

Condoland: The Planning, Design, and Development of Toronto's Cityplace by James T. White and John Punter

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Book Review

James T. White and John Punter

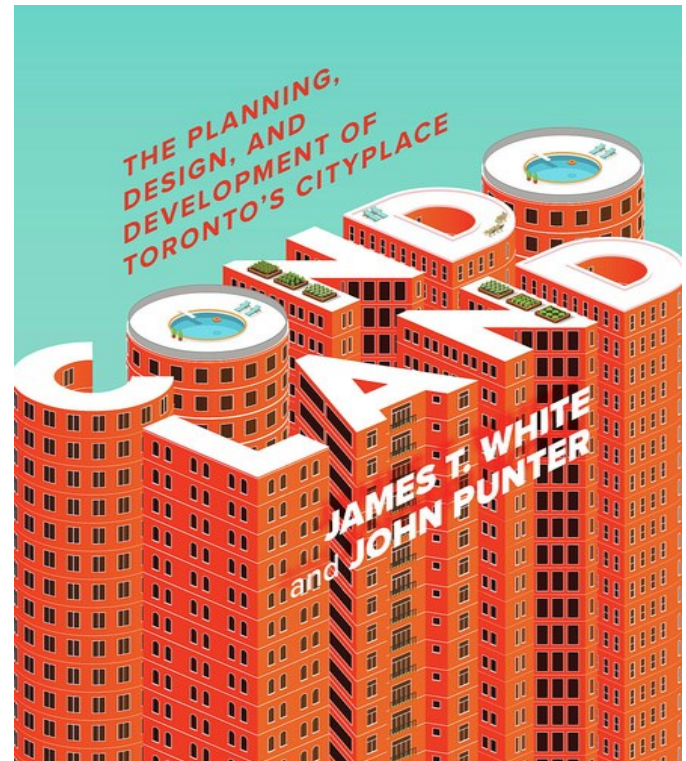
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Toronto's downtown waterfront is a curious place. In the year 2000, a visitor atop the CN tower, the megacity's most iconic landmark, would have peered over infrastructural abandonment. Twenty years later, this area has given rise to what many consider to be the epitome of Canada's contemporary housing form. CityPlace, a vast condominium development-turned-neighbourhood, is the subject and study site of the aptly named *Condoland*, an exhaustive and critical dive into the planning, design and development challenges of vertical urbanization in the 21st century. James T. White and John Punter, both experienced, UK-based urban design scholars, draw on extensive archival material, interviews with key actors, and on-site observations to produce a work that blends political economy scholarship and design critique. The authors explore the mechanisms of "how market-friendly planning and design policy directly shape the form of cities" (p.13), and how it can unravel the masterplans of tried-and-tested, successful neighbourhood templates. While the book touches on the 'socio-spatial consequences' of these new housing typologies and their impact on residents' quality of life, those seeking a detailed exploration of this will not find it within these pages.

The book is divided into two parts, which conveniently separate Toronto's planning mechanisms, history, and a broader review of condo housing literature in the first, from the much more localized timelines and observation-based design assessments in the second. This second part also integrates enlightening discussions on policy mobility between different urban governance contexts, planning for affordable housing and issues surrounding the timing of project deliverables.



After an enthralling introduction that paints a clear overview of the book, the authors begin chapter 1 by explaining the foundations of planning in English Canada, which they outline as a "hybrid of regulatory and [mostly] discretionary practices" (p. 27). They describe how development is guided, facilitated even, by a flexible mix of practices that see zoning as a bargaining tool rather than outright regulation. This chapter also presents a boilerplate of Toronto's urban development negotiation and approval procedures which serve as a useful reference. Chapter 2 provides a more historical overview of Toronto's planning movements and ideologies between the 1960s and 1990s, the most notable of which prioritized mid-rise, human-scale urban densities, and which were key to several urban

renewal and revitalization-focused public-private partnerships such as the St Lawrence district and Regent Park. White and Punter elucidate how these lay the groundwork for the initial plans of the railway lands revitalization, and they invoke these projects repeatedly going forward to contrast their urban design and architectural successes with what they argue to be CityPlace's failures. The history continues in chapter 3, which describes the decades since Toronto's 1998 amalgamation with surrounding suburbs, during which "an increasingly discretionary culture of land use decision-making and design governance" set in (p.83) amid increased provincial power and densification directives along with an intensifying privatization and financialization of Toronto housing. Chapter 4 closes the first part of the book by presenting readers with a more general literature review of relevant and timely scholarly work addressing 'vertical urbanization' and particularly 'condo-ism', or the social realities that can develop around this relatively new housing type. Some geodemographic factors are also addressed, though this discussion does not go deep into issues of gentrification and displacement. Indeed, as the authors clarify, their intention is not to fully explore these more social angles, yet condo-ism and its implications continue to colour their writing throughout: "The resilience of Toronto's vertical urbanization and the future of new neighbourhoods like the CityPlace megaproject, when viewed through the lens of condo-ism, look bleak" (p.110). This commentary takes on more meaning in part two, which presents the CityPlace saga in detail.

Construction of the CityPlace neighbourhood spans over two decades, which chapters 5 to 10 recount meticulously, block by block, by juxtaposing narrated event sequences of the planning process in a neat and unobtrusive writing style along with critical descriptions of the buildings and public spaces in between. Indeed, their voices are more manifest in these design assessment walkthroughs, which are



Figure 1. Infrastructural abandonment before the development in CityPlace. A view looking east across the western Railway Lands to the SkyDome under construction in the late 1980s. Toronto Archives, fonds 200, series 1465, file 751, item 9 (below) . Used with permission of publisher UBC Press.

accompanied by conveniently captioned street-level photographs that give life and provide crucial aids to thick and sometimes even plodding descriptions of architectural structures and street frontages. White and Punter describe in each chapter how developers and planners iteratively improved their designs and products over many years, making CityPlace a testing ground of sorts for how to accommodate vertical urbanization in Toronto. Yet, while each chapter moves through a different set of these buildings in a linear fashion, each also makes a distinct thematic contribution.

Entering this second part, chapter 5 presents another historical overview, this time about planning within CityPlace (though there are many overlaps with chapters 2 and 3). The walkthrough begins in chapter 6 through the story of how "Vancouverism" failed to reproduce itself in Toronto as illustrated by the planning and architectural shortcomings of the first several condo towers. As such, it puts forward a noteworthy example of how policy mobility can falter between different local 'design governance' regimes. Chapter 7 then describes how planners and developers changed course to better adapt Vancouverism to the Toronto context by prototyping



Figure 2. Poorly resolved “Vancouverism” tower-podium typology on Block 25 at CityPlace. A view of N1/N2 tower (left) and the short row of townhouses alongside. The townhouses have an awkward relationship with the N1/N2 tower that make the townhouses seem like a diminutive after-thought rather than part of a coherent urban composition. This view is now obscured by Canoe Landing Campus, developed in the late 2010s before completion of the campus. Photography by James T. White (2013). Used with permission.

a “made in Toronto” condominium megastructure (p. 184). Somewhat tangentially, chapter 8 is a lesson in how affordable housing and public amenities failed to keep pace with creeping height and density concessions made to property developers: while the number of residential units witnessed a “173 percent increase” (p. 207) since the original 1994 plan, the number of affordable units saw a 50 percent reduction. The amount of parkland was also not adjusted to such levels of residential intensification, nor was the street grid. Ultimately, readers are brought to understand that through the passage of time, the gyration of political priorities and iterative concessions, developers – when sustained by a long housing boom – retained the upper hand while planners were left to work reactively, thus obscuring the coherence of the initially-approved public sector plan. Finally, chapters 9 and 10 engage with challenges related to the timely delivery of neighbourhood amenities such as schools, as well as how new residents began to influence certain

planning outcomes (though there is relatively little discussion on NIMBYism).

Taken together, these chapters present a descriptive case study that connects obtuse planning processes with on-the-ground results to better understand the crucial topic of how cities get built and why they end up looking the way they do. The authors’ main contention is that planners engage in a set of both formal and informal practices that the authors call “planning by concession”, which they conclude ultimately compromises city design. Yet somewhat surprisingly, despite this strong emphasis on design, this book lacks engagement with the design literature. It does not reference work on the significance of architectural trends in high-rise housing or of urban design, morphologies, and use of public space. Relating more explicitly to these domains would have given more bite to their numerous critiques of building facades and interstitial spaces, especially in the latter part of the book. Moreover, while the book’s particular structure might have helped in efficiently organizing such diverse content, it has led to less dynamic and relational storytelling. A more consistent integration of excerpts from the interview material generated during the authors’ empirical research would also help here by conveying the perspectives and challenges faced by planners, designers and developers.

Despite these remarks, *Condoland* successfully documents “planning by concession”, and provides an exciting, foundational bridge between urban political economy and material outcomes in the Canadian context. As such, it serves as a valuable reference for those interested in urban governance, housing policy, planning, development, and some of their connections with design and architecture. For urban sociologists and social geographers, some chapters can be a useful starting point for related work.