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Luke Siemens, *PlyGuy*

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On The Sublime Pleasure Of Owning A Home Of One's Own

“If you don’t own a home, buy one. If you own a home, buy another one. If you own two homes, buy a third. And, lend your relatives the money to buy a home.”¹ -John Paulson

PlyGuy explores the implications of contemporary real estate ambition, and implicit within this work are the repercussions for those who have bought in--quite literally. *PlyGuy*, before attaining his current state, began as a 3D rendering, his individually configured parts telling a comprehensive tale of the condo experience. One arm weighted down, another offers a hook for your jacket and hat, on his lap sits a plant--lush, verdant, expectant. His facial expression reads surprise, pain, or neither. His torso is a series of laddered slats for additional storage, for shade, for ascent.

There are 2.5 million people living in Toronto. This is a fact. The median annual household income is \$75,240.² The poverty line in Toronto is \$18,759. Almost 604,000 are living in poverty. These are facts. Toronto’s newcomer population fares the worst, with 46 per cent living in poverty. One in three children under age 15 is living in poverty and 31 per cent of youths, ages 15 to 24. Housing is what drives the disparity: “with 47 per cent of all tenants paying more than 30 per cent of their income on rent.

¹ Helmin, Josin. 2010. “Urgent Advice From Billionaire John Paulson: ‘Buy A House And Gold’; Plus, Rupert Murdoch’s Pay Cut.” *Forbes*. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/josshelmin/2010/09/29/urgent-advice-from->
² <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/famil107a-eng.htm>

Another 23 per cent pay an astonishing 50 per cent or more on rent.”³ These are all facts. The average price for a home in Toronto is expected to be as high as \$3.582 million by 2026, while the average condo price may rise to \$628,000 within the same time.⁴ Certainly neither of these options is particularly viable for someone, say, who makes a living as a freelance writer of exhibition essays, but for some, especially those who are bound to the notion of “real estate equals eternal wealth,” a condominium is the only rational option.

This begs the question, do we, as Torontonians, as renters, as aspirational home and condo owners, have a tangible language to describe the experience of living in a condominium? When we remove the veneer of cupidity generated by real estate investors, along with the unforgivable displacement of lower income individuals and families from newly desirable neighbourhoods, what are we left with? Does our contempt and commiseration for the cause and effect of the condo market overshadow our ability to sympathize with those who have bought into this iterative dream of home ownership?

While theorists like Mark Kingwell are preoccupied with the impending beauty of the Toronto skyline by the year 2020, *PlyGuy* patiently, painfully, expressionlessly awaits his fate to be built, installed, wrecked and cast away in turns, as he “[adapts] to the stresses of your modern living.” Your condo companion, indeed.

These are ‘young professionals,’ or, better yet, recent graduates, who have shed the burden of overpriced and out-dated basement apartments, these are widows who can no longer rationalize their four bedroom-three and a half bathroom-detached homes, and these are first generation Canadians who have bought into the ancient precept propagated by Aristotle, John Stuart Mill, Franklin D. Roosevelt,⁵ and even the

³ James, Royson. 2012. “Nearly a quarter of Toronto residents live in poverty.” *The Toronto Star*. https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2012/06/11/nearly_a_quarter_of_toronto_residents_live_in_poverty_james.html

⁴ Ferreras, Jesse. 2016. “Canada's House Prices Will Look Like This In 10 Years, If Trends Keep Up.” *Huffington Post*. http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/04/16/canada-real-estate-projections_n_9648448.html

⁵ Fourth century B.C.E. philosopher, political economist, and former U.S. president, respectively.

superlative bigoted millionaire Donald Trump, that real estate is an imperishable asset, one which will effortlessly transform its holder into a person of boundless opulence.

If John Paulson's quote reminds you of the recent housing crisis in the United States, then you will not be surprised to learn that Paulson, hedge fund manager and billionaire, made a \$4 billion fortune by purchasing subprime mortgages before the market ultimately crashed in 2007.⁶ It is obvious that the same species of capitalist greed currently fuels Toronto's condominium market. Those very same 'young professionals' and recent graduates who gave up their dank subterranean apartments are salient prey to "investors [who] are betting on big returns from young renters who can't afford to buy in the red-hot real estate market and don't mind living in a unit, about 500 square feet, where their dining table might have to fold down into a bed."⁷

Luke Siemens' *PlyGuy*, is a tenable critique of the condominium culture sweeping downtown Toronto, as well as other cities across the globe. There are those, such as author and academic Mark Kingwell, who see the landscape's morphosis as aesthetically pleasing, and as a signifier of financial optimism for Toronto's newcomer population.⁸ There are also those, such as Toronto's artist and lower income community, who view the city's gentrification and condo development programs in a much more threatening light.⁹ And yet, there is a third lot that we rarely discuss: those who have made the choice to purchase and live in these condos.

⁶ Kolhatkar, Sheelah. 2012. "John Paulson's Very Bad Year." *Bloomberg*.
<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2012-06-28/john-paulsons-very-bad-year>

⁷ Posadzki, Alexandra. 2015. "Micro condos set to face their first test." *Macleans*.
<http://www.macleans.ca/economy/realestateeconomy/putting-micro-condos-to-the-test-in-canada/>

⁸ Hyman, Gerry. 2016. "Toronto's skyline is about to join the big-leagues: What the city could look like in 2020." *The Toronto Star*. <https://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2016/10/08/torontos-skyline-is-entering-the-stratosphere.html>

⁹ Whyte, Murray. 2016. "Skyrocketing commercial rents purge reluctant artists from Toronto's west end." *The Toronto Star*. <https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/visualarts/2016/10/23/skyrocketing-commercial-rents-purge-reluctant-artists-from-the-west-end.html>

“If you don’t own a home, buy one. If you own a home, buy another one. If you own two homes, buy a third. And, lend your relatives the money to buy a home.”¹⁰ -John Paulson

And, like *PlyGuy*, these sprouting condos are crude creations, fragmentary attempts to reproduce an ideal 3D rendering. “Fears that shoddy Toronto condos could become future slums” is a real, albeit absurd, headline that CBC News published online in 2014.¹¹ Surely the Shangri La Hotel will not become a “slum,” even though that choice of vocabulary is telling, in various respects, of the market and public perception of the condominium purchasing demographic. Read: those of you who could not afford to purchase a house, also known as the “red-hot real estate market,” and instead purchased what was marketed to you as a more affordable option, i.e. a condominium, you, poor soul, have been duped.

-Letticia Cosbert

¹⁰ Helmin, Josin. 2010. “Urgent Advice From Billionaire John Paulson: ‘Buy A House And Gold’; Plus, Rupert Murdoch’s Pay Cut.” *Forbes*. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/joshhelmin/2010/09/29/urgent-advice-from-billionaire-john-paulson-buy-a-house-and-gold-plus-rupert-murdochs-pay-cut/#241989fe7c5a>

¹¹ <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/fears-that-shoddy-toronto-condos-could-become-future-slums-1.2796979>