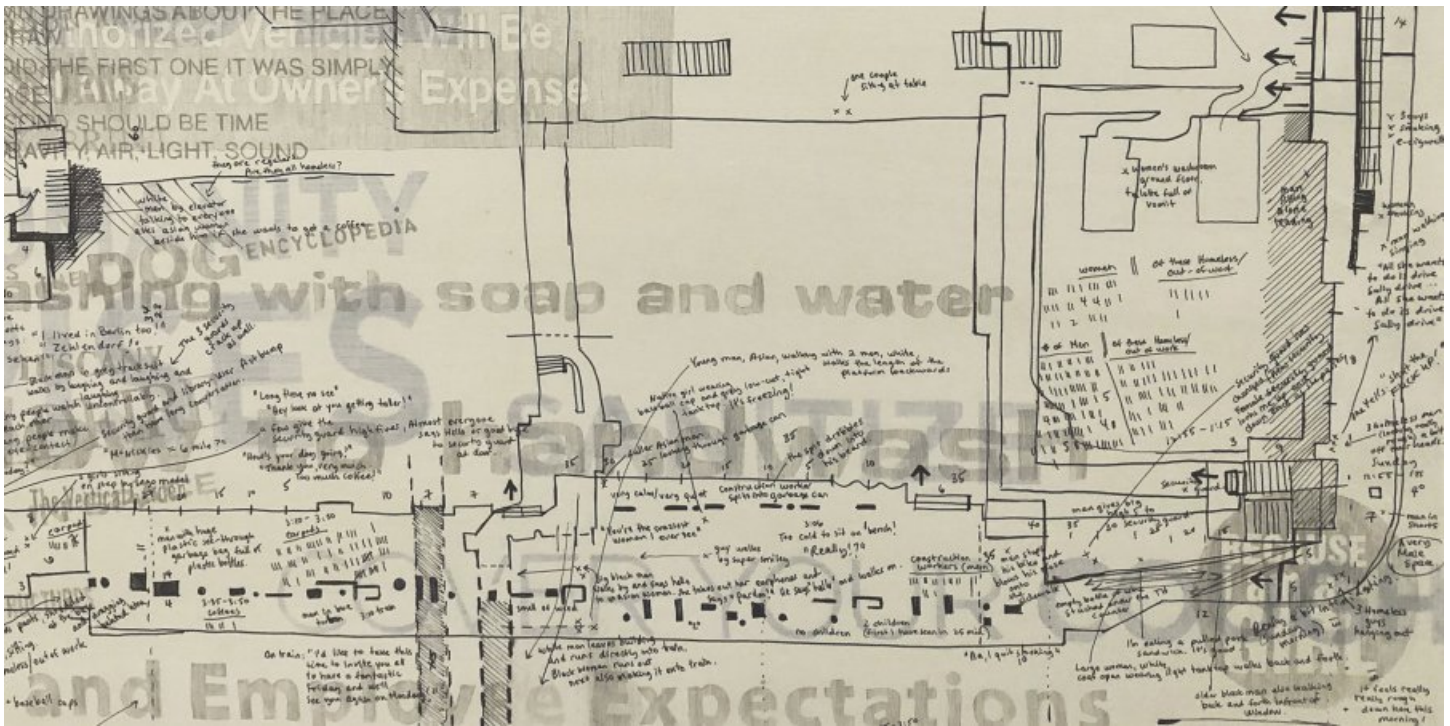




NATIONAL  
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Larissa Fassler, *CIVIC. CENTRE. I, II, III* (detail), 2016. Acrylic, pen, and pencil on canvas, installation dimensions variable. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa © Larissa Fassler Photo: NGC

# PERSPECTIVES ON URBAN SPACES

Chris Hampton

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Magazine

Drawn in black ink, an "x" marks where a woman was seen smoking. Elsewhere, the "x" indicates where a man stopped his bicycle and blew his nose onto the sidewalk, or the location of a security guard. In one area, the number of construction workers has been tallied, while nearby, the total number of people passing through between 12:55 and 1:15 has been sorted into men and women, then subdivided into how many of these were "homeless/out of work."

Overheard comments are likewise recorded. One states, “I did one tour of 8 months in Kandahar.” A second notes, “We need to find an example where everybody has a stake in it.” Another says, “I heard you got stabbed in the eye.” Someone sang Queen’s rock anthem *We Will Rock You*, or perhaps it was played over a loudspeaker or a car stereo. The distinction was not noted.

In 2016, near the start of Alberta's latest economic downturn, the Vancouver-born, Berlin-based artist Larissa Fassler spent two weeks walking and observing a four-block area in downtown Calgary. Her triptych drawing *CIVIC. CENTRE. I, II, III* represents her various findings, marked in pen and pencil on a map of the zone on three canvases in the shape of skyscrapers. The city planners' view is contrasted with the reality on the ground, as jargon-filled conversations about development rub up against comments on soup kitchens, mental health and rent struggles. "By putting those things together, Fassler insists upon their relationship to one another," says Nicole Burisch, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art at the National Gallery of Canada.



Larissa Fassler, *CIVIC. CENTRE. I, II, III*, 2016. Acrylic, pen, and pencil on canvas, installation dimensions variable.  
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa © Larissa Fassler Photo: NGC

Acquired in 2018 and placed on view at the Gallery for the first time last year, *CIVIC. CENTRE. I, II, III* anchors a thematic display of permanent collection artworks assembled by Burisch that explores contemporary perspectives on city building and city life. The questions Fassler asks continue across the selected works, the curator says. “Where are you situated in the city? Where are you looking from? How does that shape what you are seeing and how you interact with the city?” The grouping of works considers how the dialogue between town planners and residents affects urban experience. These conversations and experiences are rapidly evolving — especially in these last few months, as dense population centres pose particular challenges in managing a public health crisis.



Oliver Michaels, *Train*, 2003. Digital video, 13:00 min. Gift of Jeanne Parkin, Toronto, 2018. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa © Oliver Michaels Photo: NGC

Oliver Michaels' video installation *Train* (2003) marvels at the near-fantastical variety of facilities, lifestyles and experiences a city accommodates. His camera travels on a toy locomotive track through multiple spaces seemingly connected by tunnels, from ballroom and garden terrace, past dust bunnies beneath beds, across an office, through a warehouse and down the aisle of a movie theatre. An architectural CAD inkjet print accompanies the video, mapping what the curator calls the “impossible architecture” of such a building while again insisting upon a connection between them.

On the facing wall, the oil painting *Broken Building* by Shirley Wiitasalo likewise speaks to the experience of compartmentalization that dense development engenders. Long before the pandemic made us all too familiar with the feeling, it expresses the sense of isolation and loneliness that is perhaps special to cities. Her canvas pictures a tower in middle distance, watery, as if viewed through a window on a rainy day. The reflections of rectangular fluorescent lights — the kind ubiquitous to every office — can be seen in the foreground and, looking



closer, so are the seams of glass panes. The view is indeed through a window, and the picture's vantage point must be from a similar tower. "In the early 1990s, Wiitasalo was interested in the rapid development happening in Toronto and the changes in the city's landscape," Burisch says. "I think it is fair to say we see that again today."





Shirley Wiitasalo, *Broken Building*, 1992. Oil on canvas, 203.2 x 152.7 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa © Shirley Wiitasalo Photo: NGC

Between these two works, Eleanor Bond's painting *Elevated Living in a Community-Built Neighbourhood* (1998) is a fictionalized architectural rendering meant, at the time of its creation, to depict a city of the future. Her imaginary metropolis is thick with monochrome glass and concrete boxes reaching heavenward. "In some sense we have arrived at the future she was depicting," Burisch says.

More frequently, however, the types of change a city undergoes are not the slick and polished sort peddled in builders' brochures. A pair of small oils by Mike Bayne feature the overlooked incidentals of city-building, recasting a utility pole as an object of sculptural dignity and a brick wall that has been crudely overpainted as a worthy work of Minimalism. His are images of a continuous transformation, acknowledging both the growth and erasure that this entails.

According to Statistics Canada, in 2018, more than 70 per cent of Canadians lived in a metropolitan area with a population of 100,000 or more. Some predictions have suggested that, by 2030, as much as 84 per cent of the country will live in cities. The works of art grouped here represent urban experiences over the past quarter century, a period when the sense of evolution in most major Canadian cities has been dramatic. Looking at these works, the questions form naturally: What will life in cities look like in another 25 years? Will the pandemic have altered the current trend or will our cities keep growing more populous and thus further outward and into the sky? Can you imagine the view from the hundredth floor of your super-highrise apartment, or, for that matter, the conversations one might hear on the sidewalk?

**The selection of works is currently installed at the National Gallery of Canada. Share this article and subscribe to our newsletters to stay up-to-date on the latest articles, Gallery exhibitions, news and events, and to learn more about art in Canada.**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Hampton is a freelance based in Hamilton, Ont. His work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Globe and Mail*, and *Canadian Art*.

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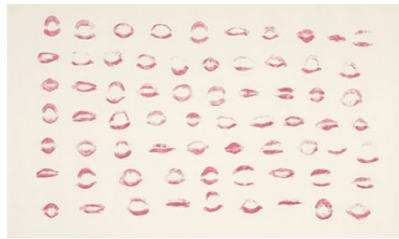
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