

Article

## Common Areas, Common Causes: Public Space in High-Rise Buildings During Covid-19

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### Abstract

This article explores forms of public space that have been rendered palpable during the Covid-19 pandemic: public spaces in high-rise buildings. We consider both physical and social public space in this context, thinking about the safety of both common areas and amenities in buildings and the emergence of new publics around the conditions of tower living during the pandemic (particularly focusing on tenant struggles). We determine that the planning, use, maintenance, and social production of public space in high-rise buildings are topics of increasing concern and urgency and that the presence of public space in the vertical built forms and lifestyles proliferating in urban regions complicates common understandings of public space. We argue that the questions raised by the pandemic call upon us to reconsider the meanings of public space.

### Keywords

amenities; Canada; common areas; Covid-19; high-rise buildings; public space; urban lifestyle; vertical living

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Throughout the pandemic, public space has been spotlighted as an important part of urban everyday life: as (a) a *physical space* where urban inhabitants have had to implement distance between one another in the interest of public safety, which has not been safe or accessible for everyone, and (b) an important and contested *social space* where new ways of dwelling, gathering, and coming together have gradually taken shape. During the past two years, our interest has turned to how public space in high-rise buildings has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. We see high-rise buildings as places where unique configurations of shared space and spatial practices exist, yet thus far, there remains little research on this dimension of vertical living, and we align with scholars who suggest a need to better understand the spaces where vertical life takes place (Harris, 2015; Lehrer & March, 2019; March & Lehrer, 2019;

Nethercote & Horne, 2016; Shilon & Eizenberg, 2021). We see the pandemic’s impact on high-rises in Canadian cities as having rendered visible complex geographies of shared amenities and spaces and realms of collectivity and social encounter.

Public space is an important part of high-rise living, including both the physical spaces where publics take shape and more abstract space that emerges as a product of social relations between people. Elsewhere (March & Lehrer, 2019; Lehrer & March 2019), we have theorized that we must conceptualize public space differently in relation to verticality and vertical living, thinking beyond and unsettling an inadequate private-public binary. Instead, we must reconsider how publicness might apply in varying degrees to shared physical spaces both within and around buildings and be produced through people’s social and spatial practices, perceptions, and imaginaries. We might consider forms of private/public “hybridity” (Nissen, 2008) to exist within

high-rise buildings. The response to Covid-19 in high-rise buildings has made these questions not just theoretically but increasingly practically salient as decision-makers have sought to implement appropriate public health measures in these spaces. We are especially interested in how these spaces have been impacted by the transformations and challenges wrought by the pandemic, as well as in what kinds of socially produced public spaces have emerged throughout it. The insights gained from this work have important implications for how planners and policymakers might meaningfully address existing problems within older towers and how they plan for liveability, safety, and well-being in the high-density, vertical neighbourhoods we continue to develop across Canadian cities.

In this article, we concentrate on these two different dimensions of public space in high-rise buildings. We examine shared spaces, detailing how public health guidelines have affected the use of amenities and common areas. We also examine emergent publics that have come about through shared struggles within high-rise buildings and around the conditions of tower living. This means that the public spaces we include here are not limited to formal shared spaces and amenities in buildings, but to a variety of spaces that are made public, both in and outside of buildings, through the struggles of tower residents. Here, public space is considered a multidimensional social product rather than simply in concrete terms. In particular, we touch upon cases in Ontario: the Keep Your Rent movement and Parkdale Organize in the Toronto neighbourhood of Parkdale, and tenant committee organizing related to the case of the Rebecca Towers in Hamilton, Ontario, where a large Covid-19 outbreak occurred in 2021. For us, these cases open windows into resident concerns about shared spaces, the social production of public space as a multidimensional entity (as explained in greater detail below), tactical use of shared spaces, and important emergent social spaces that constitute important topics for future inquiry.

In our analysis of policies and public health guidelines related to shared spaces, we focus on Canadian cities with concentrated presence of residential high-rise buildings and higher levels of concern, incidents, or outbreaks, and activism in high-rise settings during the pandemic. While we take a broader view, our case studies will be situated within the Greater Toronto Hamilton Area (GTHA), the region in southern Ontario where we live and work, which includes Toronto and Hamilton. It is important to note that circumstances in Canadian cities have differed across metropolitan regions and provinces throughout the pandemic; approaches have been heterogeneous and varied across time and place, largely due to public health being the jurisdiction of provincial governments, to a lack of coordination across provinces, and to differing contexts, circumstances, and levels of impact across cities (Cameron-Blake et al., 2021).

This article is organized into four sections. First, we outline our methodology, which applies a framework

that is taking a Lefebvrian approach to the study of space. We then provide the context for our study, exploring the emergence of vertical living in Canadian cities and the importance of public space in high-rise towers. Then, we detail how Covid-19 sparked a series of policy decisions and the creation of place-specific regulatory frameworks related to safety and public health in high-rise buildings that speak to everyday life and spatial practices involved in vertical living. Our examination of public health measures in high-rise buildings in these different Canadian cities reveals similar concerns around the spread of Covid-19 and similar approaches to protect residents. Finally, we explore social struggles related to multi-family rental buildings in the GTHA. We conclude with a discussion about how the pandemic has transformed public space in high-rise buildings into a matter of increased importance and concern.

## 2. Context: High-Rises in Canadian Cities

The production of large-scale vertical housing *en masse* has given rise to new ways of living and a range of urban lifestyles. In one sense, we can see the emergence of high-rise living as bringing large numbers of people together in proximity and generating unique potential for creating community in towers. In another, we can see it as contributing to a kind of “capsular” society in which one’s unit is one’s fortress, and separation and hyper-individualization are key (De Caeter, 2004). Indeed, the development of modernist tower neighbourhoods was oriented towards “the remaking of people as well as environments” (Graham, 2016, p. 182), and more recent scholarship understands the verticality of the high-rise form as a force capable of powerfully shaping how residents live and producing unique affective experiences (Dorignon & Nethercote, 2021; Graham & Hewitt, 2013; Hadi et al., 2018; Shilon & Eizenberg, 2021).

In Canada, we have seen a number of different residential development booms that have resulted in the construction of high-rise buildings across cities. In this study, we define a high-rise as a building over six to 11 storeys tall, depending on local context and scale (official definitions vary across cities). Between 1962 and 1973, large numbers of multi-unit apartment buildings, usually in the form of large-scale elongated blocks, were constructed during a time of government support for large-scale mass housing projects of rental housing, and then again since the late 1990s using the condominium ownership structure (Statistics Canada, 2015). Across Toronto, Hamilton, Montreal, and Vancouver, there have been varied trajectories of high-rise development, with all but Montreal (where lower-scale apartment dwellings have historically been the most popular form) seeing widespread construction of this type during this period. Since this time, we have seen the gradual emergence of a particular urban landscape, altering the physical and social form of neighborhoods to what has been described as “condofication” (Lehrer & Wieditz, 2009)—

a process of transformation akin to new-build gentrification, followed by terms such as “condo-ism” (Rosen & Walks, 2014) and “condoization” (Lippert, 2020), capturing the particular ways in which Toronto has used more central urban development strategy prioritizing density and high-rise living. While the condominium refers to a particular ownership structure and not a built form, it is commonly associated with the shape of the tower and podium high-rise.

As verticality has become an important dimension of cities, our consideration of urbanity must now account for the complex spaces that high-rise buildings present (Graham, 2016; Lehrer & March, 2019; March & Lehrer, 2019; Panacci, 2012). High-rise towers harbour various forms of physical public space, such as shared amenities, common areas, and recreational facilities. Very little work has been conducted on the “ordinary vertical urbanisms” that are constituted by high-rise living (Baxter, 2017; Baxter & Lees, 2008; Nethercote & Horne, 2016), but even fewer studies have been conducted on how shared spaces, common elements, or public space fit into high-rise residents’ spatial practices or everyday life. One study of shared spaces in disinvested public housing buildings suggests that they are important parts of residents’ entangled “emotional ecosystems” and constitute affective “memory spaces” that are not only imbued with personal feelings such as anxiety and fear but are also connected to experiences of systemic injustice and neglect (Arrigoitia, 2014). In some cases, the shared spaces of buildings have been found to provide important opportunities for encounters and network-building between residents and important alternative social spaces (Ghosh, 2014; Lehrer, 2016). The dynamics of such spaces can also be complex and challenging, however, with issues around the shared use of facilities or restrictions on acceptable practices or behaviours that sometimes cause tensions among residents (Peters & Kesik, 2020). As we continue to build vertically across Canadian cities, the shared spaces and amenities high-rise buildings offer must be part of the discussion.

### 3. Methodology

In this study, we have examined how the pandemic has affected public space in high-rise towers in Canadian cities. Our conceptualization of public space is shaped by the thinking of urban theorist Henri Lefebvre (1991), who argues that space is not absolute but is socially constructed. In his thinking, there are three dimensions of space: conceived, perceived, and lived. Therefore, public space is not necessarily only those spaces that are labelled as such but also those where interactions of publicness are happening (Lehrer, 1998). Therefore, we argue that public space is rather a complex and multifaceted social product that reveals important power dynamics and is shaped through struggle. Given the unique circumstances that the pandemic produced, this is an excellent case to look at public space in new and context-specific ways.

Our examination has involved mixed methods, including policy analysis and a media review done between March 2020 and February 2022. We conducted a policy review that examined Covid-19 safety policies and procedures in high-rise buildings in four Canadian cities, Toronto, Hamilton, Montreal, and Vancouver. These cities were selected due to their higher incident reporting related to Covid-19 in local high-rise towers. We examined policies that had been enacted by municipal, provincial, and federal governments during this same time period, seeking, in particular, to understand how these policies addressed shared spaces in these buildings. We also conducted a review of 115 media articles published during this time period related to the implementation and enforcement of Covid-19-related protocols in the shared spaces of high-rise buildings in these cities. In our newspaper search, we combined keywords such as “public,” “public space,” “common areas,” “shared spaces,” and “amenities” with Boolean operators and terms such as “high-rise,” “tower,” “condominium,” “apartment block” and “health measures,” “protocols,” “safety,” “pandemic,” and “Covid-19.” Following this broader review, we focused on two case studies in Toronto and Hamilton which stood out in our media review, turning our attention to and conducting a close analysis of residents’ spatial tactics and organizing practices related to shared spaces in high-rise buildings during the pandemic. These cases were selected due to the noticeably high levels of coverage they received in the media (based on the quantity of news articles). In regards to the Hamilton case study, we were especially interested as Covid-19 protocols were only enacted following—and we would argue largely as a result of—the organizing by tenants described below. We have monitored and analysed these struggles through textual material, mainly produced by residents and allies, including websites of organizations and material posted to social media and media releases between April 2020 and January 2022.

We concentrate on the tactics of members of the Keep Your Rent movement and Parkdale Organize, as well as residents of the Rebecca Towers and members of the Rebecca Towers Tenants Committee in Hamilton. We contrast the more “bottom-up” spatial tactics that socially produce public space and the emergent publics constituted by tower residents with the more “top-down” policies of different levels of government related to shared spaces in order to reveal very different ways that public space emerges as a matter of concern in the pandemic. Our exploratory work in this article constitutes preliminary research in a larger ongoing investigation into the impacts of Covid-19 on vertical living and shared spaces.

### 4. The Built Form: Shared Spaces and Amenities During Covid-19

During its first two years, the Covid-19 pandemic dramatically altered how urban dwellers went about their everyday lives. This has important implications for the

social production of space, which is lived and, to some extent, generated at the level of everyday life (see Lefebvre, 1991, 2014). The particularities of the pandemic's impacts have already been well-documented by scholars who, in cities around the world, sought to examine, document, and understand a shifty and uncertain "new normal." It immediately made palpable a range of already-existing social inequities, leading many such scholars to call for justice in planning and policymaking (see Jabareen & Eizenberg, 2021). Early in the pandemic, many predicted that Covid-19 would dramatically change how planners design space and infrastructure in cities to be safe and liveable, concentrating on public space as a central issue (Akers, 2020; Honey-Rosés et al., 2020; March & Lehrer, 2021). Public spaces became a central focus of governance, as decision-makers quickly moved to regulate behaviour through recommendations to physically distance, urging people to restrict social gatherings to outdoor spaces and permitting new activities and uses such as "pandemic pop-ups" (Flynn & Thorpe, 2021) in public places like streets or parks. These practices rendered visible spatial inequities and uneven spatial access of marginalized groups (March & Lehrer, 2021). Residential spaces also underwent major transformations in terms of use in the first year of the pandemic, as residents were ordered to "stay home" or "shelter in place" (an order that most frontline workers were unable to follow). Some argue that the public/private binary became especially blurred during this time, as many residents able to do so started to perform a multiplicity of tasks (work, shopping, exercise, attending social gatherings, visiting cultural spaces, etc.) from the seeming privacy of their residence (Valizadeh & Iranmanesh, 2022). Our article focuses on the particular circumstances that emerged in towers where many private residences are co-located.

Urban areas were hit hard by the pandemic. As the Covid-19 pandemic began in early 2020, attention was immediately directed to factors that might be helping the virus to spread. Crisis and catastrophe have, in other cases, led decision-makers to rethink planning and safety in towers, as high-rise buildings already played a central role in the transmission during the SARS epidemic of 2003 (Harris & Keil, 2008). In early 2020, many concerns were raised in the public discourse, specifically about the safety of shared spaces of high-rise buildings during this new crisis (Bozikovic, 2020; Lorinc, 2020). High-rises feature largely in an uneven geography of exposure, and studies have shown that, in Canadian cities, people living in high-rise apartments have had almost twice as high a mortality rate as those in detached houses (Yang & Aitken, 2021). There are a number of intersecting socio-economic reasons for this, but the built environment plays an important role. Crowded households were unable to practice physical distancing if a household member became ill (Maroko et al., 2020; Moos et al., 2020; Schellenberg & Fonberg, 2020; Yang & Aitken, 2021). High-rises also increase the risk of spread through

the co-location of many residences in one building and through higher levels of potential contact with others in spaces that see heavy traffic, such as hallways or elevators (Bouffanais & Lim, 2020; Dietz et al., 2020; Lorinc, 2020).

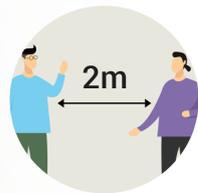
The first presumed case of Covid-19 in Canada was reported in Toronto on January 25, 2020, with the first wave of cases experienced more intensely in Ontario and Quebec. From the outset, public health measures oriented towards the containment or slowing of the spread of illness were geographically varied (Cameron-Blake et al., 2021). Measures such as stay-at-home orders, school and workplace closures, restrictions on indoor dining, curfews, mask mandates, and vaccination policies have differed across both provinces and municipalities (Cameron-Blake et al., 2021). Our study of public spaces in high-rise buildings reveals similarity in approaches recommended across the cities of Toronto, Hamilton, Montreal, and Vancouver but also exposes inconsistency in how measures were legislated, whether they involved mandates or recommendations, and how they were applied in individual buildings.

Key shared spaces come to the fore through our examination. These include hallways, elevators, laundry facilities, foyers, stairwells, and shared amenity spaces such as gyms, pools, party rooms, gardens, and picnic areas. Within these settings, provincial public health officials deemed close contact between individuals to be a risk factor for community spread of the virus and recommended or mandated precautions, though applied with great variation across cities. In all cities, increased sanitation was added to many common areas, both in the form of hand-cleaning stations and cleaning regularly used parts of the built environment. Physical distancing was recommended, resulting in capacity limits being placed on many shared spaces. Restriction of use and access changed how residents were allowed to interact with the shared spaces of high-rise buildings. Some amenities were temporarily closed in buildings across all four cities. Residents were to be notified of these changes with publicly posted signs that would clearly state official public health recommendations (see Figure 1).

Masking was either mandated or recommended in all shared high-rise settings. In Toronto, municipal by-laws were passed that required the wearing of protective masks in enclosed, indoor public spaces in order to slow the spread of disease. The City of Toronto also ordered owners of apartment buildings and condominium corporations to put policies in place requiring masks in common areas. These policies were left in the hands of individual building owners and condo boards to oversee and enforce. The City of Hamilton legislated similarly with by-laws which required masks in common areas within multi-unit residential buildings. In Vancouver, the provincial government of British Columbia's mask mandate did not apply to the common areas of rental apartment buildings or strata corporations (condominiums), although wearing masks in such spaces was strongly

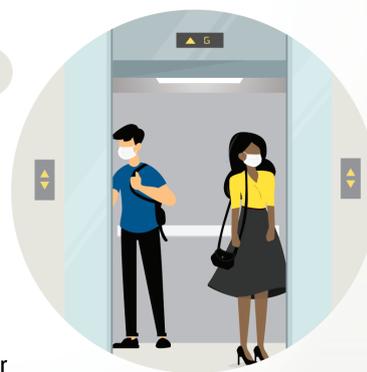
# HELP PREVENT THE SPREAD OF GERMS AND PROTECT YOURSELF FROM COVID-19 AND OTHER RESPIRATORY VIRUSES

## PHYSICAL DISTANCING ON ELEVATORS



### MAINTAIN SAFE DISTANCING ON ELEVATORS

- Keep 2 metres apart from others
- Limit number of people per elevator



[hamilton.ca/coronavirus](https://hamilton.ca/coronavirus)



**Figure 1.** City of Hamilton public health recommendations poster. Source: City of Hamilton (2021).

recommended by public health officials. Quebec’s mask mandate was also not applied to residential buildings, although public health authorities have recommended wearing masks. In Montreal, however, policy differed as Santé Montréal instructed building owners and condo boards to ensure that residents and guests wore masks in shared spaces.

Amidst all of the very particular recommendations and guidance around safety, in no case was it made clear how any measures would be enforced within buildings. For example, in Hamilton, enforcement was to be conducted by municipal by-law officers and public health officials—and non-compliance could result in a fine ranging from \$750 to \$100,000—but there was no procedure given for residents in the case that their building’s management was not following guidelines. As we will see in the next section, measures were not strictly enforced in all high-rise buildings and were not enough to prevent residents’ exposure to sickness and the emergence of outbreaks in buildings. We will also see that, when necessary, residents found innovative ways to work around rules in order to gather and collectively organize safely

and appropriated shared spaces in important ways in circumstances where they sought to render the conditions of their everyday lives publicly visible and openly challenge those conditions.

An evaluation of how shared spaces in high-rise buildings in these cities were addressed during the pandemic reveals a potentially confounding area in terms of regulation, enforcement, governance, and safety. The media analysis that we conducted alongside our policy analysis also uncovered that some residential high-rise towers were harder hit than others during this time and that the recommendations implemented in top-down ways were not necessarily effective in protecting residents from the broader range of risks they were exposed to during this time. This highlights, for us, a strong need to see the spaces of high-rise buildings as shaped by social factors. As Pitter (2020) has pointed out, residents of the high-rise towers in the marginalized, disinvested, and “forgotten densities” of cities often live in substandard conditions in their private dwellings, lack access to outdoor spaces like balconies, and can become fearful of accessing shared spaces in buildings due to lack

of adequate safeguards and stronger risk of negative outcomes from Covid-19 infection as a result of compounded factors. The following section attends to particular experiences of the pandemic in residential rental apartment towers, highlighting the multifaceted issues residents have faced and how their struggles show a need to see differences in policymaking around towers and the shared spaces within them.

## 5. Emergent Publics in High-Rise Buildings

In this section, we shift to focus on the emergence of publics and socially produced public spaces in high-rise rental apartment towers during the pandemic. We briefly explore two examples from Ontario of tower residents organizing around high-rise issues which were exacerbated during the pandemic: housing security and housing safety. We look to the Keep Your Rent movement and Parkdale Organize, which saw tenants organize around rent strikes and anti-eviction efforts, and to the Covid-19 outbreak and post-outbreak activism that occurred in Hamilton's Rebecca Towers. These struggles stood out in our media analysis, revealing the importance of seeing public space in high-rise buildings not just in terms of physical space but in terms of social space. We also see the emergence of publics around particular issues in high-rise buildings as disclosing important differences across types of density during the pandemic—Here we underline, again, Pitter's (2020) characterization of "dominant" and "forgotten" densities. While the impact of Covid-19 may have limited access to and use of certain amenities or shared spaces in condominiums temporarily, this has been the case for many rental apartment buildings, where some amenities and shared spaces have long before the pandemic been inaccessible for a variety of reasons, with lack of maintenance being a key factor. The pandemic only intensified these issues while also catalyzing action on the part of tower residents, leading to tenant organizing around turning these into matters of public concern.

### 5.1. Rent Strikes and Anti-Eviction Organizing

During the first year of the pandemic, and especially in its first months when many workers experienced a disruption of employment, the question of rent payment became a major concern for many tower residents. Within days of the implementation of stay-at-home orders in Toronto, tenant advocates began raising alarms about potential risks to tenants. Even as government aid was announced, housing activists argued that programs like the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit would not adequately cover both rent and everyday costs of living in Toronto (Parkdale Organize, 2020). In the absence of other significant state interventions, precarious tenants, activists, and neighbours in high-rise buildings emerged as organizers, working together around shared concerns and threats.

An example of this has been the Keep Your Rent movement in Toronto, Ontario. Keep Your Rent is a tenant-led movement that emerged at the end of March 2020 to help tenants organize with their neighbours in order to protect one another from harassment or eviction and to collectively negotiate with landlords. It emerged from the already existing activism of Parkdale Organize, an organization of working-class residents in the downtown Toronto neighbourhood of Parkdale. Parkdale Organize had already been helping tenants in the neighbourhood to fight against renovations, above-guideline rent increases, and poor management practices in buildings since as early as 2012 (Webber & Doherty, 2021). As the organization states: "Our neighbour's struggle is our struggle. What threatens our neighbours threatens our neighbourhood. When our neighbours are strong, our neighbourhood is strong. No one else is going to look out for us but each other" (Parkdale Organize, 2015). Organizing was undertaken at the neighbourhood level, with a focus on building solidarity within individual buildings. Rent strikes had already proven to be an effective tactic used against the large financialized landlords who own and manage the majority of the high-rise apartment buildings in the neighbourhood, with a streak of successful strikes occurring in individual apartment towers prior to the pandemic (Parkdale Organize, 2017; on the financialization of multi-unit apartments, see August & Walks, 2018). Such strikes were successful in large multi-unit buildings where many tenants could collectively withhold rent in solidarity with one another.

The organizing tactics promoted within Keep Your Rent worked well for residents in high-rise buildings. Because Covid-19 made it unsafe to go door to door or gather for in-person organizing, tenants were urged to use public spaces in and around their buildings to communicate with one another. Besides posting on streets around their buildings, Keep Your Rent encouraged tenants to post flyers and posters in their building's hallways, lobbies, or foyers and with that changed the usual function of these spaces as spaces of transition for individuals to spaces where the public could constitute itself inside of a building. Not unlike government-imposed safety measures, posters were made accessible online in PDF form for tenants to print out themselves (see Figure 2). These posters would help tenants to connect with one another and start communicating safely online, through messaging apps, and over the phone.

Tactics used within the movement to protect tenants have involved shared physical spaces within and around high-rise buildings. Prior to the pandemic, this was already common with Parkdale Organize; tenants organized meetings within building lobbies (Webber & Doherty, 2021). Lobby meetings were social spaces where residents could share experiences and information, organize, and collectively make decisions, building a movement around shared struggles around their housing (Webber & Doherty, 2021). While the pandemic

## Tenants! Organize!



647-874-8793

TorontoKeepYourRent@gmail.com

facebook.com/groups/KeepYourRent

**Figure 2.** *Keep Your Rent* poster by artist Patterson Hodgson. Source: Keep Your Rent (2020).

made lobby meetings less possible due to constraints on the use of indoor shared spaces, this did not stop tenants from organizing collectively. Once it was safe to gather in person, in-person meetings, press conferences, or community gatherings took place in the public spaces adjacent to buildings, such as lawn areas or semi-public squares. In the Parkdale neighbourhood, these spaces often constitute transitional spaces between the street and high-rise buildings themselves and presented a space for engagement with the broader public as well, conveying messages about and generating interest in the issues of tower residents within buildings.

As the pandemic continued, Parkdale Organize and Keep Your Rent activists got involved even further with the emerging and ongoing issue of evictions. While in Ontario, a temporary eviction moratorium was implemented by the provincial government, tenants and activists expressed concerns about such a measure merely postponing an eventual wave of evictions. In fact, at the same time, tenants continued to receive eviction forms from landlords seeking to remove renters during the moratorium. Again, here activists urged tenants receiving eviction notices to immediately let their neighbours know and organize collectively. Neighbours and supporters of the movement mobilized, protesting outside of landlords' homes, confronting property management companies at their offices, and showing

up in groups during evictions by enforcement officers. Websites such as EvictionsOntario enabled tenants facing possible eviction to share the locations of their buildings and connect with neighbours online. Tenants and allies also showed up *en masse* for online Zoom hearings at the Ontario Landlord Tenant Board (LTB) to witness processes and demonstrate solidarity with tenants facing eviction. While organizations like EvictionsOntario (2021b) have argued that video format eviction hearings have favoured landlords who have more resources to participate effectively, the online format of LTB hearings did briefly also produce another grey space in terms of publicness, as a broader public were able to attend the hearings from home, showing up in solidarity for tenants. Activists and community members live-tweeted the goings-on at these LTB hearings, providing the broader public glimpses into the injustices of the often-invisible eviction process as the LTB undertook what housing advocates, quoting LTB adjudicator Dale Whitmore, termed an "eviction blitz" between November 2020 and January 2021 (EvictionsOntario, 2021a). This work of tenant movement building and organizing is ongoing, and it demonstrates how individual private matters in high-rise buildings become public through organizing within those tower buildings and linking them to the wider housing struggle and its activists.

## 5.2. Outbreak Organizing

In the spring of 2021, during the lengthy second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in Ontario, a large-scale outbreak occurred in an apartment building in Hamilton. At 235 Rebecca Street, Rebecca Towers is a centrally located 17-storey apartment building containing 164 units, owned and operated by Toronto-based developer and property management company Medallion Corporation, one of many financialized landlords operating within the GTHA. On May 4, the City of Hamilton declared an outbreak in the building after 55 positive cases and one death were identified in the building. In all, 107 residents and three staff contracted the virus.

The problems that emerged in this building reflect problems of poor maintenance and upkeep that have been observed in older high-rise apartment buildings throughout the GTHA beyond the context of the pandemic (March & Lehrer, 2019; Risager, 2021; United Way Greater Toronto, 2011; United Way Greater Toronto et al., 2021). Tenants in the Rebecca Towers argued that their landlords had failed to maintain the building's ventilation system, failed to promote regular cleaning and maintenance practices, and failed to safely and adequately staff the building for upkeep. According to residents, shared spaces like laundry rooms, hallways, or elevators tended to be crowded, unsafe, and unsanitized. Tenants characterized the building as "a high-rise death chamber" (RebeccaTowersTenants, 2021), arguing that "all of us are experiencing some form of physical, emotional, and psychological distress. We are living in constant fear of sickness and death" (RebeccaTowersTenants, 2021). In early May 2021, as the tower outbreak worsened, desperate tenants displayed messages on the sides of the building, hanging signs from balconies scrawled on paper or on bedsheets reading "Help us!" or "Please save us from this petri dish."

Prior to the outbreak, tenants in the building had already reached out for support from tenant advocates with experience in organizing and pursuing to form a tenant committee in the building because Medallion Corporation was seeking above guideline increases of 3% for rent in the building. This, and a range of longstanding issues regarding building maintenance, formed the initial bases for tenants coming together. As tenant advocate, housing scholar, and neighbour Emily Power notes (2021), when the outbreak began, relationships had already been established within the building, and so tenants were prepared to face the situation together:

They were ready to pool resources, to pay for PPE and get groceries for people in isolation, they were more ready to push as a committee to demand that the City of Hamilton bring a mobile vaccine clinic to the building, they were more ready to push for the landlord to make both elevators operational, to improve the cleaning in the building, to improve the ventilation in the building. (Power, 2021)

Tenants demanded regular sanitization of shared spaces, repairs to the elevators, increased staffing, and improved ventilation.

Because residents spoke out, door-to-door testing was also arranged in early May so that residents who were isolating could be assessed in the midst of the outbreak. Through the organizing of tenants, on May 16th, 2021, a door-to-door Covid-19 vaccination clinic successfully vaccinated 86 tenants and 28 of the building's neighbours (RebeccaTowersTenants, 2021). The tenant committee played a large role in the success of these efforts, designing and distributing posters and flyers in several different languages and arranging drop-in vaccinations for tenants who were afraid or unable to leave their units during the outbreak.

The organizing, however, was not limited to merely addressing the outbreak and very quickly shifted the conversation to the topic of building maintenance. The case of the Rebecca Towers demonstrates how tenants organized collectively around the shared spaces of buildings while also using them in their organizing, turning private but public-facing elements of the building such as balconies into message-boards decrying the state of affairs inside the building and calling for action from Medallion Corporation. Tenants displayed signage on the building demanding "REPAIRS NOW!" and declaring "TENANT POWER." Press conferences and rallies were held in front of the building. While repairs had long been needed in the building, the Covid-19 outbreak that occurred in the building brought widespread public attention to these issues, making the demands of the building's tenant committee visible. Residents also corresponded extensively with the news media, sending photographs of the damage, unmaintained units, broken amenities, and dirt and infestations inside the building to the media. The circulating photographs revealed years of neglect to the interiors of the tower and effectively turned the private spaces of residents' everyday lives into matters of public concern. Tenants successfully directed critical attention to the negligence of their landlord, Medallion Corporation.

In July, after the outbreak dissipated, the City of Hamilton implemented the Covid-19 safety requirements in high-rise apartment buildings and condo towers of 12 storeys or more. During the wave of the pandemic that sparked this decision, 225 reported cases of Covid-19 had been concentrated in three different high-rise apartment towers. The organizing of high-rise tenants, including the residents of Rebecca Towers and members of broader tenant networks, is largely responsible for these changes.

## 6. Conclusion

The pandemic directs our attention towards the particularities of verticality as a contemporary urban lived experience and towards specific matters of concern in vertical living. During the pandemic, the shared spaces of high-rise buildings have become key sites of policy

intervention, but further, our examination spotlights the importance of shared physical spaces in the lives of high-rise residents and sheds light on how such spaces are utilized in the everyday and tactically made public in organizing practices. Perhaps most notably, we have seen Covid-19 give rise to important forms of spatial production within high-rise buildings, as residents have sought to make their lives more manageable, make their struggles known, gain access to important services, and keep one another safe from a variety of risks that were intensified by the pandemic. Shared spaces are both catalytic and practical sites of convergence for collectivity and organizing around the conditions of vertical living. We see the spatial practices and actions of tenants in high-rise buildings as being potentially useful to tenants engaging in movement building in other cities. As tenant movements grow, network, and share experiences with one another, we anticipate that tactics will travel. These movements render visible the conditions of everyday vertical living, making aspects of verticality public.

We see this exploratory study as spotlighting a matter of concern and opening up further avenues of inquiry into shared spaces in high-rise buildings and the dynamics and politics of public space in relation to verticality and vertical living. We find this to be true not only in regards to safety within the built environment but in regards to social spaces and the safety they make possible. In particular, we see a stronger appreciation for the socially produced nature of public spaces in planning and policymaking as being an important factor in creating not only safer but more equitable and just places to live.

Where the built environment is concerned, in exploring policies and new pathways of study, we urge the consideration of difference with regards to densities, forms of high-rise dwelling, and conditions of inhabitation and vertical living. Outbreaks in some tower neighbourhoods were clearly driven by intersectional factors—Many high-rise apartment buildings are populated by working-class tenants and frontline workers who have been unable to work from home, towers contain many overcrowded households where isolation has been difficult or impossible, and unmaintained buildings present tenants with higher levels of risk. In this regard, Covid-19 revealed stark inequities that already existed before the pandemic. In future studies of public space and high-rise buildings, we suggest further inquiry into differences between high-rise forms and deeper qualitative investigations into the nuanced ways particular shared spaces fit into the everyday lives of residents.

We already see research being conducted into the kinds of renovations, building improvements, and new design features that will be necessary to create safer indoor spaces for tower residents (Safarik & Miranda, 2020). Long-term solutions will be needed if we are to try to safely “live with the virus,” as some now insist we should. For tower residents, living with Covid-19 clearly presents vastly different challenges than it does for residents of other housing forms. Many conversations have

turned to how shared spaces can be made safe. As they play important roles in the everyday lives of tower residents, we suggest that planners, designers, and architects must consider ongoing safety in contexts of contagion going forward, potentially adding features for improved ventilation or creating space for physical distancing in particular areas of residential high-rise buildings, and strongly considering how spaces around buildings can be made more accessible in equitable ways to tower residents. Planning initiatives must also listen to the emerging publics of the vertical city. Tower residents must be consulted in planning processes, if not engaged in more meaningful processes of co-design where new buildings or major renovations are concerned. We hope that, following the calls of high-rise tenants, safety will also include risks *beyond* contagion, taking into account long-needed repairs, maintenance, and upgrades that Covid-19 has made more visible to the broader public, as well as questions such as tenant precarity and tenant rights in the face of multi-layered crises that in Canadian cities include the affordable housing crisis, eviction and reeviction crisis, and homelessness crisis. We hope to see meaningful policy action around these issues beyond the short-term emergency measures and restrictions on usage that have thus far characterized the policy response to Covid-19 in high-rise buildings.

Finally, we see this crisis as also revealing the need to see public space in complex and multifaceted ways. As we stated at the beginning, we used a Lefebvrian approach, which means that any space is socially constructed through and with the three lenses of conceived, perceived, and lived. This allows us to see public space evolving in moments where private space changes into public space and where an individual issue becomes a collective issue. Therefore, we see the Covid-19 pandemic’s effects on the world of high-rise buildings as having underlined how public space must be understood as something that exceeds the private/public binary through which it has often been understood. We comprehend high-rise buildings as revealing unique grey areas of publicness around which different publics, made up of residents, allies, and housing advocates coalesce and where governance, policy, and collective interests are at play. This tells us that we need to further consider and complicate the meanings of public space and further engage with its particular manifestations in contemporary vertical living.

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### **Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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