they replaced it with glass and frosted glass. But because of the shape and the placement of the balconies on the outside of

the building, you can see the entire wall of neighbor's balconies, and everyone up floors, down floors, across... it's very exhibitionist. The only time we've enjoyed using it is when in the summertime, we made a wall with our plants and then sat low on it. And again, we're on the corner so we're lucky. We're only dealing with one side.

And when you're out there, would you say you see a lot of people out on their balconies?

Yeah, I would say a fair bit.

No, I would say -

- in the summer, people barbecue out there.

But there's really only like, 5 max people who use their balconies. On our side.

Considering how many balconies there are?

There's usually a woman down below -

- ok, you're right.

- on the phone. There's the couple that's up there smoking.

There's the family that barbecues.

There's the family that barbecues above, the people next to us decorate with AstroTurf but they're rarely out there. It's very underutilized, I would say.

In the summer when you can use it, what would you say the main function of the balcony is?

I would say just extended living space right now. I think in the summer it's going to be a garden.

In the winter it's storage. There's a dead plant out there right now. Christmas tree.

Is having access to that private outdoor space important to you?

Yes. It's why I have such a huge problem -

- it'll be fine. We can fix it. I think having a wall of plants will be not like, a wall, but more private.

Would you rather have a larger apartment over access to a balcony?

Yes.

No.

Well, no, not if it was like, fully enclosed. But I'd be super keen for something that has like, a curtain close. And then you can use it more in shoulder seasons.

I think a three season room would be nice.

Do you guys plan to decorate your balcony?

I think we're going to do some food and plants, and get some Solair chairs.

And how much of that decoration would you say is aesthetic vs functional?

I think everything is aesthetic in some way.

Yeah, 100%.

I mean, I'm not going to lie, I pick beautiful things -

- no, no I take that back. Because everything, at least for me, is first about how my life works. Right now, for example, the closet, I haven't organized it, and it's driving me insane. So I will either then build something I can like, put my socks into that isn't getting in the way every morning when I trip on them. So I would say function is #1, but it's not alone.

But if there is a function, we're both pretty keen to make it the prettiest version of it can be.

We have a list of things we'd like to do, and importance is ranked by which is the ugliest

right now.

If anything, the most aesthetic thing is the plants. I think plants would be aesthetic.

They're a function for me! I can't be in a space without plants. It feels too cold. It's needed for my well being in a space.

Al, that's like, the definition of aesthetic.

No. Ok, maybe. It's close.

Their function is joy.

100%.

When you guys do have stuff on your balcony, are you able to see it from the street?

Yeah.

I mean, I haven't really looked.

I can find our apartment if I count the floors and look for the air conditioner.

Is being able to pick out your unit from the street is something that is important to you?

No. If anything I would like to not see it.

Why?

It's about privacy, we like to be private.

Does this building have any communal spaces?

The laundry room. And the storage room. And the garage.

They have a Christmas party every year in the lobby.

Our superintendents are kind of the best.

It's also used for the landlord to meet perspective tenants.

And old people will sit there to wait for a cab or something.

Do you wish there were any other communal spaces you'd like to have access to?

I mean, it would be nice if there was a gym. But I think that's just me, I don't think C would

care.

No, I don't care.

I just want a treadmill. But I'm not like, looking to hang out with my neighbors.

Do you see your neighbors a lot?

A few. There are a few really nice people on this floor. There is this one lady at the end of the hall who we love - she has a sister in the building. They share a dog that's older than them - the dog gets dressed in sweaters and pushed around.

Not to be rude, but that dog is hanging onto it's life by a thread. I don't think it has eyeballs.

So even if there was a larger communal space, you wouldn't have much of an interest in interacting with your neighbors?

No, and I also think that's kind of the demographic of the building.

I feel like I would hang out with my neighbors in some sort of communal space that was nice. When you just have the corridors and the lobby it's a little bit forced.

When I was living in New York, most of the parties, or the house parties, I would go to would be on the roof.

Do you see your neighbors a lot, in the hallways?

Waiting for the elevator sometimes.

And have you noticed a lot of personalization in the hallways, by your neighbors?

Yeah. People have wreaths - doormats are on the inside though.

Do you like seeing these types of decorations?

Yeah, I like it.

Yeah, I guess. Around Christmas it's sort of nice. I don't think I would be into like, gaudy Santa decorations -

- I mean, I was very into this neighbors like, little Easter Bunny. She had like, a seasonal display.

It was tacky. Listen, if you have good taste, go for it. Otherwise...

Oh you're no fun.

Is there anything about the space you think is very important, that you haven't encountered anywhere else?

The character. The way that the apartment is built is not built like this now. The details on the doors -

- the window in the shower -

- the tiles in the bathtub. The window in the shower is the most exquisite feature in this apartment. I've never had a shower like that.

Oh, also not super into the accordion door situation.

But in general, it has the right amount of glass for me. A lot of new builds have floor-to-ceiling glass - it has enough but I don't desire more light in here, let's just say that. It has enough, but it always feels bright.

**A conversation
with 'Rick' about
his Wellesley
apartment, where
he lives alone.**

**Rick has lived in the
apartment for five
years.**

interview 04

How long have you been in this apartment for?

About five and a half years.

And where were you before?

I was on Carleton Street.

In a similar building?

It was a condo, yeah. It wasn't as old as this building - this building is 60s.

Do you have access to a private outdoor space?

I do, yeah.

Are there any other public outdoor spaces around the building you like to use?

Well there's Allen Gardens, and that's it.

Is this a pet-friendly building?

On the website they say no, on the lease they say no, but, yes. Officially no, unofficially no problem.

How many legal bedrooms does this apartment have?

One. Just one.

So is it just you who lives in the apartment on a regular basis?

Yes.

Do you have a lot of guests over?

No. You mean overnight guests?

Yeah, or if you have family staying with you -

- no, no.

Do you feel you have enough space in this apartment?

Lots. Plenty. Really, I don't need all this space.

Do you feel like you're lacking any specific

types of spaces?

Nope.

Which space do you think you use the most, in this apartment?

Hard to say. Between the living, kitchen, and bedroom (laughs)... I guess living room, definitely. During the summer however, I would be on the balcony. I'm out there a lot. It's a big one, with a beautiful view. It's really nice to be out there in the summertime. Spring and summer.

Do you think you'd spend as much time out there if the view wasn't so great?

I think the view is - well, it's not just the view, it's the privacy. And that's another thing I absolutely love about it. You can see the closest building, I walk around here any which way I want to because really, if someone wanted to look, like, okay - fill your boots! They're so far away.

Do you consider the balcony your favorite space in the apartment?

Yeah. It's comfortable, you can do anything. I can entertain.

Do you like to entertain in your home?

I do, I do like to entertain.

How often do you have people over?

In the past year or so, I haven't had that many people over because of the construction. And actually, the year before that with the water off as frequently as it was, I couldn't count on it being on, so I couldn't invite someone over if I wasn't sure I would get a notice 24 hours before saying 'oh, sorry, water's

off tomorrow'. That's all they legally have to do, and the lowest legal standard is this building's gold standard (laughs).

Do you find the layout of the unit helps or hinders entertaining?

Oh it's great! Especially because the kitchen's so open, so I can be cooking, which I love to do, and still be entertaining and chatting.

Have you added anything more permanent to the unit since moving in?

No.

Would you like to?

No.

Do you feel you have enough storage in this unit?

Plenty. Plenty. I'm at a stage of life where less is more, I should not be having more things. I should be getting rid of things.

Do you find that it's helpful that you have a set amount of storage in the apartment where

-

- I think that process happens naturally. I think I found it rather than it finding me. When I moved here I was in a much bigger unit - a two bedroom, a much bigger two bedroom - and so I purposefully touched everything I ever owned and decided if it brought me joy. And it was such a wonderful feeling to let go of so much stuff. I still declutter... I can't believe the stuff in here sometimes. So no, that's where I am in life and I have all that I need. I sometimes sit here and go, 'I could live with less'.

And how long did it take for you to settle on your current furniture arrangement?

I would say, three or four iterations before the current arrangement.

How often did you move the furniture?

Probably over six months to a year, of changing furniture. I would put it in, live with it, and then decided I didn't like it and go 'well, let's try this'. And I still do that sometimes! The upsizing of the TV caused me to think about rearranging...that affected the view, but rearranging required getting another large piece of furniture which I didn't want to do... so a lot of that type of rearranging happens in my head. Plus, I'm the one who does all the moving, so.

What's your typical day like in the apartment? I know it must vary from day-to-day but -

- no, it doesn't really, because I'm retired. I get up very very early, I come into the kitchen and make my coffee, and I sit on the couch and check my email, check YouTube and see what Rachel Maddow did the night before, then I'll make my breakfast and have that, then I usually go back to bed. And then I get up and out by 9 o'clock, and usually I have things on, I have errands to run or whatever. Socializing. Make dinner, usually most nights I made dinner here. Actually, most days I make three meals a day here, and clean up after them. Then I'll watch TV or read and go to bed.

Is the kitchen large enough for you?

Yes. I have had a bigger kitchen - I don't need a bigger kitchen. There's ample room, lots of counter space, and if I were to have more I would just clutter it more. I feel the same way about the fridge. It's the smallest fridge I've

ever had, and I often say to myself, 'I'm gonna get a larger fridge', but I don't need another fridge, I don't need another freezer. If I've got that it's just more chance for it to break down and for stuff to go bad. I don't need it. Although I love in the winter, I can keep food out on the balcony to keep cold. If I'm hosting a large dinner, I can use the balcony as extra cold storage.

Do you use your balcony in the winter months consistently?

As cold storage, absolutely. It has a huge use all year round. I use it for storage in the summertime as well. If I'm preparing a big meal in the summer and something doesn't need to be refrigerated, I just need the space, I put it on the table out on the balcony. It's also where I keep most of my recycles, my waste and my organics out there too, because it gets buggy. It's nice that I can put anything out there and no animals will bother it. The birds don't touch it.

Is having a private outdoor space important to you?

Yes, privacy is very important to me.

If the building had a shared roof deck, do you think you would ever use it?

No. Even if I didn't have the balcony, I wouldn't use it. Because I like the privacy.

Would you rather have a larger apartment and no balcony?

No. I didn't have a balcony for years, and didn't think I wanted one. But since I've moved here I love my balcony, I used it all the time.

How long did the renovations to the balcony last?

8 months - I was barred from using the balcony door, for safety's sake. They replaced the concrete balustrade with glass - it changes the space a lot. It's lighter, airier, but it does make me feel more exposed. Although I was fine with what is was, that's what I signed up for. But I'm happy with it, I do like the change. They made significant upgrades to the building. Again, in an effort to get rents through the roof. The sign out front used to say 'recently renovated affordable luxury', but the minute the hoarding went up for this reno, a new wrap went around and it said 'luxury'. The word affordable was dropped as soon as it was approved and construction began. The management know me, the landlords know me... they refer to me as 'the pain'.

Do you find there's a strong community in the building?

There were a lot of meetings at the beginning of the renovation, and they were well attended, but I stopped going to them because they were a waste of time. They were poorly managed, there was no agenda, no follow-up. It was plausible deniability.

Where did the meetings happen?

In open spaces that were there because of construction, and they eventually moved them down to the new gym facility in the basement.

What was the extent of the renovations?

They fixed the balconies, they sandblasted and repainted the facade. They updated the fire and smoke detectors. They also came into every unit without really explaining what they were doing to set up heat sensors so that now if you turn your temperature above 23

degrees, you cannot go higher. It wasn't legal for them to come in and not tell us what they were doing. That's how they used to do it - now they don't get in my door without very explicit instructions as to why they want to come. I have made it very clear to them that they can come in once a year for inspections, and once a year means once a year, not every ten months. And otherwise, no, just because you stick something through my door doesn't mean you can come in.

Was there a gym in the basement before?

No. That was an upgrade that was part of the pitch to the city - the city said you have to do something nice for your tenants. That was one of the upgrades.

Were a lot of people pushed out after the renovation?

Oh, there's been a huge tenant turnover. But a large part of the turnover is because of the noise and the construction for the last year. It was just horrible. And new people that came in weren't told. Terrible - just really scandalous. It's scummy. And once people move out you can take the rent up as far as you think you can go. But, there's a core group of real, old tenants that have been here for years and haven't even had this upgrade, there's two or three new iterations of upgrades even since I moved in. I know there are people in this building who have really, really cheap rent. And they're not moving! They're retired people, they're on fixed incomes or very low incomes, and they are not moving.

Are there a lot of set rules for living in this building, in terms of decoration or -

- yes. I don't really try, I'm fine with the way it's decorated. But I love the bones of this apartment - I really love this space. It works for me. It flows well, it meets all my needs. The older I get, I want for nothing.

So you spend a lot of time out on the balcony -

- and I'm a big walker, and I am close to everything. Anything I want, or anything I need, any service is all within a 15 to 20 minute walk from here. It's a great bubble! If I add another half an hour to that, the options are endless. The city is right at my doorstep.

How much furniture have you added to the balcony?

I've added very little, almost none. I have the table and the chairs and the bench out there - that used to be in here - but I never sit on it, it's just storage. But that's it. There's a little table at one end that was part of a shelf, and I will plant things out there. I like to grow herbs and lettuces and things like that, but definitely herbs. I missed doing that when the balconies were closed down.

Would you describe all of the furniture out on the balcony functional or aesthetic choices?

I'd say both. I'm very basic, and if I change the casing on the pillows that will change it up completely, if I put a new tablecloth on the table it changes it up completely. And the plant will soon go back out there.

Do your neighbors have a lot of decoration on their balconies?

No, it's all very quiet.

Do you have any awareness of your

neighbors when you're sitting out on the balcony?

Only if they're out and talking. I don't see people out there sitting, having their dinner or their lunch, watching YouTube, living out there. I don't have a sense of them doing that. What people tend to use them for is to have private phone calls, which is horrible when I'm out there because they tend to speak really loudly and don't realize people can hear them. It's a lot of drama. And smokers, who don't like to smoke in their apartment. That was actually one of the biggest issues when they said the balconies were going to be closed for the better part of a year; where am I supposed to smoke?

Other than the gym you mentioned, are there any other communal spaces in the building?

Laundry. And I don't use the gym - I have a gym membership that I use.

Are there any other more communal rooms

-

- it doesn't have a party room. No, the gym and laundry and the recycling room is all downstairs, and that's it.

Do you find these spaces adequate -?

- yes -

- do you wish you had access to any other types of spaces?

Nope. No desire, I have no desire for any social mixing with my neighbors. It's not why I moved here. I knew what I was getting into. In my old condo, which had all those things, I know nobody used them. They're selling features.

Do you run into your neighbors often?

Mmhm, in the elevator. There are people that I see regularly, that when I don't and we see each other again, we check in.

Is there a lot of personalization in the corridor?

No, no it's not allowed.



**A conversation
with ‘Mal’ about
her work in
Thorncliffe and
Flemingdon Park,
where she’s involved
as a community
advocate.**

interview i

How long have you lived in the neighbourhood?

So, I have lived in the neighborhood since 2012. Previously, I was in Brampton, and then I was living in a while in Scarborough, but we moved here in 2012.

What type of outdoor spaces do you have access to in your neighbourhood? How often do you use them?

So, basically, I am associated with a couple of non-profit organizations and the mandate for them is to really engage - as you've noticed, there are a lot of high-rise towers in this community, so most of the residents don't have access to spaces. The only thing that's available to them are the green spaces, the park spaces around the towers. But those are also very under-utilized, if you look at the community, it's a very densely populated community, and there are very few recreational facilities. There is only one community center, there is a recreation center, a library, there is a pool, and then some gym spaces, there is only one main basketball court that's available. So we're trying to animate, try to hold as many outdoor events as possible, especially during the summer months, so that these folks that are not able to access other recreational spaces, could at least come out to the park spaces. We hold a lot of outdoor events to get these people out and about, clean-ups, festivals, clothing swaps, different 'arts in the park' activities. I think for four years straight, the Toronto Arts Foundation has chosen our

neighborhood to host their event. Japanese drummers, African dances, you know, all sorts of activities that were arranged in the park that folks could come out and not only have fresh air, but have a chance to network and reduce social isolation. Those are the things that I've been really engaged with.

The other aspect of the outdoors is the ravines, exploring the ravines. I have trained as a ravine walk leader, we have organized four or five ravine walks. If you move towards the Ontario Science Center, around the back of it, there is a huge ravine system. Not a lot of people know a lot about it, and I'm trying to re-ignite the interest in the ravines, so I am establishing partnerships with geographers and naturalists, the Lost River organization, and the Parks people. There are some of the activities I've been involved in.

You mentioned that a lot of these outdoor spaces are under-utilized. Does the surrounding community take advantage of the post-war tower's open space at all, or are they primarily, if infrequently, used by the tower residents?

So, most of the agencies are engaged in organizing some events in the spaces to reduce social isolation, give people an opportunity for connection. This community is a newcomer community, so many people are coming from outside, immigrating to Canada, especially the South Asian community. You will have over 100 languages being spoken in the community. There are so many different types of people

living in these communities. So trying to engage all of them, it's a huge effort in itself. We try our best but still there is lots more to do. I'm not sure if you've seen, but we've engaged the youth in making a mural. There was a mural at the Flemingdon Park site, at the far end there was a basketball court, which had a wall with a mural. It was in a very bad state, so what we did was approach a group called Friends of Flemingdon Park. So we got together and we wanted this mural to be repainted. Having the history of Flemingdon Park, the connotation that it's only a negative space, where only violence occurs - lots of shooting and drug activity - we wanted to paint a positive picture of our community. We engaged a group of students, involved an artist, and these youths were given a few sessions, they were mentored, they gained confidence, and these were youths taken from both Flemingdon Park and Thorncliffe Park. They developed a design, and it's an awesome testament to them, to their resilience. Basically, what we wanted was that the youth could take ownership of the park. So they painted it, their names are on the wall, now people come and take photos with it. Unfortunately some tagging has happened, we were not able to really secure the mural, so some vandalism happened.

Did more people use the park, after the mural was completed?

Yes, absolutely. Before that, it was a place people were scared to go. There was not enough lighting, so we requested from the City of Toronto to have a safety audit done.

Once the audit was done, it was found that there were areas that were dark, there were holes in the fences, and there were folks that were unwanted, that were individuals that would be there selling guns. Even when we were doing the mural, there were guys asking like, "why are you over here?". But once it was completed, and the lighting was improved, folks are going there and inhabiting the park more. The other amazing thing that happened was that we collaborated with a group that came and repainted the basketball court. Now the kids have a space they can enjoy, so that was really needed. Now, there is a huge farm that's also being built over there, called Flemo Farms, which would be a huge 1.5 acre space in which farming would be done, it's part of the city's urban farming project. It's in collaboration with the City of Toronto, food-share, Flemingdon Health Center, all coming together to give the opportunity to the local community to be engaged in the activity of growing food for themselves. We will be taking six farmers from the community would be trained by the lead farmer, who is from Foodshare, and then they can, you know, have a food market on a monthly basis so the local residents can have better access to fresh food.

What's the timeline for this?

So, it's happening now. The space has been secured, the only challenges were around securing storage space and acquiring water for the farms. Now COVID's happened, everything's been suspended. But right now, if you go out there, you can see we've put tarps on the ground so that the grass can die down,

so it's much less work when you have to start tilling the ground. Planting was supposed to happen, but because of COVID everything got delayed.

I understand that Flemingdon Park is a new-comer community, and you've mentioned instances of social isolation within the tower neighbourhoods - do you feel like there's a strong community?

Absolutely, I feel that it's a very, very strong community. A very resilient community. The only thing is, how can we reach out to them? Because they're speaking all sorts of different languages, so whenever we are planning programs that is an issue. We hold these events in open spaces so anybody, anybody who's walking by, can come and enjoy these programs. And they do, in large numbers. I remember with the clean-ups, we had the largest number of people turn up, we had around 250, 300 people. Normally, with clean-ups, if you have 50 people show up you're happy, but we get these huge turn outs. We also have partnerships with local agencies, all the agencies that are working in the community, we do events that are in partnership with them. There was a multi-cultural festival that was done, maybe two years back, in October, so we themed it Halloween. I think we had nearly 500 people turn up. It was such a cold day, but folks turned up, it was a massive success.

Folks need that opportunity. The resilience is there, but there needs to be more opportunities. The lack of recreational space is a problem for sure. We also need the

renovation of existing recreational spaces. The ice skating rink, that's in the middle of the community, that needs renovation. We advocated to the city of Toronto, who had funds set aside for 'neighborhood improvement areas', so in that funding route we received \$525,000. This funding was allocated to two things; Flemo City Media, because focus groups were done with the youths to find out what exactly they wanted, and then the arena itself got renovated.

You mentioned that the neighborhood doesn't have enough recreational programming -

Definitely.

- are there any other missing vital services?

I think missing is the wrong word. Defunct, yes. Mental health resources, these are newcomer, immigrant populations, we need counselling specialists. We've been noticing there's a very huge seniors population in the community, and not a lot of recreational facilities for seniors. Really deficient in recreational facilities in youth, apart from a few things here and there, but not a lot is actually available. What we do have is in a state of disrepair. Then again, there has been a new site that's been built along Don Mills road, but I'm not sure how folks from here are supposed to travel all the way over there, because it's the main, central site, not only for the youths, but also for the seniors. But it's not walking distance from their apartment buildings. So it needs to be more accessible. Folks have to take a bus, or two buses, again these communities are struggling

communities. There are a lot of unemployment issues, a large seniors population, a large population of children - the elementary schools, the high schools, they're packed, they're at capacity. Once those facilities are not available, you see all kinds of untoward activity, rising out of mental health issues, rising out of frustrations, lack of employment, you know, all those issues. These are the things we have been struggling with. Youths don't have the opportunity to relax, to let their hair down, there's no gym space, or sports activities.


If there were to be a massive effort to update a lot of the post-war towers, what key changes would you like to see?

One of the pressing issues in the communities is the gentrification of the buildings. Folks have been struggling with the rent issues, a lot of buildings have, in the past years, there has been a ton of issues with the landlords and the tenants. More projects have been announced in the community have created a lot of anxiety and apprehension among the residents, already the place is very, very dense, but adding more towers... these are a few of the issues the community is facing already.

I have seen the buildings, I have seen the state of the buildings... holes in the kitchen that have not been closed, outwardly they beautify the buildings, but it's important to go inwards. They are in a really appalling state. Again, on top of that, expectations of raising the rent, and evicting the current tenants, and all those issues. The landlords can raise

the rents whenever they want to, but there are ways and methods - folks that have arrived, they're newcomers and they don't really know their rights, and they suffer the most. They get intimidated. This is why landlords do this, they can rent it to people at a higher rate. We're trying to raise awareness, create workshops, town halls, to let folks know about their rights, so they can challenge these situations. If tower renewal has to happen, it has to take into consideration the community it serves, rather than pushing - if you push these people out, they go live somewhere else, in worse conditions. That is not a solution. If you want to improve the state of the community, you need to serve the community, you need to earn their confidence and really work with them to get to a solution that has consensus, rather than just listening to one side of the story. It's not helpful to anyone, really. We need to be fair to all the members of the community.

In the media, the perception of Flemingdon Park is always negative. It's not all negative, there's so much positive in the community. There is so much potential. Opportunities need to be given - once you provide the youth with space, who knows where they will go.



**A conversation
with 'Riz' about
his Regent Park
apartment, where
he lived with two
roommates.**

**Riz lived in the
apartment for three
years.**

interview 05

So, how long were you living in the apartment?

I was there from October 2016 until February of 2019.

How many people lived with you in that apartment?

Yeah, so it was three people living in a two bedroom apartment - it made it crazy affordable. It was pretty good actually, one of us took the living room and the rest of us had our own space. It was a pretty big living room so we still had room for like, a kitchen table, a couch and a TV set-up, and everyone was still able to have their own space.

Was that area partitioned off in any way?

Yeah, we had a kind of screen set up out of bed sheets. It worked for us. It was a pretty big apartment. I would say the common area was twice the size of a conventional living room, so there was more than enough space to have a separate bedroom, kitchen, and common space area.

In the building, were there a lot of shared common spaces?

There were no entertainment rooms or anything like that, but there was a shared laundry in the basement. That space was shared with the whole building.

Were there any common spaces you wish you had access to?

Honestly? No not really. Even when I eventually moved into a newer building, I didn't use any of the amenities. Maybe a study area? Because of how we had set up the space,

we didn't really have room for a desk in the living room or in any of our bedrooms. But the apartment was pretty close to a library so it wasn't so bad.

How often did you guys come across your neighbors? Did you feel like there was a strong sense of community in the building?

I think we were pretty solo... we would see our neighbors every now and then, but very rarely. You would see the same people in the lobby on a daily basis, talking it up, but I'm not part of that circle, so [laughs]. I was living with my good friends, so it was just us hanging most of the time, and that was fine.

If there was a shared gathering space in the building, do you think you would have used it?

Personally no, just because with school and work, and friends and stuff, just life I guess, it's not really my thing. But there are a ton of people in the building, and in the area, that just kinda hung around - on park benches, in the lobby. I know they lived in our building, so I think other people would benefit from it. There were a couple buildings across the road - on Oak Street, in Regent Park. So there's three apartment complexes, and one of those complexes was city housing, and there are a lot of people who just hang around, they don't have jobs, and there was a community floor, or room, on the first floor of one of the buildings, and it was always packed with people

What floor was the apartment on?

I was on the eighteenth floor.

Did you guys have access to a balcony?

We did, yeah.

How often did you use it?

We used it pretty often. You know, always smoking and stuff - we didn't want to smoke inside. When people would come over from the city, you know, a balcony's a balcony...

So would you say it's main function was a pseudo-smokers lounge and a breathing space for when you had gatherings?

Yeah, yeah exactly.

Did you guys use it in the winter at all?

It was more of like, a storage area in the winter, we would keep bikes and stuff out there.

Did you furnish or decorate it at all?

No, we didn't decorate it. It was pretty minimal.

Were you able to identify your balcony, or your unit, from the street?

Yeah, yeah for sure!

Was that something that was important to you?

I do that with every apartment I live in - I love being able to see it from the street. It's my place, it's nice to know, you know, where it is. Especially in a building that big, you know?

Was access to the surrounding open space something that was important to you?

Um, what do you mean when you say open space?

I guess I'm referring to the parks, any of the playgrounds, the basketball courts surrounding the buildings. Even the parking lots, I suppose.

It's not really the best area. I mean, it's

been revitalized right now. So like, around the Dundas side, it's really nice now. But I was closer to the Gerard side, and that's still not the best area, so we didn't go outside that much. And I definitely saw a lot of people walking their dogs in the parks, and even - I mean Riverside Park isn't too far, over on Broadview, so I think a lot of people go there sometimes. But like, in the immediate vicinity of the apartment we didn't go outside all that much, because it was kind of a sketchy area. The parks around the building were pretty barren. But like, the basketball courts close to Dundas, people were always using. In the open park, there were never a lot of people, mostly just people walking their dogs. The park benches were always full with people hanging out and talking though.

So the recreation spaces got used?

Yeah. `

Were you missing any types of outdoor spaces?

Like what?

Anything - maybe more recreational spaces, different types of parks, gardens, functional land, playground spaces...

I think what's there is alright I guess -- it depends if you're talking about for all of Regent Park in general or just for us, like, my street community?

Whatever you're comfortable speaking to.

Honestly, if I wanted something specific, the bus was right there. There's a pretty nice aquatic center that's just opened up, Riverdale park is just around the corner, if you go south, down River St, you can get to an underpass

park which is pretty nice. It's really hard for me to speak to the entire community of Regent Park, because it's at this transition point where there are people who have been there for a long time, and they're struggling, and then people who have just moved in now it's 'revitalized'. And there's a little bit of a divide, you can sense it. You can tell who's living in the nice apartments and who's not. From someone who came from the suburbs, and was living there because it was the only rent I could afford and it was close to school, it's hard to talk about a sense of community. I felt my community was mostly at Ryerson. There's also a lot of crime and gang violence in Regent Park, so in terms of community... I don't know. I don't know where I was going with that.

Was it clear to you which outdoor spaces belonged to your apartment complex, and which were larger public parks?

I would say so, yeah. The big parks, like Moss Park and Allen Gardens and Riverdale, those were clearly public. There were a few little parks close to our apartments, I'm not sure if they were open to the public actually. I think they were for the other housing in Regent Park, so I never went to them.

Were you more hesitant to use spaces where a sense of ownership was unclear?

Honestly, I didn't use any of them, period. But they were always filled with people that were loitering.

Was there anything you especially liked about living in this apartment? Were there any major tension points for you?

After I moved out, my roommates told me

there was a leak, so the apartment got flooded twice. That sucked.

What I liked most.... the rent was cheap [laughs], and the location was good. Location was good as it was close to school. When you're living with your friends, you don't really stress on the little things. Overall it was pretty clean, we had no issues with bedbugs or cockroaches or anything like that, which was very fortunate. I'm pretty thankful, it didn't smell, there were no horrible smells. No like, garbage smells.

I didn't like how sketchy the neighborhood felt sometimes. If I was coming home from school late at night, honestly I didn't feel safe. There were times I would go to the corner store, which was just at Oak and River, and I've been approached by people under the influence who were, you know, pretty belligerent. It wasn't anything crazy, but it wasn't simple, you know?

**A conversation
with 'Sam' about
his Westmount
apartment, where
he lived with his
parents and sister.**

**Sam lived in the
apartment for
thirteen years.**

interview 06

How long did you live in the apartment?

Oh, good question. It was shortly after we moved to Canada, up until I was 18. So age 5 to 18? Twelve, thirteen years I guess.

Where were you living before that?

Before that we were staying with my aunt, in a single bedroom, all of us, for a few months when we first arrived, until we were able to move into this place. And in this place, we changed apartments about three times. We moved actually three times within the building; from the seventh floor to the ninth to the fifth.

Why? Was it about availability?

Well it was always an upgrade. So we started with, again, a one bedroom, so we were all sleeping in the same room, the same bed. Shortly after we moved into a two bedroom, where I spent most of my childhood sharing a room with my sister. And then finally we moved into the three bedroom and I was able to have my own room.

So there were four of you -

- yeah, my parents and then my younger sister.

So you were in the two bedroom apartment the longest?

Yeah, I would say for about two thirds of the whole experience, the whole tower experience. But I mean, the two, three moves within it made the whole thing feel like this world that we very much never able to leave [laughs], it was a bit of a closed ecosystem. It was one of the few rental opportunities in the

neighborhood. We were surrounded by mostly semi-suburban, low-density single family homes. It was this enclosed little world - it really felt like a little world in itself, this tower.

Where was this?

It was out in Etobicoke, west end.

Did you, in any of the apartments, have access to a balcony?

We did, in each of them. The fifth floor one - the last one we moved into - was kind of magical, because it was at the level of the leaves of the tree. A huge, huge old bushy tree. It was kinda like being in a tree house, you could walk out into the balcony and pick leaves off the tree.

Do you remember how many floors this building had?

Seven... seventeen? But they skipped the thirteenth floor.

Would you live on the thirteenth floor?

Absolutely. I would pick the thirteenth floor if I could [laughs].

Do you remember if you had access to any shared, communal spaces throughout the building?

From what I recall, there was a swimming pool, including saunas that were rather underused. I always have fond memories -- there was only really ever one person in it, if ever. A huge swimming pool... the facilities were actually kind of nice.

Was this attached to some type of community center or -

- no, no it was private to the building. But no one ever used it. There was a huge patio attached to that, which was just this empty

concrete tiled kinda fenced off area, which I think was supposed to act as some type of community-room outdoor space, but it was totally underused. A lobby, furnished with the discards of previous tenants - if you left anything behind, the landlords would bring in dusty old sofas, and you know like, Value Village-type art. Also totally unused. I don't think I ever saw someone sit in there. I don't think there were any other type of 'party room' facilities - I don't think the apartment was fancy enough for anything like that.

I mean... you had saunas.

That's true [laughs]. But they weren't like... they were pretty dingy saunas.

Were there any type of shared spaces you wished your building had?

Hm...

The answer can be no.

I mean, as a kid I always wished we had access to the roof. That was a fascination of mine. I would always climb the fire stairs, but there was a gate that was always padlocked. We would try to squeeze ourselves in between the bars but, no luck. But apart from that not really. I recall, for a few significant birthdays, we would rent a party room in a family friend's condo which had one. But apart from that no, not really. Tenants really tended to make their own shared spaces too. There were groups of teenagers that would always hang out and smoke weed in the staircases. That kind of thing I think, was pretty common.

How often did you see your neighbors on a daily basis?

Oh, every day. You would always run into

people in the elevator, the lobby - constantly. It was hard to enter or exit the building without running into someone.

Did you feel like there was a sense of community with these people, or was it more like, faces you would see in the hallway then move on?

Oh absolutely the latter. You'd say hi, you might have some brief conversation, but there wasn't really much of a community beyond that. I mean, once we had this really old Turkish neighbor who taught us how to make bread, and a few Turkish desserts I think. I might have interviewed him for a grade three project, where we had to interview a neighbor. It was kind of a surreal experience, stepping into someone else's unit within the building. Perhaps it was just my family who didn't have friends, but it's not like there were.... community was definitely lacking.

Do you remember if there was any type of decoration, or personalization in any of the common spaces?

Like I said, the lobby was furnished with this discarded, leftover furniture that was always rotating when people moved out and left behind a couch slightly less dusty than the one already sitting there... Another flower painting... but apart from that, no decoration or anything. The hallways were pretty bare, carpeted with this deep red carpet. The lobby had this paneling on the walls - this very porous kind of stone. I don't know how to describe it beyond that, this yellow stone full of holes. A very textured - very gaudy, everything was so gaudy.

How often did you guys use the balcony space?

It was a very seasonal thing, in the winter it would be essentially storage. Very storage heavy I think, that was true for most people, despite the landlord protests.

What type of protest?

Yeah, whenever someone did something especially obtrusive, there would be letters. It was mostly rather lenient.

What counts as especially obtrusive?

Like a dangerously cluttered balcony - if things looked like they might tumble off, they would send a letter maybe. But unless someone complained, or was out to get you, they kind of let you be.

In the summer, of course, my sister and I would spend quite a bit of time out there. Again, especially on the 5th floor. Sometimes we'd eat lunch, or whatever... The balconies were a very delightful part of the whole experience.

Did your family furnish or decorate the balcony at all?

Yeah, yeah we had some plastic patio furniture. Even a carpet, which was very ill advised, because it was outdoors and it just gets disgusting and moldy. But it was otherwise this bare concrete floor that my mom couldn't stand so... so yes, the balcony was carpeted [laughs].

Were you able to identify your unit from the street?

Yeah, yeah.

Was that something that was important to you?

Oh yeah, for some reason that was always a fascination, how quickly you could find the balcony.

How did you pick it out?

It's hard to say. You could usually pick it out by the laundry hanging - we always hung laundry on the balcony too. Or you know, the handle bar of a bike pokes out. Each one was subtly different... it was never a matter of counting floors or anything. After a while you just knew, instinctively, where it was in the array, in the grid.

Would you ever have wanted to enclose your balcony for extra square footage? Or did you like having a completely private outdoor space?

Yeah, I think we would have used it more if it was enclosed, seeing as the balcony was very much a seasonal space. But as kids, no we loved the balcony... our parents maybe... but honestly the apartments were spacious enough though! And I think that's true for all these types of tower buildings. Compared to other rental types, for a family we had quite a bit of living room and dining room space. It never felt like we were lacking interior space, apart from when we had to share a bedroom, which was a big point of contention. But we loved the balcony, and even in the winter to have the storage space was nice.

What type of outdoor spaces did you have, in and around your apartment?

It was very interesting actually. It was in a field, it was a tower in a field, but the American version of that where there's a fence around the field. There was an above-ground parking

lot, but then around that a lot of landscaped green lawn surrounding it. Like a big, paved road, a round-a-bout kind of, leading up to the front of the building. But it was sitting in this totally unused green lawn, surrounded by fencing. Of course, as kids, we knew where all the holes in those fences were, so you could kind of enter the surrounding landscapes, which themselves were interesting.

Directly to the north of our building there was a large park, which we would spend a lot of time in. Just to the west, there was an unused lot, which was kind of a pit - just this filthy - people used it as a dump for a while. But we would go tobogganing there some years. To the south, there was another tower.

So the field wasn't really used? Was it mostly the park that was occupied by the neighbourhood?

Yeah, you would always see neighbors in the park. The field, people would walk their dogs in it sometimes, but other than that, totally empty.

Did you feel like you were missing any types of outdoor spaces?

No, I don't think I was ever missing outdoor space. I missed a connection to the outdoors, because frankly being up high, and then having to take the elevator across the lobby... it was too many thresholds, it really felt like you were disconnected from the ground plane. Which I know is an obvious criticism of high-rises, but I think what I really yearned for as a kid was urban space. I wished we were in the city. But we weren't, we were in this sort of semi-suburb. But there were so

many neighborhood parks surrounding us, so...

You mentioned a chain link fence - was it clear to you which types of outdoor spaces belonged to your building, and which belonged to the neighborhood?

No, it was always very ambiguous. I mean, we knew the fenced in area was building property, but exactly what you were allowed to do there, how you were allowed to behave there, it was always something we fought over with our parents.

Did it affect how you used these spaces?

Yeah, they were shrouded in ambiguity [laughs]. It was kind of a strange, no-mans land, that's the only way to describe it. In fact, it felt very uncomfortable being there, partially because it was an empty field that was totally landscaped, and behind it was this backdrop of a grid of balconies and windows, in which you were in their full view. So we never really used that space. It was all very panopticon-esque [laughs].

Did you feel like you had any connection to your surrounding neighbourhood?

No, never as much as one as I would have liked. I mean, there was a neighborhood pool, an outdoor pool, that we went to. There was also a little strip mall a ten minute walk north, that we surprisingly rarely went to, I mean, we would do our grocery shopping by car to No Frills, despite there being a rather lovely little Italian bakery and all these shops.

We didn't have many friends in surrounding suburbs... I mean, the park was really a kind of nucleus. Everyone used it. It was definitely - even my childhood friends,

who I went to school with - and school was just up the street, like everything was rather clustered together. So I had friends that lived in the neighborhood as well, and we would always meet in that park. It was the center of it all.

Did you feel like you were missing any vital services in the neighbourhood?

Yeah, I guess not. I mean, the transit connection was kind of awkward; it was difficult to take the bus anywhere - it came once an hour, or you had to walk 15 minutes to the more frequent bus stop. But no, I wouldn't say... It was boring. It was comfortably, delightfully boring. Especially summers, oh my god.

Is there anything you remember really liking about living in the apartment?

I mean, we've already talked extensively about the balcony. And when I asked my sister now, just before our interview, I asked about what she remembers from this place, and we agreed on that. I think the balcony is a really, really kind of magical place. But apart from that, what I liked... I don't know, access to a swimming pool was like, something we totally took for granted, and something that I haven't had since. Such direct access to a pool. Other things that I liked... yeah I don't know. I think that was it. It was a pretty standard unit, there wasn't much to particularly like. It wasn't bad, I mostly had issues with the fact we weren't in a city.

And if I were to ask you the inverse, do you remember anything you had a lot of problems with -

- more than anything that lack of connection. Especially as I grew older, when I was a teenager, it began to feel like a prison [laughs]. As a kid it was just boring. I guess I didn't like how disconnected you were from the street, even after you'd exited the hallway, gone down in the elevator, or the staircase - which we used surprisingly often. You wouldn't think we did, but we took the stairs a lot, even on the ninth floor, because the elevators were slow and often out of order. Yeah, and then you'd have to cross this field, this driveway... it was an ordeal, it was so arduous. I hated it. Even on the way to school, like walking to school, the walk itself was fine, but just getting out of the building really felt like an ordeal.

The hallways too - I don't know what it was about them, but you were never comfortable in them. Nobody ever stopped to chat, they were just, aesthetically dreary places. Dimly lit, unpleasant to be around. And if you ever got off on the wrong floor and ended up on someone else's floor, any floor but your own really, it was like - I can't even compare it to anything. It's not like being on someone else's street. It's like really being in a place you don't belong. I always felt so out of place. And each hallway had its own small, signifying marker. You can tell one apart from the others by little things, the scuffs on the walls, or the way the carpet is stained. There's a strangeness, a surrealism - it's like you're in a parallel universe and things are just a little bit different.

I guess it's a kind of necessary evil, even when they're done nicely, I find, double-loaded corridors to be awfully unsettling. I mean,

the lobby space, on the other hand, was a total pleasure to be in. I loved waiting for the elevator coming home from school... it was always bathed in light. I think the front of the building - I guess technically it faced north, so this memory doesn't make much sense, because it was always bathed in the most beautiful south light. I could be getting my orientation wrong. And there was the weird porous stone, very 1970s kind of, decor, and it would warm up, so it was always very toasty. I loved being in that lobby.

Did you ever spend time down there?

Purposeful time?

It was just a really nice place to pass through. I guess, on occasion, one time that comes to mind was when we were selling chocolates for some elementary school drive. So we were selling chocolates, but nobody fucking bought anything. No sense of community [laughs]!


What you reminded me of actually, the smells, the smells were such a politically important thing. Somehow the building had really poor separation between units, so when people cooked it was always... there were a lot of racial tensions, for that reason. Someone would be cooking food from a specific cuisine and their neighbors would be like, 'oh, they're cooking Indian food again' - it would always turn into this racist thing. People would complain in the elevators. In fact, the politics of living in this building, and the neighbors relationship to the superintendents, that was it's own world as well.

The superintendents had their office on the

ground floor - it was an elderly couple, their tenure lasted most of our tenant-ship. And we knew them quite well, everyone did. They were who you went to for any kind of problem, and there were many problems. And I don't know, the way you'd have to bribe them for their attention to get stuff fixed, you know. I recall my parents inviting them to our apartment and offering like, I want to say vodka... it was some beverage. Yeah, I mean just for them to overlook the washing machine that we weren't allowed to have in the unit, according to the lease. That kind of thing, under-table deals.

So their office was on the ground floor, but did they live in the building?

They did, they did! They had a unit on the ground floor as well. I don't know, that was always a very strange thing for me. It was like, these ground keepers who had too much power for their own good. They were really unpleasant, really really awful. And they weren't the landlords, the landlord was a corporation that hired them out. So in a way they were subject to this larger tower as well... it was all a very strange dynamic. Their office, on the ground floor, it was just kind of in the vestibule. So there was no way to get past their office, so they would always be chasing people down for rent cheques or something. They were very much at the entrance, difficult to avoid. And so mean to us as kids. They would always yell at us for running down the hall.



**A conversation
with 'Ruth' about
her Regent Park
apartment, where
she lived with her
two roommates.**

**Ruth lived in the
apartment for a few
months.**

interview 07

So, how long were you living in the apartment?

Oh, I was in it for... I think four, five months? Maybe longer?

And where were you living before?

In Cambridge. I think... yeah, I was living in Cambridge before that.

How many people lived in the apartment with you on a regular basis?

Two other people.

How many bedrooms did the apartment have?

Two bedrooms.

How did that work?

I had the smaller bedroom and then the two people I lived with were friends, and they shared the other bedroom. Each one had a bed on either side of the room and would just like, split the room in half.

Was there a physical divider or...?

No, it was like they were in a jail cell.

Did they live like that the entire time?

I believe so... the entire time I was there.

What floor was the apartment on?

I don't remember, it was higher up.

Did you have access to a balcony?

We did have a balcony, yeah.

Were there any shared spaces in the building?

I think there was, laundry maybe, but I never used it.

Did you wish you had access to any types of communal spaces?

No, I wasn't really there that much.

Did you find it was easy to go about your daily life, living in this building?

So, I kind of just used it as a place to sleep to be quite honest. I did my laundry somewhere else and, there wasn't really rec space that I knew about. I mean, it definitely seemed like it was lacking everything, like any type of communal space where people could use to hang out. There were little mini green spaces around it, so when pigeons weren't fighting people would hang out there. It was aggressive! There was a dead pigeon every day.

How often would you see your neighbors?

Never.

If you weren't seeing your neighbors, did you ever see traces of your neighbors - was there any decoration on apartment doors, or -

- sometimes there was garbage in the hallways, but that was kind of it. Smoke...

Those were the only traces of human occupation? Smoke and garbage?

Yeah.

How often did you guys use your balcony?

I probably used it every other day. Just to like, go out and get fresh air. It had a really nice view actually, over the city. I would say every other day.

What would you say it's main function was for you?

Just fresh air. Views. That was kind of it.

Did you guys have any decorations on the balcony?

No, we had a few chairs but that was it.

The only furniture was some seating?

Yeah.

Were you able to identify this balcony from the street? So if you were walking by -

- no, it also didn't look onto the street, it looked onto - I don't want to say forest, I don't know what it was. It looked onto a park, and then the green areas of Toronto and then the city behind it.

Is that something that's important to you? Being able to pick out your unit from the grid? Or were you okay being a little more anonymous?

I think both, I don't think it's important to me in the sense that I need to know which apartment is mine, and I want people to know that. I think there is something nice about being anonymous. But also, it's fun to be able to go 'that's my apartment'!

Was having access to a completely private exterior space, like the balcony, important to you?

No, I don't think so. I don't think I spent enough time on the balcony, I didn't really hang out, in order for it to. I think regularly, yes. I like, I guess it's kind of related to the decorations question - the decorations within the balcony and what you see being in it is really important and effects how we use it. But at the same time, I wouldn't want that distinguishing factor, seeing it from the street. It's private, it's an extension of your home, so there's this aspect of - it's like the Zoom calls, how much do you want people to see? It's still your private space.

Would you rather have had a larger apartment with no access to a private exterior

space?

No, I don't think so. Didn't need to.

What types of outdoor spaces did you have access to, in and around the apartment?

There's a parking lot slash garage, but you had to pay for it, it's pretty private still. There's a little patch of grass where trees go, with a bench you could sit at. That's kind of it - there were parks around if you walk a little bit, but it's nothing directly related to the building.

Did you ever use that park with the bench?

No, I didn't feel safe using it, to be quite honest. The times that I would come home, or be there, it wasn't the best area, or the most secure. So as a single female, young female, it wasn't the spot to loiter at.

Did other people use it?

Yeah, people used them. It appeared like it was a lot of... I don't know what the PC way of saying this is - mentally disabled people? It was a lot of druggies and people needed a little bit more help.

So it was mostly a loitering space for people who didn't necessarily have many other places to go, not people who lived in the building.

Yeah, I mean I think there were probably some people who lived in the building, but I also think it was one of the few spots that people in the community could go to.

Was it clear to you what outdoor spaces belonged to the apartment, and which were more public? Was that distinction clear?

I think the parks were city-owned... there were three towers that were next to each other, so I'm not really sure if they were all owned

by the same developer or not. But I think that space was most likely city-owned.

Did the park feel like it was part of the apartment complex?

I would say no.

Did that affect how you used these spaces?

I think it was just another weird thing... I think as a civilian, using a space that was not for me, something that would determine if I would use a space or not. Just because I've been so many places that have great public spaces, and spaces feel like you can just use them, so I don't feel the need to use spaces because of ownership, because 'I live here and this is my space'. So for me I don't think it mattered.

Did you feel like you were missing any type of outdoor spaces?

Yeah, I think like, smaller parks - pocket parks - I think would have been nice to have around. Just general seating and activity spaces. I mean there's a little sports center that they were building close-by... I would say, at the time, it was getting a lot better for outdoor spaces.

Did you feel like there was any sense of community within your apartment building?

No.

Did you feel at all connected to the surrounding neighborhood?

I felt like the buildings were very isolated from the neighborhood.

Were the people you saw in and around the buildings mostly residents, or were there people from the larger neighbourhood...

Mainly people that lived in the buildings, I would say.

Did you feel like you were missing any vital services?

I would say, health clinics to multiple degrees. Grocery stores, or like, a variety of stores, I don't think there was a huge selection of places you could go for essentials, whether it was a drug store or groceries. Laundromats or convenience stores - it was quite limited. And I mean, neighborhood is a very loose term, I think typically when people talk about that they're thinking of a five or ten minute walk, in which case there's... there wasn't that much services in general, whether it's restaurants or salons, or any 'middle-to-higher-end' facilities'.

What was the thing you liked the most about living in a post-war tower, and what did you like the least?

I liked that it was recognizable. I found it easier to navigate, being in the building. I find a lot of condos now, they're really difficult to navigate, in the sense that I feel like I'm in this endless hallway and I don't know where I'm going and everything looks the exact same. I find in the post-war towers, there's a natural progression and understanding of where to go. The building, scale-wise, feels a little more comparable to a human. I think things like elevators shutting down, and the laundry, and where you can park... small things like that are just very inconvenient when they just don't work anymore, or they're really outdated and nothing's being fixed.

I think there's an aspect of security that was really loose and missing. Just like, how it was surveilled in general felt kind of useless. I think the area was nice, our small little pocket

was kind of sketchy, but in general it was a nice area. It didn't feel crowded, you could kind of get away from the city a little bit. The rent was really good.

What did I like the least... I think the amount of space, and the quality of space when you're sharing rooms like that, sharing an apartment like that to save rent, is a little more difficult because you then just have an increased amount of people living in one space, living as strangers, natural flows of domestic life don't really match up. I can't say if that's tied to the actual towers, but I think that was a really common thing that I saw. That these little apartments were definitely being filled with way more than was originally expected of them, which I imagine puts an increased load on everything.

Again, I don't know if this is specific to the towers, but there's things like the balconies now have netting on them to stop suicides. Small notes like that, that are added, I was really aware of.

Was the netting added by the building or by the people in the units?

The building. So there are small things like that, that I could recognize or that I found out about, that really brought me down a level. But I also think it could be type of clientele, and what type of building it is.

Do you think if there was a space on your floor - that was a type of common space for only for your floor - that you could work in, or watch TV in, would you feel comfortable using it? Or would it still feel too much like a public space?

I think if it was one big space for the entire building, I wouldn't feel comfortable with it. I would feel comfortable to go and hang out there occasionally, like, if I had my dog or like, if I had friends over. Events, more like event situations I would feel comfortable. I think if it were to be an extended backyard, it would be like a floor thing, or between neighbors, where I know who's in the space and what the situation could potentially be. I think there's an aspect of that that comes into play.



**A conversation with
'Em' about her work
in Thorncliffe and
Flemingdon Park,
where she's involved
as a community
advocate.**

interview ii

How long have you been working with the neighbourhood for?

I've been here since 2008.

How would you describe what your organization does for the neighbourhood?

Our organization is a community-based, multicultural settlement agency, focusing on serving newcomers, mainly refugees, but there's also this community development work that we've been doing since we established the agency a few decades ago. So we're very much community-centric - all residents are aware of our services. We're kind of the go-to for services in the neighborhood.

What type of outdoor spaces do you find people have access to in the neighbourhood?

Well, very limited green space, right? Considering that, according to Statistics Canada, the population we have that we have here, in the neighbourhood, is even underestimated. Anecdotally people say there are more residents living in the units, versus what is being declared on the census. So, there have been so many improvements in recent years because of our involvement with, for example, United Way, City of Toronto, where there are some good, should I say, products of those partnerships and projects we undertook before; including the community garden at 71-75 Thorncliffe Park Drive. Also, of course, the Leaside Community Garden which we oversee. There were some proposals, recently, we did a big town-hall meeting and there were some big ideas by the residents, but it didn't push

through because of challenges and barriers in terms of the bureaucracy in place, and also some challenges with funding and all that. Among other things, aside from the garden, we were able to put in some benches in some of the apartment buildings where people could sit and enjoy nice weather. There's a community park that's soon to be renovated, and we're very much engaged and are very involved in ensuring the city will hear the voices of the residents, and how they want to see the park and how they want to use the space.

Again, as you can see this is a highly, densely populated neighborhood, and in many years it will be learned that these apartment buildings were considered 'luxury' apartment buildings, where there is good access to the ravine from the high-rise apartment buildings. At one of these buildings there was a swimming pool in the basement. But definitely, access to green space has continued to be a challenge, but there have been improvements in recent years and we would like to continue to support the residents in terms of access to green space. And there are so many things that need to be done, even though we've accomplished so much, there's so many things that need to be done. I mean, we're proposing a lot of things, expanding the gardens, balcony gardening workshops, it will be challenging with COVID, but at the same time, people now need to go outdoors because of COVID, so it's a good opportunity for us to leverage that need.

You mentioned earlier that you were helping ensure that tenants voices were heard in planning sessions with the City. Have you noticed any common themes in what they're asking for?

Now, with the school's reopening, it's mostly about ensuring that the elevators are working well, and the last couple of months tenants have been asking for our help in regards to safety issues in their apartment buildings like. A huge thing about the construction happening on some of the balconies, people are saying the timing is really bad, they need to be able to air condition in the summer. Again, the elevators are a big issue. But we are now in the process of supporting the tenants organizing work, and we're very hopeful that when they have a unified voice, it will be easier for them to really push for things that will benefit them. For now, a lot of the things - they come to us individually most of the time, and although we advocate on their behalf to the landlords and to the city, what we would want to see long-term is for them to have a unified voice. So we're trying to support tenant organizing work. Things like community development work, it's hard to get funding for it and some of our workers are outreach workers, some of them don't have specific skills in tenant organizing, so that's why we're struggling. Especially with COVID, it's hard to do a lot of the outreach and community engagement work in these buildings.

We work with the Federation of Metro Tenants Association, with their amazing staff

there. We organize workshops, information sessions. We also occasionally receive information from ACOIN, so they work with tenants organizing. And of course we have a partnership with Don Valley Community Services, we recently and formalized it with a memorandum, an agreement between the two of us so we can define our work in terms of tenant engagement.

Do you feel like there's a strong community within the neighbourhood?

Yes, I think it is the most active neighbourhoods that we see.

Do you find that the community has enough space to gather - inside or out?

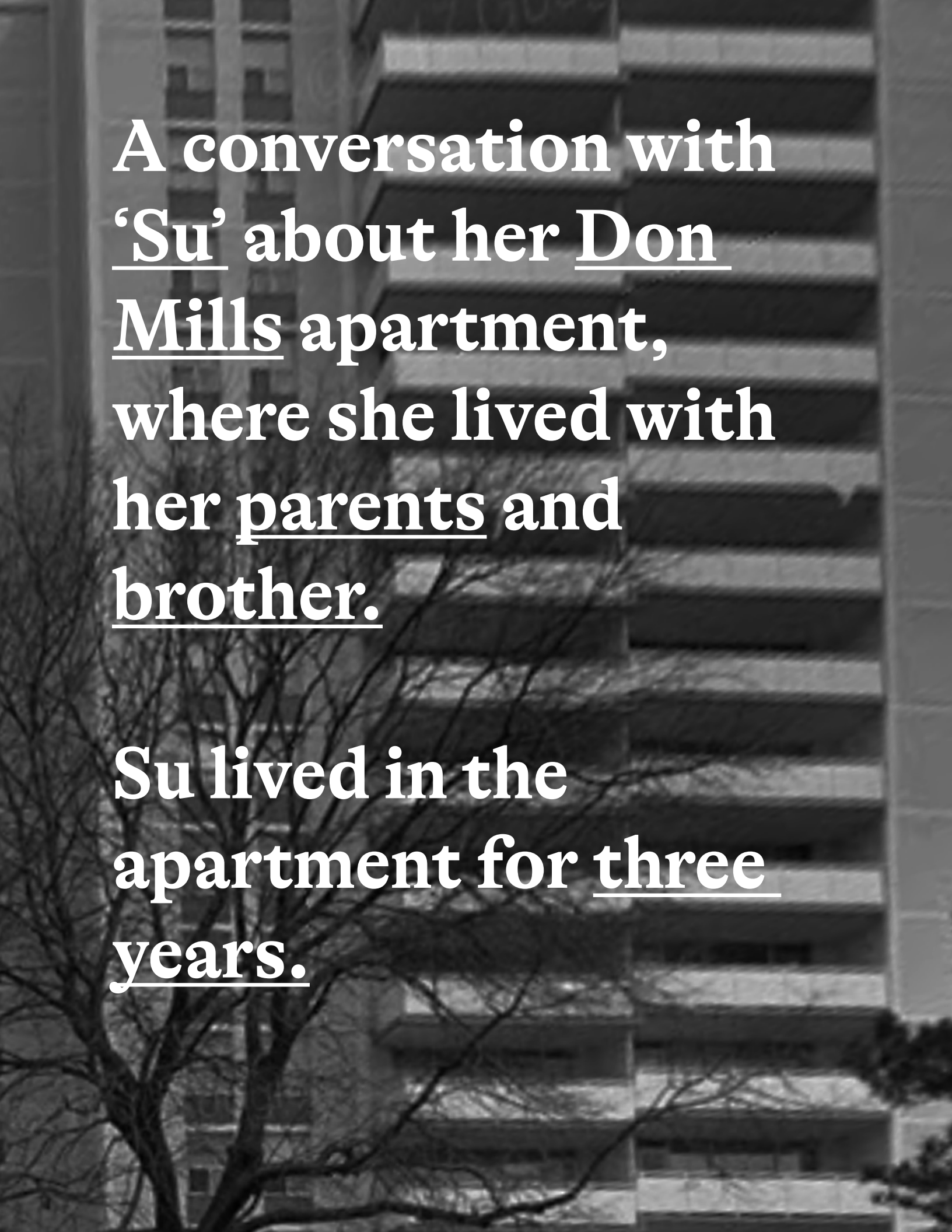
Well we used to organize things at the back of 71, and 75, those buildings. We also have a good relationship with the Parks over at Thorncliffe. But you know, with COVID it's a different story. Before COVID we were meeting with the new management of the two residential buildings, and there have been some conversations about us organizing community bazaars in the parking lots, but we're very successful in engaging the Town Centre, so we will have our by-donation drive on September 27. I think it depends on the availability of the space. We're negotiating for a free sewing space in one of their stores right now. Again, because of COVID it's a totally different story and we need to take it into consideration -- all of our events now were cancelled. But, for example, next year if we can do our Summer Festival - which we did online this year - we won't be able to do it at the park, but we might consider other space, like the

Eaton Park. We might be able to organize a summer workshop there.

What vital services do you feel like the neighbourhood is missing?

Well, we've started moving our sewing initiatives, where we provide opportunities for women to earn some income. Also for the youth, we recently brought a proposal for youth composing programming, again to provide economic opportunities for the youth. A lot of amazing things are happening, unfortunately some of the youth here face additional barriers, so stand-alone programs don't work here. They need to be tied up with other existing programs. For example, if you want to do mentorship, that mentorship program has an economic development component where at that same time you are improving the life skills of these youth, you need to provide something in the meantime that will help them with some of the economic challenges they face.

I think the City of Toronto has been very supportive, I think what's needed is community organizers that can help. All of us working here as service providers don't live here - we're not here on weekends. We need someone from the community who's really here to do community organizing, tenant organizing work - that's actually what's needed. We don't have the capacity, we don't have the resources, it's hard to find resources to enable those activities, to find that support staff.

A black and white photograph of a multi-story apartment building with a tree in the foreground. The building has many windows and balconies. The tree is in the lower left and middle ground, with its branches spread out. The text is overlaid on the image in a white, bold, serif font.

**A conversation with
'Su' about her Don
Mills apartment,
where she lived with
her parents and
brother.**

**Su lived in the
apartment for three
years.**

interview 08

How long did you live in the apartment?

I lived all of my high school years there. I lived right across the street from my high school, the building was across the street. It was three years... three years.

How many people were living with you in the apartment on a regular basis?

It was my family, so both my parents and my younger brother...so the four of us.

How many bedrooms did the apartment have?

The apartment had two bedrooms, so I shared with my brother.

Do you remember what floor the apartment was on?

We were on the ground floor, it was uh actually it was the corner unit of the building. So the heating was very poor and it was quite uncomfortable living there. The building was very old so it had pest issues and stuff like that. I think I had a friend who lived in a nearby building she lived on the fourth or fifth floor, or somewhere in the centre of the building, and she was very comfortable. Her apartment was much more comfortable than ours.

Did you guys have access to a balcony?

No.

Did the building have any kind of shared spaces, like a laundry room or -

It had a laundry room, it had a lounge at the entrance which was very sparse as well. I used to have friends over all the time because my house was right across the street from the

school but we used to hang out in my room because there is no other space, which is, I guess, comfortably cloistered.

So you guys would never use the lounge?

Yeah no, it's just too much glazing everywhere.

Did anyone ever use it?

Just for waiting I think.

Were there any communal spaces you wish you had access to?

Well my school actually gave us a lot of spaces, and there were actually that space near Don Mills, it was right across the street from the high school, about a 10 minute walk from the Peanut Plaza - do you know that space? Actually it was a very nice area, the library was a 10 minute walk, the mall was a 10 minute walk, grocery was 10 minutes away so it was quite, urban planning wise, it kind of gave a lot of facilities even though it wasn't in the building.

There were nice trees around where you used to sit underneath, everything was very close and the bus stop was right there so we could go anywhere.

Was it an express bus?

It was number 25. It was right in front of the building; it stopped and took me wherever.

How often did you see your neighbors?

My dad was... I wasn't someone who made friends with the neighbors, but my dad definitely made friends with the neighbors. I think he knew maybe at least three or four units. Also my brother's friends, all our friends

we would be living in different buildings at the same time, so we'd use each other's pool facilities or you kind of had to swap with whoever had the better amenities.

For those types of relationships, did you guys usually hang out in each other's units, or were there any kind of common space that you guys would use?

In each other's units.

I know you mentioned you were on the ground floor, but were you able to identify your unit from the street?

It was a corner unit, so I could tell easily.

Is that something that was at all important to you?

I could quickly understand... I don't know, I feel like I could tell my friends apartments just from looking up, I could tell which was their window. It wasn't actually because the ground floor helped, because at the end of our stay, when I was going to Waterloo, that summer we got a puppy so we had to take him out a lot to the backyard. That was the only good thing, I feel about living on the ground floor.

What type of outdoor spaces did you have access to?

Behind the building there was a parking lot, and right behind the parking lot there was a little green strip. The building was on a hill so you could see the Toronto skyline on the other side, so that was nice. We just hung out there, but it was a shaded area so it was cold. Other than that... some trees were around... some old trees. There were these stones that they, I don't know, in front of the buildings they had these marking stones. And the stones

were under this big tree so we used to sit on the stones and hang out.

Did anyone ever really use these spaces?

I think it was a little exposed because the building is right on Don Mills Road, and the road is pretty busy.

Were there any types of outdoor spaces you felt were missing?

I'll be honest with you, I'm not someone who plays, you know? The library was the main thing for me, there was a rec center across the street too, and there was also a big green, I don't know what you'd call it, like a soccer field? So my parents used to go walking there because they're reaching an age where they need to start walking everyday. So they used to go jogging and walking there but I don't remember going there there myself. There was a little space in front of the library as well. Most of my years when I was there the library was being renovated, they had a little outdoor space in front of the library which was nice too. It was slightly sunken in.

Was it clear to you which of these spaces were directly related to your apartment building?

I think the private buildings, the residential buildings were more confusing. They always had these fences everywhere, so navigating through the jungle of fences was off-putting. But it was nice. I didn't actually go on the other side very much - my friends came to my side because we could take the bus and go anywhere else. I loved that place, it was very convenient for everything. My parents have now moved and I'm really pissed because

it is way more isolated. It's in Scarborough, in the suburbs.

Did you feel like there was a strong community within your building?

Not within the building, but my parents knew some people, my dad knew some people, but it wasn't a strong community I would say. I told my parents maybe they keep us separated on purpose, they don't want us to start complaining about their lack of facilities, because if too many people get together and all have the same problem it becomes an issue.

What was the best part of living in this apartment? What was the worst?

The kind of like, building science stuff was the worst. The pests were a real issue too, I really forced my parents to move out because of that. The best thing was the library was right there, my school was there, everything was right there. It was really nice, you're really connected to your surrounding neighbourhood. The school was an art school so they used to let me stay till four or five, working on my stuff. I was lucky enough that the teacher there was really good, so he used to take a lot of immigrant students and train them to become designers, which is very nice.



**A conversation
with 'Mara' about
her Regent Park
apartment, where
she lived with
her parents and
siblings.**

**Mara lived in the
apartment for
fifteen years.**

interview 09

How long did you live in the apartment for?

I lived there until I was in high-school, so 14, 15 years?

How many people lived in the apartment with you on a regular basis?

It was... sorry, I have a lot of siblings, so the timeline is difficult [laughs]. I think there were five of us in that apartment.

How many bedrooms did the apartment have?

Three.

So did you and your siblings share a room?

Yeah. Me and my sister would sleep together, and my brother had a room of his own. Actually, you know what, I lied to you, we actually had all seven of us at one point - I have other siblings. So yeah, the seventh one came and then we didn't stay very long, we only stayed a year after that. Seven of us, and we all shared rooms - no other way around it.

Did you move so you could have more space?

Not really. What happened was that Regent Park was getting revitalized, so we were forced to leave the apartment. The place we moved to, it was only one more room, so I guess it was bigger.

Were you offered an apartment in the new Regent Park, once it was completed?

Well, how the process worked was that - before you left the apartment, you got a raffle. If you landed say, seventh, you'd be the seventh person allowed to find a new place, so when

they give you a list of places you can leave to, if you're number seven, you beat number ten on that list to get that place. If that makes sense.

Yeah, it does.

So they did the same thing going back, where you draw a number and depending on that number, it's the time or the phase you'll return. We were originally hoping to move back, but the process wasn't working, and they moved us into another crappy neighborhood, so my parents eventually financially got themselves together and were able to buy a house. So we never moved back.

Do you remember what floor the apartment was on?

Yeah, it was on the third floor.

Did you guys have access to a balcony?

No, we did not.

Did you have access to any shared spaces in the building?

A laundry room. That's it - it was always busy.

Growing up, do you remember if you wished for any type of shared spaces?

Yeah, a few. I think because I felt like there was such a premium on space, I always wished I could have more. I can't say what exactly I would have wished for specifically, but I know I always wanted more.

How often did you see your neighbours?

We're Sri Lankan, so we were fortunate enough to have other Sri Lankan families living on our floor. For that reason we connected with those people quite often. But

on a regular basis, with anyone else -- there were what, maybe twelve families on our floor, and only three of us Sri Lankans, so we barely connected with anyone else, and really only connected with them. Or you know, we would leave in the morning to go to school, some people went to the same school so we would walk together, but it wasn't a real connection.

Do you think if there was a shared space, that was just for your floor, that gave you a place outside your unit to spend time with your neighbors, would you have used it?

I think so. I think that there were so many kids growing up - because our school was right outside of the apartment, so we all knew each other in a way, because we all went to the same school, so I think it would have been interesting and I definitely think people would have used it, including my family.

Did you or any of your neighbors decorate the shared spaces at all? Like the corridor, or -

- we definitely didn't decorate it. No one did really.

I know you didn't have access to a balcony, but were you able to identify your apartment from the street when you were walking by?

Yeah, we had a corner apartment so it was really easy to pick it out.

Was that something that was important to you?

It was sometimes important, because my dad when he was coming home, we would try to spot him and wave, but I guess that's the only level of importance it ever had.

What type of outdoor spaces did you have access to around the apartment?

Well, like I said it was close to my school so there was a big field that was available. There were also other playground areas, and an ice rink across the street. That was kind of it.

Did you use these spaces a lot?

I used the ice rink quite a bit, yeah, and also the school grounds.

Would you say they were busy?

Oh, they were always full. Especially in the summer, everyone was out there.

Did you feel like you were missing any specific types of outdoor spaces?

I think a swimming pool was always something...especially because we could never afford swimming lessons, so having that public amenity would be great. But having one close to us would have been great, so we would have had the option to learn. I didn't learn until high school because of this.

Was it clear to you which outdoor spaces belonged to the apartment complex, and which ones didn't? Did this effect how you used the space at all? Or how you felt using the space?

It's kind of funny, because the communities - I don't want to say that they were segregated, but South Regent was definitely more of a Black community, we had all the Somalians and the Ethiopians, where the North had more brown people, like South Asians, so I think in a way, yes. I hate to say it, but the South Asian community has a level of bias they don't like to acknowledge, where they really care where and who their kids play with. So I would say yeah, definitely. We knew what public space belonged to each building.

I know you touched on this a little earlier, but did you feel like there was a strong community within your building?

Yeah, like I said - I think it's because we were newcomers, so people would connect to anyone who spoke their language. I think people definitely spoke English, it wasn't a question of if they could or not, it was a matter of familiarity, of being able to find someone with similar experiences.

Did you feel like you were missing any vital services within your neighborhood?

I think, maybe security. Not in the broad way, but I remember waking up one day and there were police outside our apartment because our neighbors got shot. So we weren't allowed to leave for school that day. We also had someone murdered right in front of our apartment as well. There was a slope leading to the back entrance, which everyone used, and all the blood was rushing down... There were all these little things, you know? And then I was with some friends who had a little more money, and their buildings had security, so I would sometimes wonder, 'well, where's ours'? But it was never a huge thing I would think of day-to-day, but looking back now. It's something I think we needed.

It's funny, what you're able to normalize when you're young -


- yeah, exactly.

Was there anything you liked about living in this building? Was there something you liked the least?

I think a huge issue was the bedbugs. It could never be dealt with. We did everything

we could in our power, we hired someone, we spent our own time. But unless the other apartments did it as well, it just won't work. I also remember the staircase, the fire stair - it was disgusting. People were doing prostitution, we would try to get down but you would have to deal with the needles, that was something that was very odd to have to navigate. Yeah, like you said, when you're a kid you normalize things. Looking back now, the hallways were disgustingly dark and dingy, you never got to see outdoors when you were inside, especially in the hallways. Things like that were always off-putting, but like you said, as a child it's never really a concern.

That's all I can really think of. That's my main view.



**A conversation
with 'Cat' about
her Dixon Park
apartment, where
she lived with her
parents and sister.**

**Cat has lived in
the apartment for
twenty five years.**

interview 10

How long have you lived in the apartment for?

So I've lived here for 25 years, 24 years?

How many people live in the apartment with you?

Four - my parents and my sister and me.

How many bedrooms does the apartment have?

It has three. Growing up, my parents shared a room and my sister and I shared a room, and we used the third room as a playroom. When we got older and needed our own space we were able to split up.

What floor is the apartment on?

Fifteen.

Do you guys have access to a balcony?

Yes.

What type of shared communal spaces do you have access to?

Many, many years ago there was a pool on the first floor, but over the years it became dilapidated. They couldn't afford to keep on a lifeguard or do any maintenance. So now it's just a massive hole in the ground. Eventually they just closed the doors, and now we don't really know what happens behind there. So there's that.

There's a gym. I wouldn't really call it that - that's generous. It's essentially in the basement, and it smells bad, and the walls are rotting a little bit. It's not really conducive to exercising. They have quite a few machines, like actual workout equipment, and people seem to use it pretty frequently, which is

surprising. It's awful down there.

There are a couple of highschoolers who have recently - within the last two years I think - started a community garden in an abandoned lot next to the apartment. My mother joined this year, and it's been great. They grow peppers, and chilies, and flowers. We make all of our summer salads from this garden. It's completely communal, it's not controlled by the management or the building or anything. It's not really provided, we made it for ourselves.

Are there any types of communal spaces you wish you had access to?

More space for activities would be great. Tennis, or basketball... there are some in the neighbourhood but they're not connected to our complex at all. The pool would've been great, if it didn't become a hole.

How many buildings are in your complex?

There's three buildings, it's an apartment neighbourhood. There's a little roundabout and a driveway we all share, with some flowers. Right next door there's a complex that mirrors ours exactly. So six buildings total maybe?

Do you see your neighbours a lot?

Mostly in the elevators. There's this one interesting lady on my floor, who's quite a bit older, and she's really into community building. So she talks to everyone. There's another woman on our floor who's a nurse and she asked us to help her make masks for the hospitals, which we did. We socially distanced and had cake -- it was awesome.

How often do you use your balcony?

Basically never, it's been mostly storage for a long time. But recently, we've put out some chairs and a table and we sit out there, we eat out there, we read out there. We use it a lot more now that we've spruced it up. It's like an extended living room -- we eat fruit out there when the weather's nice, read our books.

Are you able to identify your balcony from the street walking by?

[laughs] Yes. It's because I put a Canadian flag in my window, and I have Christmas lights hanging up.

Is that something that's important to you at all?

I find it important. When we were kids, my sister and I used to stand outside and play a game to see who could spot the unit first. It's nice to have a sense of identity in the grid.

What types of outdoor spaces do you have in and around the apartment?

So there's the garden. The space that is basically just grass and a few picnic tables and flower pots is technically a public space, and in the evenings you can find a lot of people sitting out there chatting. It's really only used after dark. My neighbourhood is mostly Somali, and I'm not sure if it's a cultural thing, but everyone only gathers outside once it's dark. It's kind of sad -- all the kids play on the grass and use it as a public space, but there are all these signs that say "DO NOT PLAY ON GRASS", which is odd, because then what's it for really?

Are there any types of outdoor spaces you wish you had access to?

I mean, this sounds a bit frivolous, but a tennis court would be amazing. Or a basketball court - a lot of the kids here play basketball but have no formal place to go. There used to be a little park for kids but they tore it down -- I know a lot of people miss that. There's a little dog park, but it's so small and fenced in.

Is it clear to you which of these outdoor spaces belong to your apartment complex and which don't? Does this affect how you use these spaces at all?

It's obvious that anything that's fenced in is owned by the building. They always have a ton of signs, like 'KEEP OFF THE GRASS'. I wouldn't necessarily say it affects how we use the space, because everyone just kind of does what they want, regardless of signs.

Do you feel like there's a strong sense of community in your apartment building?

I think there's been a strong sense of community through COVID. Before COVID not so much. I think people would sort of group up based on cultural similarities, but other than that they do not really interact. But now that COVID has brought everyone outside constantly, I notice a lot more people chatting and are generally more friendly than before.

Do you feel connected to your surrounding neighbourhood?

I feel like the towers are their own little neighbourhood, but I think that has a lot to do with the architecture. The way it's designed is that there are two buildings parallel to each other, and then one of the buildings is hexagonal. The buildings are very turned inwards, so it feels like whatever happens

in the complex kind of stays in the complex. It feels a bit like, 'us against them', not in a violent way, but we don't ever really interact.

Do you feel like you're missing any vital services in the neighbourhood?

No, only because we're close to two major intersections - Kipling and Dixon and Kipling and Islington. So we have a lot of little strip malls that have everything we need.

Was there anything you remember particularly liking about living in a post-war tower? Anything that was especially difficult?

I actually quite like the garden - it gives me a renewed appreciation for where I live. I know it's really hard to get a plot in Toronto, and when you do there are waiting lists, and the space you get is so limited. The fact that the garden is community built and community run is amazing. It makes me really like where I live.

Something that is tough about living in such a large building is that it is quite separating. We don't interact with other people very often. It's kind of isolating in that sense. And the fact that all the amenities are there one day gone the next is difficult. In terms of maintenance, it's horrible. Our ceiling is ruined from floods, it's the perfect storm of poor construction, poor building management, and poor maintenance.

**A conversation
with 'El' about
her Wellesley
apartment, where
she lives alone.**

**El has lived in the
apartment for a few
months.**

interview 11

You're in luck! This building is the first high-rise residential building that was made in Canada.

Really? Did you do all this research before moving in?

I found the place on ViewIt, which is apparently the place to find apartments, and I concur. But they had this whole web page for the building, and usually they don't have web pages, but once I checked the location and the price point there was a history page. They have some really old photos from when they first made the building, which is pretty cool, but they also have the original floor plans from the 70s. It's the funniest thing ever, oh my god, they're like olive green and red and yellow.

What I absolutely love about this place - and what I've noticed in other buildings of this age - is they lack hallways, so I don't have to pay for useless garbage space.

How long have you been in the apartment for?

A few months now, yeah.

How many people live with you in the apartment?

Just me! And it's a one bedroom - how luxurious. I have this view, the building is offset from the road by about 10, 15 meters and it has this beautifully immaculate garden in the front that's just a pleasure to walk into. The back has stuff too, it has a barbecue area, a patio. I mean, I do call this place the retirement home because most of the people here are over 60. I'm totally cool with that,

they're quiet, they're good neighbours, so it's perfect.

What floor is your apartment on?

Eighth floor. It's nice, I can see over the top of the tree canopy that's planted out front, and on a good day I can actually see the lake.

Do you have access to any types of shared spaces in the building?

Yes. But obviously more so if we weren't in a pandemic. There's a laundry room, there's also a party room, which when COVID is over I'll be able to use. It's pretty sizable, which is kind of nice. It also has an indoor pool, that's saltwater, and I've been using that and it's really dope. It's kind of sunken in the back, so it has windows out onto the barbecue patios so it gets natural light. There's also a gym and a sauna, an outdoor barbecue patio like I said... a meeting room that you can book, but I'm like 'who the fuck is having meetings here'? But it's there if you want it.

I know the pandemic probably changes how you would typically occupy these spaces, but have you noticed if they're getting used?

Absolutely. The apartment building has like, a residents page online and that's how you book everything. So the pool and the gym just recently opened this week, but you can go in and book times to use them. Apparently in normal times they didn't have this, you could just show up. But the pool's always booked, it's kind of hard to get time for it. The gym is completely slammed all the time. So I would say the spaces are definitely used actively.

Are there any types of spaces you feel like you're missing?

I think the party room is too big - it's huge and enormous and can have fifty or sixty people in it, so it's great for a big party. But these apartments, even though they're quite generous in size can fit maybe a maximum of ten people. It would be interesting if they had the big party room, but also a smaller one for twenty people. It would be nice if they had a smaller room instead of a meeting room, like a casual get-together room. But it's hard to use the meeting room for that because there's a giant board table and a conference phone - it would be a really weird dinner party. Everyone's in power suits, like 'we need to get those numbers up'. [laughs]

How often do you see your neighbours?

I never see them. I think I've seen people in the hall and on my floor hallway twice, but other than that I don't bump into them. I hear them sometimes walk down the hallway with their dogs but other than that, no I don't see people. I see people out in the front, not my floor neighbours but people from the building. I see people in the main lobby all the time, but actual neighbours... I don't know what they look like, I don't know what they sound like, and I'm ok with that.

Have you noticed if your neighbours, or yourself, have decorated any of the shared common spaces?

It's pretty uniform. I would say there's no personal effects anywhere. I mean, the office management has put a little bit of effort into decorating; there's some paintings on the wall,

they're generic paintings but that's something. Honestly I'm just happy it's clean. They do very regular cleanings - if I can smell bleach I'm happy. I mean, the pool could be better... the saunas are pretty gross, but everything's working fine.

How often do you use your balcony?

I eat breakfast out there every day. I eat and watch the sunrise and it makes me feel like today's going to be a good day.

What would you say your balcony's main function is?

Chill. I had a house-warming and it was big enough that we were able to fit about nine of us out there, we grabbed all of my chairs and just sat out there and enjoyed the weather. It's nice - when it gets too hot in my apartment we can go sit out there.

I mean, other than eating breakfast sometimes I'll read my book out there. It's really just for relaxing, honestly. I mean, I see it being abandoned in the winter, which is unfortunate, but I see no other way around it.

How have you decorated the balcony?

The majority of the furniture is hand-me-downs from my family. There's a pretty big table, some chairs. I'm absolutely spoiled with the size of the balcony - it's pretty beautiful. There's parquet flooring because the landlady didn't like the feel of concrete on her feet. It's crazy, the entire apartment has the parquet flooring, but it's covered in carpeting everywhere. If I owned the place I would have ripped it up already.

The view is great also.

Are you able to identify your balcony from

the street?

Yeah, I can. They left me this fake owl that's perched on the balcony to scare away pigeons - it does not work, but I love him anyway - so looking up I can see my little owl, or if I've left my lights on, because I have colored lights I can tell which one is mine. I see some other people there and it looks like they have a whole amazon forest on their porch, and I want that. It would be nice to get that going next summer.

Is that important to you, being able to pick out your unit?

No, not at all. It's really just a fun happenstance. I used to hate the monolithic look of the balconies, and I hated it because of the concrete fins that came right out. I never understood it and I think it looks like garbage, but now I live here I'm like 'this is how every balcony should be built'. This is honestly how everything should be made, because I've also lived in a place where they've had a whole strip of balconies which only have a glass partition in between, and I can hear everything everyone is saying. Every argument they're having, every shitty TV show they're watching... it drives me bonkers. It makes you not want to have your windows open because you hear everything, you smell everything. But with these concrete fins, I've never heard my neighbours and I'm pretty sure they can't hear me.

I know you touched on this a little already, but what types of outdoor space do you have access to around the apartment?

I'm super spoiled. So it's a bar building that goes across the property, and we have a

big driveway with services in the back, and an outdoor patio, and a walkway to the front, but the rest is all beautiful gardens. The building management waters all the plants, they cut the grass, in the winter they do all the shovelling.

Are they just pleasure gardens, or are there any vegetable patches or anything?

It's all aesthetic, but they have little pockets of benches, and you see a lot of old people on them. They get used a lot, even by younger people having their friends over; they just sit on the bench and enjoy the outside. They're well maintained because they're used.

Do you feel like you're missing any specific types of open spaces?

If there was a garden plot I would sign up in a heartbeat. Realistically, even though we do have a large outdoor footprint, we still have 300 units in the building, and it would be completely unfeasible for all of us to have one, and I could see it getting contentious really fast.

A lot of people have dogs, so it would be nice if there could be a type of play zone, or even just a larger patch of grass where dogs and little kids could run around.

The closest park is Allen Gardens, and even though it's aesthetically nice, it's filled with homeless people and a lot of drug users - and I understand that's one of the few places where they don't get bothered - but it still makes the space feel really sketchy as a single woman.

Is it clear to you which spaces belong to your apartment and which don't?

It's pretty much fenced all around, with a

pretty tall wrought iron - well it's not wrought iron but it's the cheap version where it's just black metal - and it's very clearly delineated, and has been made tall enough that people can't hop it. So it's very clear, even to all the neighbours around, that this area is only for the residents.

Is there a gate at all? Is it locked?

No, it's more of a symbolic barrier I would say. It's just a very strongly demarcated threshold.

Does this affect how you use these spaces at all?

Well, I've never really had a problem with occupying space outdoors. But it's nice knowing that it's only the residents in here, and I hate to say this, but it's nice to have a space where I know I won't get hassled.

Do you feel like there's a strong community within your apartment?

Amongst the elderly people, yeah I think so. They seem pretty tight. Everyone here is very welcoming, I've had casual conversations with people waiting in the lobby or even in the elevator, overall everyone's quite pleasant.

There's this program going on right now, where you can sign up if you're elderly or if you're immunocompromised where other residents in the building will run errands and bring you your groceries.

And obviously there are people who choose not to engage at all, but they're still respectful.

Do you feel connected to your surrounding neighbourhood?

I'm right in the middle of a quiet residential neighbourhood and the busy downtown, so it's

nice to be near the hustle and bustle but I don't have to actually engage with it. The street itself is really quiet, but if I walk one street over it's like I'm in it.

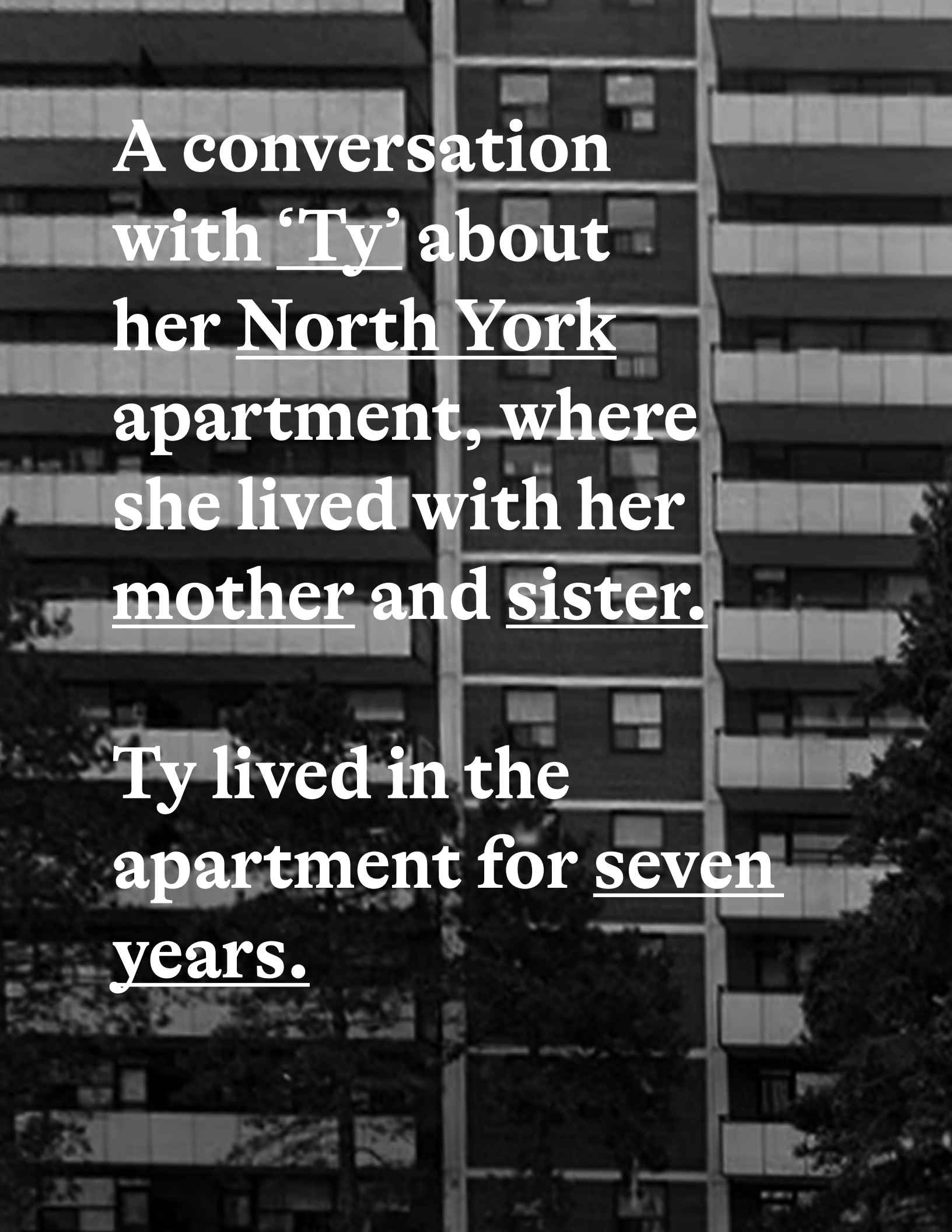
Do you feel like you're missing any vital services?

No, it's downtown so I feel like everything's here.

Is there anything you particularly like about living in a post-war tower? Is there anything you find difficult?

I love the unit layouts in particular. It's very generous compared to what's being offered today - I really like the old construction methods. I like the smaller openings for the windows - there's more privacy.

I mean, the building was built in the 60s, so there's some things that are lacking. The paint needs to be sanded, there's still a breaker box over a fuse box. Building maintenance is slow on the uptake. I hate the carpet.



**A conversation
with 'Ty' about
her North York
apartment, where
she lived with her
mother and sister.**

**Ty lived in the
apartment for seven
years.**

interview 12

How long did you live in the apartment for?

I lived there from 2006 to 2013, so seven years.

How many people were living with you?

There were three of us. It was me, my mom, and my sister.

How many bedrooms did the apartment have?

Two.

Did you guys share a room growing up?

Yeah, we shared a room for four years before she went away to university.

What floor was the apartment on?

Sixth floor.

Did you have access to a balcony?

Yeah, we did have access to a balcony, it faced a green area which was pretty nice.

Did you have access to any shared spaces in the building?

Yeah, there was a laundry room, there was a small gym with maybe five or six fitness machines. There was also a small party room, but I don't know if that was used much, I never saw the inside of it.

Did you ever use these spaces? Or see them get used?

The gym was used quite a bit and the laundry room was used, although we weren't allowed in-unit laundry so the laundry room was used by everyone. The party room was weird, so I'm not sure. Above the parking garage, there was kind of a green space, a little park above the ground that a lot of kids used to

actually like to play there with their families.

Was it landscaped?

It was just grass, just a lawn really. But it was taken care of, and mowed, and above ground level, so I guess it was intentional.

Were you missing any types of shared spaces?

Let me think about this a little bit... I remember on Halloween, or other holidays where you needed space for things, like trick-or-treating, it would have been nice to have a backyard that was a little more private where you would be able to do stuff with your family. I remember it was always a bit frustrating to try and go bike on the street or something, you were kind of on a main road; there wasn't really good access for walking or biking, it was very car-focused.

How often did you see your neighbours?

I would say rarely. The elevators were always busy, but I barely saw anyone on my floor. So it was really just the elevators.

How often did you use your balcony?

Never, I don't think we ever used it.

Did you use it for storage?

Yeah, we used it for bikes and scooters, but it didn't function as a nice eating space or anything like that.

Is there a reason you didn't use it?

It was pretty narrow, it was probably only a metre, a metre and a bit, but it was quite long. It was also not very private, you could see your neighbours and they could see you. The view was directly to a group of townhouses too, so it

wasn't very secluded.

Were you able to identify your balcony from the street?

Yes, because of the window stickers we'd put on it, but in terms of the architecture? Not at all.

Was this something that was important to you?

I thought it was. I remember always trying to find it when walking by with my friends, and it was frustrating when it took a while. When I was a kid, I would look to see if the lights were on, if my mom was home.

You've touched on this a bit already, but what types of outdoor spaces did you have access to in and around the apartment?

So it was two buildings and they each had a parking garage, and above the parking garage was a grass space with a staircase that went up. So I would say those two spaces... other than that it was just a big driveway that connected the two buildings, but that space wasn't really occupied.

Were there any types of outdoor spaces you wish you had access to?

I would mostly just say I wanted a connection to the rest of the neighbourhood. I felt like when I went to hang out with friends, the main streets were six lane streets. So to get to parks in the neighbourhood, you had to disconnect from the residential environment and then go into the neighbourhood. But there were parks closeby, it was more of an access issue.

Was it clear to you which outdoor spaces belonged to your apartment, and which didn't?

Did it affect how you used the space at all?

Yeah actually. I'm also speaking from the perspective of a middle school kid, and I remember not knowing that the spaces above the parking garage were there. I remember with my friends, it was this fun thing when we found out we could go up there and we weren't sure if we were allowed up there or not.

For the most part, the property was fully fenced off, so it was clear what was in the zone of the property and what was not.

Did you feel like there was a strong community within your building?

I would say yes. They would try to do things in the lobby for Christmas with a big Christmas tree, or they would have building-wide barbeques and stuff like that. The management would organize things so I would say yeah, for sure.

Did you go to any of these events?

No [laughs]. But there were other people there, I saw other people there!

They also used to have voting, like for elections, in the lobby of the building.

Did you feel connected to your surrounding neighbourhood?

So it was a four-sided property, two sides were the big, big streets and the other two sides were totally fenced off, even though there was only a residential neighbourhood on the other side. So sometimes it felt like a bit of an ordeal to leave.

Did you feel like you were missing any vital services in the neighborhood?

No, not really.

Was there anything you particularly liked

about living in this type of building? What did you feel were the drawbacks?

Let me think... At one point I had some friends on different floors in the building and I thought that was this cool, fun thing that they were only ten or so floors above me, like a little vertical community where you can run into people in the elevator, and you can play games in the hallway even though that wasn't really allowed. It was kind of exciting.

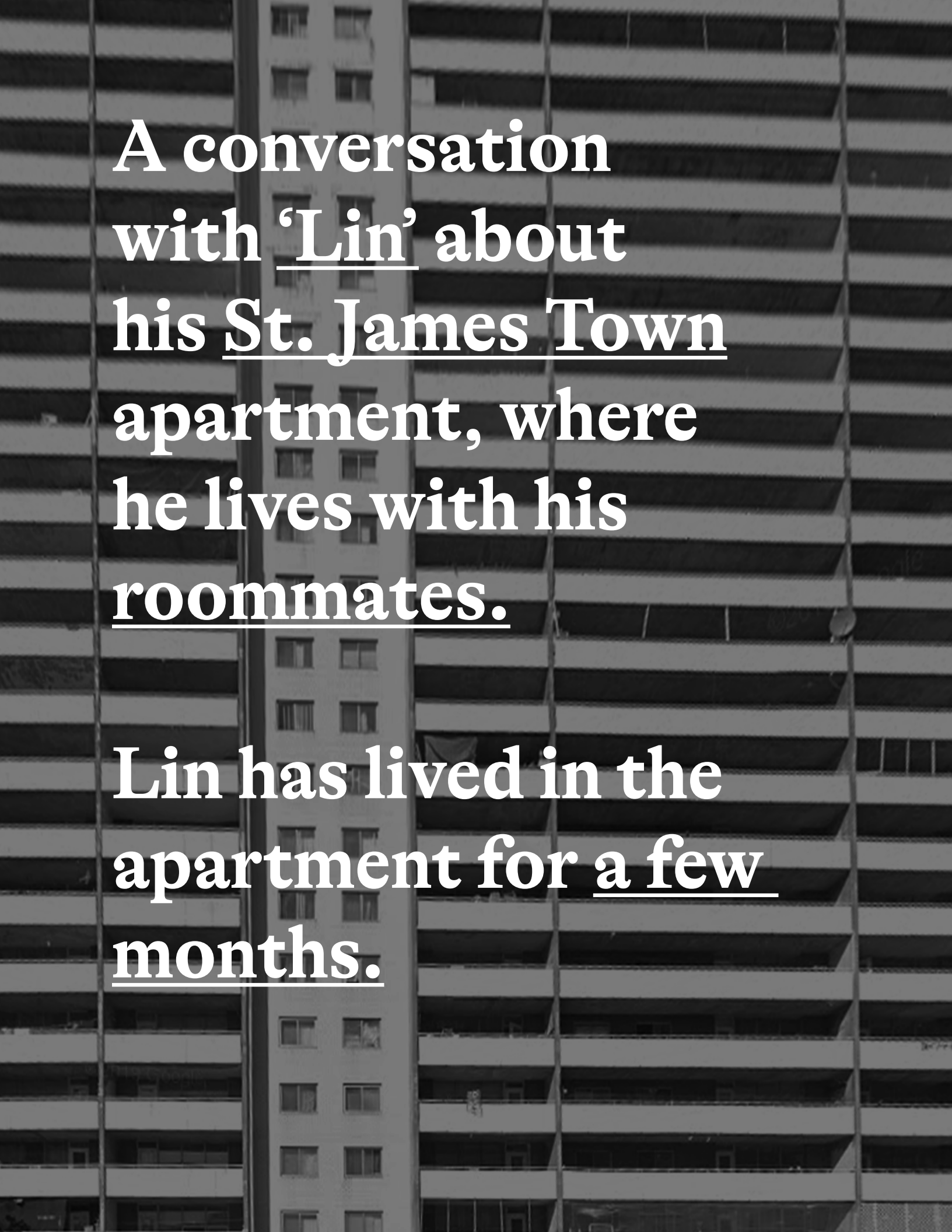
I didn't like how the post-war towers have a very negative connotation in the neighbourhoods. I didn't like that there was this perception of - well, a lot of new-ish immigrants lived there, and there was this connotation that because the people that live there are renting, they're not part of the neighbourhood. Really, I remember once I got a comment from a friend whose parent was like 'oh, why are you friends with someone who lives in that building?', like it was this confusing thing for a wealthy neighbourhood to have these buildings in them.

I also didn't like the idea of living above ground, high up, but that's just a personal thing.

It was nice having access to the gym, especially in the winter.

There was a lot of construction while I was living there, so it was really loud all the time.

That's it.



**A conversation
with ‘Lin’ about
his St. James Town
apartment, where
he lives with his
roommates.**

**Lin has lived in the
apartment for a few
months.**

interview 13

So, how long have you lived in the apartment?

About four months.

How many people live in the apartment with you?

On a regular basis, there are maybe... four people? That's max.

And how many legal bedrooms does the apartment have?

I have my own room, and then the other room had three to a room sometimes -- so two bedrooms.

What floor are you on?

The 17th.

Do you have access to a balcony?

Yes, but it's almost exclusively bike storage at this point.

Does the building have any shared spaces that you use?

There's a laundry room, the lobby, if you can even call it that... I don't know what else...

Are there any types of communal spaces you wish you had access to?

It's tough to say...maybe a gym? Honestly, in terms of walking, and observing other people, I've always felt like an outlier, so I'm not sure if I'd use a communal gathering space per se.

How often do you see your neighbours?

Not at all, not very often.

Do you think you would like a space outside of your apartment where you'd be able to interact with your neighbours?

An actual space? No. But I do wish I ran

into people more often, just in passing. I don't think I'd hang out in a space, but something that could encourage more incidental meetings would be nice. And I know part of that is my responsibility as well, that I need to talk to people. But I think more incidental meetings would be good, but an actual space to hang out in? I don't know if I'd use it.

Do you or your neighbours personalize the common spaces at all? Like the corridors, or the lobby?

Not that I can think of.

I know we've already touched on this a bit, but how often do you use your balcony?

Never. Never, it's just bike storage.

Is there a reason you don't like to occupy it, or -

I mean, it's been cold for a while so it's not great to sit on right now. Maybe I'm overthinking things, but it's also a bit cyclical. There's a tradition of Ryerson students living here, and someone left a bike out there ages ago and it started rusting, and then someone put another bike up against that, so it just became a space for the storage of bikes and unwanted furniture. I mean, there are outdoor chairs and a small table, but it's just kind of instituted itself as a place that isn't for sitting. It's been designated bike storage -- it was bike storage long before I moved in, and it'll be bike storage long after I move out.

Are you able to see your bikes from the street? Can you identify your balcony?

I can count floors, but I don't know if I can

actually just pick it out.

Is being able to identify your balcony, or your unit, something that's important to you at all?

I think it's important but not in terms of identity. For me, it's not about proclaiming to everyone else 'I live here', it's more for myself and being able to recognize how far above the street I live. It contextualizes your 'house' in a way -- it's more of an internal, introspective thing.

What type of outdoor spaces do you have access to around the apartment?

There's a small park behind the building, a basketball court that I never use, there's also a school - this old historic redwood school in the middle of St. Jamestown, which is very strange and very interesting, and adds a lot of texture to the neighbourhood. Of course there's a playground... I mean, as I mentioned I'm not a huge fan of just like, hanging out, but there's a promenade down in front. It's not officially programmed, but it has become a type of public space, people use it as a space of appearance. But I mostly just use it as a passing through space, I don't hang out there.

There's also a Food Basics on the corner, built into the podium of another building, that has an arcade thing out in front of it, with burnt bikes locked to the columns, and on the other side there's a group of trees where people often lay out rugs and sell - I wouldn't call it black market goods - but shoes, and DVDs, and things like that. It was like an informal market, which of course draws a crowd of people. People would sit under the trees -- I'm trying to

be nice, I know there's a specific word that isn't 'hippie market' but it's not in my head at the moment...

Are there any types of outdoor spaces you wish you had access to?

Not really... I don't think so. Maybe a place to sit? Or more freedom to walk? I know that sounds simple, but as I said, when I do go outside I enjoy - again, maybe this is too easy - but walking outside of St. Jamestown feels very much like crossing a threshold. I understand that the neighbourhood is its own little thing, but to be able to walk outside of my apartment, into the city, and come back and not have to traverse those moments - the chainlink, the thresholds, the changes - it could be nice? It's so contained, right now. So long story short, no, I don't wish for any other types of outdoor spaces or amenities.

Circling back - so it's clear to you which outdoor spaces belong to the building and which are part of the greater neighbourhood?

Yeah, most outdoor space is fenced off, so if you look at the plane of St. Jamestown it's not really one homogenous field, it's broken up by ownerships of specific towers, most of which are demarcated by fences, so it's very explicit which tower, say, the basketball court belongs to.

Does this affect how you use these spaces?

I think the promenade is the one space that really feels public, it's the only space that you can't tell who owns it.

Do you feel connected to your surrounding neighbourhood?

It definitely feels like it's own micro-

neighbourhood. There's a real noticeable socio-economic change when you leave the perimeter, so it does feel quite disconnected from the rest of the neighbourhood.

Are there any vital services in the neighbourhood that you feel like you're missing?

No, not really. There's a new library over on Wellesley and Sherbourne that's great, but I don't use it often...

Is there anything you particularly like about living in a post-war tower? Is there anything you find particularly challenging?

The ventilation is terrible - the ventilation in the apartments is absolutely awful, the washroom is always super humid and the kitchen is impossible to ventilate.

...I don't know if this is fair to bring up, but I think it speaks to two things - it speaks to the reality of living in the tower, and also my own ignorance... One morning I woke up - my room is on the end of the floor with a window looking out onto another building, and I never used to sleep with my blinds closed, so I noticed there was some sort of commotion outside, on a neighbouring balcony. There were firemen trying to help because sometime in the night a man had hung himself off the balcony. At the time, I don't know if it struck me properly, how this is often the reality of living in these types of spaces... Instead of addressing the root causes of these types of horrors, the building just installed netting on a lot of the balconies that can't be removed, which is not really a solution.



**A conversation
with Hal about
their Parkdale
apartment, where
they lives with thier
roommate.**

**Hal has lived in the
apartment for four
years.**

interview 14

How long have you lived in the apartment for?

I've lived here for four years.

How many people live with you on a regular basis?

One roommate.

How many legal bedrooms does the apartment have?

Just two.

What floor are you on? Do you have access to a balcony?

Tenth, and yes.

Are there any shared spaces in the building you have access to?

There is a laundry room.

Are there any types of shared spaces you wish you had access to in the building.

Yeah, for sure. There's actually - I don't consider this a shared space because they won't give us access to it, but they just renovated one apartment into what they're calling a 'community hub', but no one can book it. It's only landlord-run events in there, so it's almost like their own little lounge. I wish we had an area that we could book. I mean, it has a kitchen and everything, it has the potential to be really cool.

Actually, I personally wish - I mean, I'm a communist - I would love if there was a cafeteria, or a shared cooking area that people could use.

So the community hub - in heavy quotations - it has a fully equipped kitchen but they won't let any tenants access it.

It's essentially just an apartment that they've painted to look nice. So it has a small apartment kitchen, and I assume it's equipped. You're only allowed in there if you're part of some program they're running. They're doing a book club, but the entry rules are perverse... I don't know, it's really, really stupid. They're using COVID to keep us out of there, but the 'book club' is still running. It's fine for them to have an event that endangers our lives, but we're not allowed to use what's supposed to be a community space.

How often do you see your neighbours?

Well personally, I see my neighbours a lot because I'm an organizer here in the building. I seek people out. But I would say most people know who their immediate neighbours are, on their floor at least. A little bit, not a lot.

I think it depends. There are a lot of different communities in my building, it's very diverse in terms of people who live here. So I would say within the separate communities, they definitely see their neighbors a lot. The Tibetans all hang out, and the Hungarians all hang out.

When you say you're an organizer, what exactly does that mean?

There's a lot of issues in the building, so there's a growing group of us here in the building that are pushing back against what the landlords are doing to our building, and to us. I wouldn't call myself a leader, but I'm definitely an instigator [laughs]. Since April we've been organizing to demand rent relief

during COVID. We also do things like making sure the heat is turned on when it's supposed to be. The heat was supposed to be turned on October 15th, and it didn't get turned on for five days. So we organized a group call to the office. We plan office visits.

Was there any infrastructure **in place when you moved in that helped you start advocating, or -**

- there has been organizing in this building before, but I haven't really been in contact with anyone who has been a part of it. So I live in Parkdale, and there's a group called Parkdale Organize that basically attempt to facilitate organizing within Parkdale. They were in the news in 2017 because they helped organize a rent strike that was in response to an above-guideline rent increase by their landlord Metcalf. They organized a rent-strike, with the help of Parkdale Organize and they won, the AGRI was dropped. So after hearing about that in the neighbourhood I reached out to them. About two years ago, they helped us organize a repair forum. Basically our current landlord bought the building two years ago but there were a whole bunch of issues because they didn't know how to run this building that's really old and has been neglected for a long time. So there was this flood and there were a ton of issues and they were completely ignoring work orders. So we collected work order forms and hand-delivered them all to their office all together, as a large group.

It's not like a tenant association, we don't really have a structure.

How often do you guys use your balcony?

I personally use the balcony every day, because I garden.

What would you say it's main function is - garden?

Production... I'm growing weed. Production and just like, hanging out. Our balcony faces inwards to a big courtyard. There's basically two buildings that face each other, so it's also useful for, like, knowing what's going on. Snooping [laughs].

Have you furnished the balcony with furniture or anything else?

There's no power out there, but I do have lights set up that I string inside in the summer.

Are you able to pick out your balcony easily from the street?

I can see it because I have a banner that says 'KEEP YOUR RENT', so it's pretty easily identifiable.

Is that something that's important to you at all?

Hmm... yeah, I think it's more important that I can see my building, and less my personal balcony. Maybe no, not really actually. It's cool if I'm talking to my neighbor and if I'm trying to make a connection with someone I haven't met yet through organizing, I can say 'I live here, that's my balcony' and being able to point at it is actually really helpful. It cements for people that I'm really, truly a neighbour and not some outside activist.

What types of outdoor spaces do you have access to in and around the apartment?

The courtyard... that's basically it. There is a small, janky playground. It's used, kids play on it.

Do you feel like you're missing any types of outdoor spaces, or is there anything you would like to have access to?

I would love a community garden.

Is it clear to you which existing outdoor spaces belong to the apartment building and which don't?

Yes. I don't know if you've ever seen my building, but it's pretty unique. It's the only high-rise in this little area -- most of the high-rises are over on Jameson. So we're the only high-rise that is north of Queen, but we're also bordered by the train tracks, so there's an insular feeling to the property, and there's a fence along all of the one side, and the other side is bordered by an empty lot. It's kind of like a complex, it's own thing. In the middle there's a fountain, it's very art-deco -- it went in in '65 I think? So mid-century modern?

Does this sense of property effect how you use and occupy these spaces?

Yeah, totally. There's a whole section on the north side of the building that's fenced off, it has signs that say you're not allowed in there, but it's just a grassy, treed area you're not allowed in. Ridiculous.

We have a back entrance that's locked, but residents always prop it open and it opens into the garbage area and everything is blocked off - you have to climb over the fence to get around. It's a much more convenient entrance, spatially, but it's so needlessly difficult to access. It's basically a short-cut. It's almost 10 minutes faster to go out the back door then to go out the front door - it lets you cut across the train tracks.

Do you feel like your building would use a community gathering space?

Yeah, for sure. I think how it would be used would depend a lot on how it was maintained, and who maintained it. If it was freely accessible, I think it would be used a lot. But if you had to book it, or had to sign-in, or it was controlled by the landlord, I think people would be more skeptical of it. It has to be designed and run by tenants. That's why the Hub is stupid. It's not for us and it's not by us.

They also have two garden plots that they call a 'community garden', but they never did any soil testing for, because if they had, they would never put them in-ground! So like, they actually have illegal gardens that are growing inedible food. And they're being maintained by staff members, they aren't maintained or run by tenants, and yet they still call it a 'community garden'.

So what happens to the harvest?

So last year, they did share the harvest, but let me reiterate: there should not be in-ground gardens. They need to be raised beds, as per Toronto and Ontario health regulations. They are literally giving people tainted food. There used to be a rubber factory here, and this building was constructed less than two years after the rubber factory was torn down. You can't grow things here, they shouldn't be growing things here.

This year, there's no harvest because they just didn't take care of the gardens. I can see them from my balcony and I pass them every day, and they're barren, they're not tended to. Now we don't even get to participate in this

thing they said was supposedly for us, because it was never for us, not really. It was a PR stunt.

Have there been any discussion about opening it up?

I don't know, it's not clear to me, and in all honestly I'm not jumping at the chance to eat rubber-factory vegetables. Our landlord is Timbercreek and they're very slick, they're very into PR. They put up a mural. The first year, they did create this group called the 'Lodge Team' or something. It was mostly young people in the building, and I'm told they were paid, but I'm not sure how much. They had a tshirt and they were doing clean-up around the building, but as far as I know they didn't repeat it this year. And they were somehow involved in the caring of the garden, but it wasn't like 'oh tenants, come be involved'. They hired teens from the building to be glorified maintenance workers. It was backwards - they paid them nothing for labour and then also made them pay to live there... that's not investment.

Do you feel like there's a strong community within the building?

Yeah, I think there are micro-communities for sure. I mean, we're trying to build it with the organizing but it's slow. It's a huge building - there are thousands of people living here. I see people hanging out all the time. And now when I meet people and we get talking, we realize we have all these people and neighbors in common, which is great. I would say more so than a lot of other spaces, partly because we have the courtyard space, it allows us to gather. But also because the building is so

poor, people need to lean on their communities in the way that the middle-class and the wealthy don't need to do.

People babysit for each other, deliver food to the elderly... we help each other.

Do you feel connected to the surrounding neighbourhood?

I feel connected to Parkdale, as a whole, but not so much to the immediate surrounding neighbourhood.... It's all blue-voters. They have conservative signs on their lawn, maybe liberal, as if that's any better, and they have a lot of distain for the building and for the people who live in the building. But I do feel connected to the other high-rises in Parkdale. There's one a few blocks over that has a very similar makeup to us, as well as the high-rises on Jameson.

The building in general also has a very bad rep on the news, which makes things difficult. We're infamous. I wouldn't say there's open hostility, but you see a lot of signs on peoples lawns, policing how we occupy space. 'No loitering, no littering, don't let your dog pee here, don't steal packages'. There's a small community garden with planters in the park behind our building, and no one in our building has every been able to get a plot. It's all homeowners that already have gardens anyway.

Are there any inter-building social events, or?

There's not a lot, especially during COVID. Not formal events. There is a tenant committee that sometimes runs things. This summer, I along with some other tenants

organized a free food giveaway. We did that here and that was cool. There's not even a community notice board to put anything up on. There's a formal bulletin board, but you need the offices permission to put anything up...

Do you feel like you're missing any vital services within your neighbourhood?

Not really, we're pretty lucky.

Is there anything you particularly like about living in this type of building? What are the major points of tension for you?

I like living collectively. I think it makes sense for people to live in apartments. It's the right price for me. I wish I had access to more outdoor space, to more community space. I wish there were places for me to hang out with other people that wasn't my apartment, especially during COVID. I really wish there was more, in general, public spaces.

The worst part of living in this building is that it's owned by a predatory landlord that wants to extract as much wealth and as much profit from poor people who live in the apartments. That's the greatest tension here at the building. Rent is not super-high because we've all been living here a long time, but rent isn't cheap either, and they're trying to raise our rent as much as possible. In my building, there's 723 units. There are over 200 empty units since our new landlord took over. There were about 20 empty units and now it's up to 200. A good portion of those people have been evicted. That's the greatest tension, that our landlord is actively evicting people and pushing people out. It's unsafe to have so many empty units. There are more mice and

cockroaches now. Some of the empty units are full of junk, with the balconies full of debris. It's awful.

They're not even renting them out yet because in their eyes, the building's not ready. But when they do rent them out, it's going to be a fundamentally different demographic, a wealthier demographic, and it's going to fundamentally change the building and the community, and displace a ton of people. They're trying to change who gets to live in Parkdale.

They're starting to renovate the units that are empty. It's been seven months already and it's not stopping until 2021, but they're doing major loud renovations to the parking garage. I'm not sure if you know this, but a parking garage renovation makes you eligible to request an above-guideline rent increase.



**A conversation
with 'Lis' about
her Westmount
apartment, where
she lived with her
parents, siblings,
and brother-in-law.**

**Lis lived in the
apartment for
twelve years.**

interview 15

How long did you live in the apartment for?

It would have been from 2001 to 2013... so how many years is that? 12? From the time I was five years old until I was finishing high-school. It was the first place we lived after immigrating from South America - we lived in Medellín, Columbia, but then moved into that apartment in 2001.

We lived in two different units in the building at different times. At first we moved into a two bedroom unit where there were four of us, and then subsequently moved into a three bedroom unit where there were six of us.

So for the most part, did you and your siblings share a room?

Yeah, when we lived in the two bedroom apartment it was just my brother and me sharing a room. I have an older sister, who's quite a bit older, by about 20 years, so by the time she immigrated we had moved into the three bedroom unit. So my parents shared a room, my sister and her husband shared a room, and then my brother and I shared a room - and it was like that for the whole time we lived there.

What floor was the apartment on?

The second unit was on the fifteenth floor, which I think was the first highest floor in the building... I think it went up to seventeen. I remember it being really high, especially as a little kid, looking out over the balcony railing. I think the two-bedroom was on the fifth floor?

Did you have access to any communal

spaces in the building?

Yeah, there was a swimming pool I went to quite a bit. I was never allowed to go alone, but there was a swimming pool and a shared laundry room - we always did laundry downstairs.

Were these spaces used frequently, by either your family or other people in the building?

A lot of people used them, you would always encounter people in the laundry room but the pool as well. There were a lot of other young children and seniors in the pool.

Was the pool just shared between tenants in the building, or was it open to the larger community?

No, just with tenants in the building. You actually accessed the pool by the basement, you had to go all the way down and cut through the basement to get to the changerooms, and then you kind of popped up to the ground floor again. It was an indoor pool, and it looked onto the outside, but there was no way of accessing it from outside the building.

Are there any types of communal spaces you wish you had access to?

Well, we were new immigrants so I think my parents were... very cautious. About safety, about letting me out on my own, just because they weren't familiar with the environment. So I wish there was more of an enclosed outdoor amenity space where we could play, as opposed to the massive public park we had in front of

the building. I was never allowed to venture that far alone.

I think another thing is, as a family we had a big community so we always hosted - my parents liked to entertain people, but we didn't have the space. We had a tiny barbeque that would go on the balcony, and so I think my parents would have appreciated some type of entertainment space. You know how condominiums have outdoor barbecues and nice seating for larger gatherings?

Was that community within your building, or was it more family friends living elsewhere -

- it's funny, because the south side of the street was all post-war towers, and the north side was all single-family residential - the typical 1960s detached bungalow. So we had a bunch of community in the neighbourhood, but we also had one family that lived on the third floor who were also Columbian that we were very close to. I think there were actually two Columbian families we were close to in the building. But also in parallel buildings, we would have a community. I remember visiting other peoples buildings, other people's apartments all the time.

Did you meet those families through the tower neighbourhood, or did you know them before you moved in?

I think a little of both actually. The reason we moved to the building was because through the type of immigration grapevine, my mother somehow got connected with this other Columbian woman who lived in one of the post-war towers in the neighbourhood - not the one we ended up living in, but one

nearby. She recommended we rent a unit in the building because it was affordable, and there was kind of an informal network already in place. She could vouch for us. And so subsequently, after we moved, people got in contact with my mother about the immigration process and they started moving to the neighbourhood. I think there were at least three or four other families that my mom helped bring over. When they arrived, she would help buy them mattresses, bring them a full load of groceries, pick them up from the airport. So to answer your question - both. I think we came here because there were people in adjacent buildings who helped us, but then more people came because we were here.

So when you would spend time with these families -- would it be in their apartment? Was there any type of neutral third space you could spend time in as a group?

So, we would all go to the pool a lot. One of the families that lived in our building had a daughter who was only a year younger than me, so we would always play in the pool together. One of the other buildings we frequented had an outdoor pool, so we would kind of float between buildings - one in the summer and one in the winter and sort of, trade amenities when appropriate. Colombians love the sunshine.

I don't remember there being any rec rooms or things like that that we used.

Did you see your other neighbours frequently?

Yeah, but we didn't necessarily engage with them as much. I have memories of the

superintendent, and vague recollections of other tenants, especially when I would come home from school and see people in the stairwells, or the elevator shaft. There was an elementary school at the top of the street so there were quite a few kids who lived in the building and also attended the school, who were all on the same schedule.

Did people ever decorate any of the common spaces - like the hallways or the lobby?

It was pretty utilitarian. People sometimes discarded stuff they shouldn't discard in the hallways. There was a lot of junk like broken light bulbs or, when people didn't want light fixtures anymore they would just leave them in the hallway so other people could take them.

Just outside their doors, or -

- they would leave them in front of the elevators on their floor. I remember sometimes stepping out of the elevator and seeing basically piles of junk, until the superintendent would come and clear it away.

You mentioned having access to a balcony - how often did you guys use it?

Not that much actually - I think I was really freaked out by the height, especially in the second unit we lived in. From my recollection it wasn't very habitable. We used it a lot to cook, we had a tiny charcoal grill and we would barbeque out there, during the summer and into fall, but I don't remember my parents every putting chairs out there and just lounging.

What do you mean by 'uninhabitable'?

I remember the floor being very rough,

unfinished concrete. Part of it was the height too. Part of it might have been the orientation too. We really only had the barbecue out there. Other units had Christmas lights and stuff, but we certainly didn't decorate ours. It wasn't really a space we fully embraced.

Were you able to identify your balcony from the street?

I think because we were so high up and faced the back it was pretty rare that I would actually see our unit -- maybe when I was throwing out trash with my dad or something. But I do remember looking up and seeing people's lights, or the stickers they had on their windows.

Do you think you would have rather had a larger interior space, instead of access to a balcony?

So the way the apartment was set up, was that the door to the balcony was just a single, small door with a metal screen, glass window, and a metal frame. It really didn't feel connected to the indoor space at all, it didn't feel like part of the apartment. I think we would have used it more if it flowed better, if it was less awkward. I remember the living room actually being quite generous, so I don't know if I would necessarily want to extend it. But it would have been nice if the balcony was better connected.

What type of outdoor spaces did you have access to around the apartment?

There were two big parks, one of which had a giant soccer field with a play space next to it. There was also an outdoor public pool that had a really nice park with a bunch of tennis

courts - my brother used to take me there all the time to play tennis and go to the pool. There was also the Humber Trail, which had a trailhead pretty close to the apartment, just down at the end of the road. On weekends I would ride my bike with my dad - the entrance to the trail wasn't super obvious but there were a lot of neighbourhood people around walking, or riding bikes.

Were there any outdoor amenities directly related to your building?

No, it was all above-ground parking. Some other buildings on the street had little parks or playgrounds, but we just had a sea of above-ground parking, and an entrance to a below-ground parking garage. There was also a giant empty lot that our property connected to where we used to go tobogganing in the winter. It was a really big hole in the ground, so it was perfect for tobogganing.

Was it clear to you, living in this network of post-war towers, what was your tower's property and what wasn't? Did this affect how you used the spaces?

Absolutely. I mean, every building had a driveway so it felt very much like you were entering a different place, and they were all completely fenced off. There was a massive outdoor parking lot that backed onto the park, and for no good reason there was a big chain link fence that just separated one empty surface from another. So to get to the park, you had to really walk around this long fence, really go out of your way, leave the property and then walk back up the street to the park. It was all super demarcated -- there was no

ambiguity. Other towers had this too - the neighbouring apartment had this big cement wall that separated it from the park, you had to learn to completely re-navigate the grounds based on the fences.

It really felt like a threshold you couldn't cross. Maybe it was a cultural bias, the way I perceived 'private property' but they felt like lines you really couldn't overstep.

Were there any types of specific outdoor spaces you felt like you were missing?

I think as far as outdoor spaces go, I have a hard time imagining what the possibilities could be. Maybe more outdoor gathering spaces, but also spaces where we could cook outside.

Did you feel connected to the surrounding community, or did each tower kind of feel like a community unto itself?

To say that each tower felt like a community wouldn't be accurate. I mean, there were people within the towers we were connected with, but there are also hundreds of other units. Safety was always a big issue, so was privacy. Interacting with people in the buildings, overcoming things like language barriers and cultural differences... it was tough. So I wouldn't say it felt like a community.

I felt more of a sense of community with the neighbourhood than within the building. I mean, I wasn't allowed to go in the stairwells by myself, until I was much older, I wasn't allowed in the elevators by myself. Our building was one of the rougher buildings on the street, and I remember a lot of characters

lingering around, especially in enclosed spaces like that. There were police called to the building a lot - it's not like we'd get woken up in the middle of the night, but they were there.

There was a sense of safety within the unit, but outside was a different story. My parents were cautious. Even when I was older and had more independence, I wouldn't want to go up the stairwells alone.

Was there anything you remember particularly liking about living in a post-war tower? Anything that was especially difficult?

I loved the pool -- I know I've mentioned it a lot. I think having access to that, and having friends in the building I could use it with was great. It took a lot of pressure off of my parents too, knowing that another family could supervise me for the afternoon.

Looking back, I have a lot of respect for my family for dealing with the initial culture shock. When we first moved to Canada, we lived in a house off of Spadina for three weeks while we got oriented. My brother and I thought all of Toronto was going to be like Chinatown, but we moved from there to this super-diverse apartment building. My brother was twelve or thirteen at the time, and he was very vulnerable in many ways. I think making a move that drastic at such a young age is really difficult, it's really taxing mentally. At first it was hard to digest, just because everything was so new and different. I didn't know what a Muslim woman looked like - I'd never met one, so seeing women in headscarves and Niqabs was confusing at first. I remember one of the first days we moved in, we saw a woman who

was praying by the elevator - she got stuck waiting and had to kneel and pray -- and I had no idea what was happening. In retrospect, I have a lot of reverence and respect for these experiences because they were very valuable and very formative - I think they make me very respectful of other people. But the initial shock was difficult, for the entire family.

Communicating with people was very hard as well, because there were a lot of immigrants in the building and a lot of different languages. Sometimes it felt like there were these big miscommunications between families that were blown out of proportion due to the language barrier - it was much harder to resolve squabbles.