

Chapter 1

Spotting the High Rise

Arrival

December 3 – 23, 2014

Hay River's most visible landmark is a seventeen-story high-rise residential tower the developer named Mackenzie Place. Locals simply call it "the High Rise."

Mackenzie Place looks like many other North American post-war towers built to deal with urbanization: a concrete rectangle with rows of identical windows and balconies and minimal architectural flourishes. If it were in a city, it would likely not catch your attention.

When driving north by car, you can begin to spot the High Rise from seventy-five kilometres away. What strikes a first-time visitor as curious is not the building itself, but rather what is not around it. Most modern residential towers are in clusters and face other towers. This one sits on the bank of a river in a small Canadian subarctic town.

With everything else around only one or two stories high, the building looks like it was left here by accident.

It is wearing out in ways common for towers of its vintage. The butter yellow exterior paint is peeling. The windows need to be upgraded. One of the two elevators is often out of service.

There is nothing particularly unique about the building's structure. The balconies are uncluttered. Through

the iron railings you might see a single plastic chair. For most of the year it is much too cold to sit outside. Satellite dishes are affixed to the railings along the southwest side: a modern log growing grey plastic mushrooms.

Mackenzie Place is home to a diverse set of working-class people from a variety of backgrounds: Indigenous (Dene, Inuvialuit, Cree, Métis), settler, and immigrant. Mackenzie Place was built in the 1960s on the promise of the proposed Mackenzie Valley pipeline that never came to pass. Since then, it has been repurposed to house those making a living working in extractive industries and supporting public sectors.

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In 2008, I stood in the lobby of the run-down building staring at plastic white letters that listed the names of tenants who were long gone. As I waited to be let in by the building's rental manager, I read and reread the three posted rules:

NO SMOKING IN FRONT.

NO DOGS.

NO HOT3L ROOM.

As I waited for the superintendent's wife, I jingled my car keys in my pocket, hopeful that this move would finally set in motion my research on the effects the diamond boom was having on the area. I was in the High Rise that day trying to find a place to live to begin to study this transformation from the perspective of those living through it.

The cream-coloured walls, the peeling linoleum tiles, and a buzzer system that did not work were just as I remembered them. Five years earlier, I was there under very dif-

ferent circumstances. Then, I was a school teacher who had just arrived to take a job teaching fourth grade in a French-language school. I was transferred to this large —by Northern standards — town from a small village in the high Arctic. My partner had been promoted to principal of one of the schools.

On that first visit in 2003, we waited in between these same two glass doors for the superintendent, who was going to show us a two-bedroom apartment to rent. Trying to imagine a long, cold, dark winter in the decaying building, I became impatient.

"Let's just leave. There is no way that I am going to live here."

The day of my arrival as a researcher, Cindy, the building owner's girlfriend and the property manager, saw me and let me in.

"Holy, you got a lot of stuff! Let me get my son Trevor to help you. Trevor! Come help this university woman with her stuff!"

I tried to assure her that I could manage, but she insisted.

"It's fine, he's not doing anything anyhow. He is going back to school soon, though. He has a real good opportunity coming up. He is going to be taking an underground mining class at the college here. There's a lot of good jobs up at those diamond mines, you know."

When Cindy told me about her son's upcoming course in underground diamond mining, I was reassured that my move into the High Rise had not been in vain. I was hoping to meet people trying to make a future through resource work and here was my first possible participant. I was

familiar with the course Cindy was referring to. It was the most recent iteration of educational opportunities that were supposed to move local people into high-wage work in mining.

When there is a rise in Northern economic activity, many people move to the region from other parts of Canada and increasingly from around the world. This includes Indigenous people like Cindy and Trevor, who are Cree but not locals. In-migrants usually end up in the small number of peri-urban hubs like Hay River as they are accessible by road and have more, even if slim, choices for rental housing.

Trevor appeared dragging a large, stubborn-wheeled metal cart to the front door. He had on baggy jeans and a backwards red New York Yankees hat. On the side of his neck was a small tattoo whose green ink had weathered in a way that made the symbol undecipherable. He silently piled my stuff on the wire bed of the cart and asked:

“Eighth floor, right?”

In the elevator, my questions about his upcoming mining course are met with one-word answers. I asked him if he is from town.

“Me? Am I really from this shit hole? No way. I’m from La Ronge, Saskatchewan. Some other shit hole.”

Trevor’s home community was a former logging town that had seen the end of the industry. His father moved them to Hay River to work in mine construction. After their divorce, Trevor’s father moved to another resource boom region, while Cindy elected to stay behind with her two sons to try and make a living here.

For many people I spoke to, chasing the good life in Hay River and other resource towns often involves imagining leaving them.

The High Rise was a strategic housing choice to get me closer to the people most closely involved in the processes of extraction. Over time, I came to realize that the building did more than merely house the people who could tell the story of the Northern resource economy. Instead, the building itself is a critical storied element of how extraction comes to make sense for many people.

I was not alone in my initial murky understanding of High Rise residents. My now ex-partner had never been in the High Rise after that first visit to the lobby in 2003 despite having now been in the community for ten years. After visiting me a few times, she declared:

“There are people here I have never seen before in my life. This place is a separate culture!”

Yet “High Rise culture” has never made it on to an ethno-cultural map of the Northwest Territories. Unlike so-called local traditional cultures, it is not written up as a tourist attraction or described as a source of pride. No one, not even its tenants, would tell you that the High Rise is “the real” Hay River.

Chapter 2

Billy

Gary

Destiny

Why This There?

June 20 —

October 25, 2015

Billy showed up for his interview with six cans of Molson Canadian beer, a bottle of white wine, and a small bottle of Root Beer Schnapps.

He was one of the seven men who immediately responded to the participant recruitment flyers I slipped under the High Rise's eighty-five apartment doors. I often saw Billy at the local pub when he was on his "out" rotation from one of the diamond mines.

He worked in logistics, which I understood to roughly translate to putting things and people in the right places around the worksite and camp. In the interview, his speech style wavered from wildly excited to quiet and conspiratorial. It was clear that he felt vulnerable about leaking any information about the mines that could get him into trouble.

"They really keep tabs on you, you know."

Billy was over fifty years old when he was let go from his job at a meat packing plant in Toronto. When he heard the news about diamonds in the NWT in the mid-1990s, he knew where to go to find better work.

When he arrived in Hay River, he spent his first years in the shipping industry. Billy worked the boats for his first summer, and then actively pursued a job with the mines as a more permanent employment option.

Billy got a job with a local automotive company that held multiple contracts with the mines. Part of his company's winning bid proposal is their claim to a 100 percent Northern employee rate. Since Billy had an address and had been in the territories for three months, he was considered a "Northerner," and eligible to be hired.

He spoke with slight frustration about the policy. On the one hand, it had given him a leg up to get into the mines, but now he felt like he was stuck in Hay River. He had wanted to move back to Newfoundland and fly back and forth like many of the other subcontractors, but giving up his address would mean giving up his job, as the 100 percent Northern employee policy was strictly enforced, at least at his level.

Billy had been saving for quite some time, and he bought his first home, a small trailer, the winter after we initially spoke. I would pass him on the street occasionally, and at one point he let me know that his job position was more vulnerable than he had initially communicated. Additionally, owning a home made him more concerned about keeping a steady job.

In late May 2009, he told me that the workforce at the mine had been cut in half. His job was considered part of the site's maintenance, so regardless of whether it was in production or not, he was still needed. Still, he was concerned, because the mines were increasingly ending subcontracts. He had heard of some workers being let

go by the subcontractor and then wooed back by the mine directly. These were not circumstances he could count on. He was doing his best to do what he called a "top performance" on each and every shift.

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Gary arrived from the maritime province of New Brunswick in 2008. Gary's booming voice and assertive stance stood in stark contrast to the Seven Dwarfs sweatshirt he wore to my apartment on a Sunday afternoon in August. He sat in a wing chair with his feet thrown over the right arm. He was in town on a contract to install sprinklers in a newly built assisted-living facility.

Two years earlier, Gary was living in his car in Woodstock, New Brunswick, when a contractor picked him up to work as labour on a job at the local hospital.

A few days into the job, the boss realized that Gary would have to be registered as an apprentice. The hospital was a government project, and in New Brunswick all provincial projects require labourers be enrolled as apprentices to accumulate hours toward professional certification. When the job ended, Gary had worked enough hours to write his first block of apprentice tests. He was delighted when he passed, but his excitement quickly dissipated, as the employer would not take him back due to the legislated wage increase that came with training.

While on the job site, Gary worked with someone who did contract work in the Northwest Territories. Gary's new contact had passed along information for a company that did similar work to Gary's new trade: sprinkler installation. With his unemployment

payments dwindling, Gary sent a resume to Yellowknife. That same day he got a call from the employer with an offer to fly him up the following day. He explained it this way:

“Well, I am single, right, and I don’t care and I’m tired of not paying my payments. I’m tired of Honda Canada calling me everything but a delinquent, right. I’m tired of having surcharges at the Royal Bank. I said yes. I had no idea. I’m not world travelled. I’m 51 years old, and I had never been on an airplane in my life. Well, the next day, I took three!”

His first project was putting in a sprinkler system at a power plant in a diamond mine. Largely, he enjoyed the work.

“It’s awesome, The food is next to none.”

He did note that there were a few downsides.

“In a way, it’s a glorified jail. The only difference is if you screw up, you get kicked out. But I had a good experience.”

When his first three weeks were complete, he was flown home, where he collected unemployment insurance until he got another call from Yellowknife. Now on a second contract in Hay River, Gary was enjoying the high salary he’s earning.

“Well, that is what I’m here for. The money, not anything else. I get awesome pay: \$18.00 an hour. Plus, for every hour I work safely, I get one dollar put in a kitty for me. I can cash it in anytime I wanna buy tools. I get a food allowance of fifty-five dollars a day. I work two hours of overtime every day and I work every Saturday. It works for me because I have nobody to care for but myself, and I can go

anywhere on a minute’s notice.”

Gary’s employer was paying for his High Rise apartment. His wage, without overtime, was actually on the lower end for the North, but compared to New Brunswick, it was extremely high. Because Gary did not have to pay to subsist in the North, he found his temporary stay quite comfortable, yet his participation in the Northern economy puts downward pressure on wages. At the job’s end, he had accumulated 1,200 hours of work; he was able to go back on unemployment and prepare to write the second block of apprenticeship exams.

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My third night in my High Rise apartment, I was uneasy with myself. I was certain that I had overestimated the move into the building as the perfect jump-start to fieldwork. I lay awake lost in plans to improve as an ethnographer the next day when the distinctive thumping sound of hip-hop music started coming from the apartment next to mine. When I listened closely, I recognized the unmistakable sound of Flo Rida’s club anthem from the early 2000s, “Low.” It was three in the morning and the track was on repeat. I assumed the apartment next to mine was occupied by men who worked rotations in the diamond mines. Mine work typically consists of two weeks of twelve-hour shifts in the mines followed by two weeks out.

The next morning, to my surprise, I saw a young woman come out onto the balcony next to mine. Her metal-framed balcony door squeaked loudly. As did mine. Over time, this sound became the signal to the other that we wanted to talk.

Even with the crisp October air, Destiny wore a slinky, lacy-strapped tank top and a zip-up hoody left undone. She had on dark sunglasses, the kind Audrey Hepburn might wear. Leaning on the iron railings, and talking every evening until the snow made it impossible, I came to learn that Destiny was a twenty-two-year-old Dene woman, a hip-hop aficionado, an herbal tea lover, and an absolute perfectionist when it came to her appearance.

She combined intricately braided hair with dark and glamorous eye makeup. She was a member of the K’atl’odeeche First Nation Reservation across the river from the town of Hay River. Destiny hadn’t travelled far to move into the High Rise apartment next to mine, yet, she spoke like she was worlds away from her life on the reserve.

“I’m never going back,” “Why would I want to be stuck over there?”

Even though the town and the First Nation are separated by a relatively narrow stretch of river, travel between the two isn’t always straightforward. In winter, a ploughed ice road lets vehicles go across from reserve to town in under five minutes. The all-season bridge is at the town’s southern boundary. In warmer weather, it takes about twenty-five minutes by car to make the fourteen kilometre trip around and across, bumping along a dirt road. Taxi fare is \$50 each way. In town, the First Nation is simply called “the reserve” and on the reserve, town is simply referred to as “across.” Without vehicle access or sufficient resources, being “stuck on the reserve” can be taken literally.

“I got this apartment because I am going back to school. I was just sick of all the partying and shit at my

mom's. I just had it. With going to school I get my own place. I am gonna take real good care of it, like, keep it real clean and stuff."

Determined to be an ideal tenant, Destiny would do a "killer clean" every Saturday before attending to her social plans for the evening. Her apartment consistently smelled of bleach and hairspray. She decorated the walls with carefully lined photographs of family, friends, and eventually, an anthropologist. She hung a poster of Tupac Shakur next to the Dene Nation flag.

"What are you taking at school?"

"Um, like, mining, or something like that."

Destiny enrolled in a training program for higher paid underground diamond mine work. She jumped on the offer when someone pointed it out to her. She let me know that it would be "real good money."

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In this small community of 4000 people, the High Rise looks desperately out of place. It is rare to see a tower of this scale not beside others. Unlike most high-rise towers, which face other towers, this one casts its midnight summer shadow on what feels like an endless stretch of taiga.

High-rise residential towers like this one were increasingly common in the postwar northeastern United States after World War II. Inspired by Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier's "Radiant City" concepts from the 1930s, tall, high-density housing was a hallmark of Western architectural modernity in big cities.

Hay River's new building was designed to house well over 300

people and offer amenities like a coin laundromat and a convenience store, accessible from within the building. The original drawings included a second story above-ground bridge to the businesses across the street. These type of modern features were common in Canadian cities confronting winter weather.

The presence of a lone high-rise tower on a subarctic landscape is striking and impossible for any visitor to ignore.

To understand why and how a tall, modern tower came to be built in a small subarctic town, it is important to understand some broad outlines of the history and geography of the area. The High Rise overlooks the town's namesake, the Hay River. The Hay River travels north from Alberta and connects to Great Slave Lake, one of the world's largest freshwater lakes.

The mouth of the river provides for excellent fishing. As such, it was used seasonally by the Dene peoples for thousands of years. Dene people fish and hunt and thus chose different sites in the region to make their livelihoods. Existing seasonal sites became more permanent dwellings for some Dene when the presence of the fur trade posts and missionaries began to take root in the 1860s.

At the turn of the twentieth century, settlements along the lakefront on both sides of the river began to take shape.

The High Rise was in the planned centre of Hay River's "New Town" on the west bank. A Toronto-based developer bought the key downtown lots and based the High Rise plans on British-imported designs increasingly common in Toronto in the

1960s. With the new pipeline project rumoured to be in the works, the building was imagined to accommodate the eventual influx of migrants.

It was meant to showcase the North as a place with potential to be modern, a place where non-Indigenous people could live with city comforts.

Unlike other modernization schemes across the Arctic and Subarctic, which were aimed at the Indigenous population, the High Rise was aimed at attracting a working middle class that was not yet necessarily in town.

The so-called modern features of the town's development like a recreation centre and multiple grocery stores were, and are to this day, essential to drawing labour north on the promise that one can lead a good life, by southern standards, north of the sixtieth parallel.

The High Rise was officially named Alexander Mackenzie Place, after the Scottish explorer credited with mapping many northern regions and waterways.

Like many things in settler colonial Canada, these naming practices are integral in erasing Indigenous presence.

The High Rise, as an icon of modernity, helped to create an image of northern Canada as available for investment and development.

Chapter 3

Ivan

Michelle

Infrastructural Prospecting

Signs

December 16, 2017 —

April 23, 2017

Ivan moved to Hay River from Chile in 1978. His apartment had the identical layout as mine, yet it felt unfamiliar.

The walls were filled with neatly framed family photographs and posters of airplanes. Ivan's 11-year-old son stood hiding behind the front door as I arrived and quickly took off to a friend's apartment. Ivan sat down, crossed his legs, and began to tell me about his thirty years in the Northwest Territories.

"Being an immigrant and coming up here is like winning the [lottery]. When we arrived, they were desperate for help. Dad took a job as a janitor for \$1000-a-week and could not believe it! Although my father had been wealthy in Chile and had owned his own business, he did not mind being the janitor because he was still treated like a 'mister.' We became servants, but we were well-treated, so that was confusing to us."

In 1979, the nearby Pine Point lead and zinc mine just east of Hay River was in full swing. Ivan got a job as a mill operator for \$12.20 an hour. While employed, the company paid for his room and board. He stayed

for three and a half years. He told me about the strength of his union at that time: the United Steelworkers. They taught him about coffee breaks and got him an English tutor. These are two lessons he said he was still grateful for.

"I was mostly working with Native guys, some from Manitoba, some from Fort Resolution. That's how I know so many elders from there. Those guys were all at Pine Point working the day shifts at the saw-mill."

During a recession, the mine took a six-week closure. Ivan had wanted to move up to surface work and took the closure as an opportunity to move on. When the mine reopened, he was re-offered his position, but he turned it down in favour of pursuing his diploma for motor vehicle licensing and instruction. Ivan rattled off a long list of the career changes that took him all over the Territories. He had tried owning a restaurant in Yellowknife with his wife but ended up back in Hay River when it did not get off the ground.

"We were happy to come back to Hay River. It's friendly here. At first, I thought it was creepy, weird, but now, I think it's special."

Ivan was now a truck driver for one of the largest ground shipping companies in the region. He had been with the company long enough to primarily go on short-haul day trips. His load was usually groceries and mail destined for different communities on the same side of the lake as Hay River.

Ivan's marriage was in trouble and that was what landed him in the High Rise. He had faith that God would bring him and his wife back together

again.

Since Ivan's arrival in the late 1970s, the number of immigrants to the Northwest Territories has tripled, making Northern locals more multicultural than ever before.

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Michelle had moved to Hay River and the High Rise from a nearby Indigenous community. Michelle was thirty years old and two semesters from completing her high school diploma.

"I am sick of planning for my future."

Michelle was one of eight young mothers who lived in the High Rise. I met her at the Hay River community college. Before teaching the work readiness course, I was invited to talk to the college students—all women—about being a woman in university. It was supposed to be motivational. Tim, the college director, felt that many of the women were very close to moving on but that for some reason, they continued to drag their feet close to graduation or in the application stage for university. My job was to help them make a five-year plan. During my best effort to provide a non-condescending and informative talk, most of the women looked completely unimpressed. In a one-on-one conversation later, Michelle explained her feelings on the matter;

"I mean, you spend all this time planning out what to do, and you think, okay, this is going to work. Then, of course, something happens, and you are right back where you started. It's a waste of time, all these plans."

Michelle had two children who were in primary school. After talking for some time, she let me know that she was expecting again, and that was why she was so resistant to commit-

ting to more courses. She explained:

“My boyfriend is looking for full-time work now and that means in the mines. He will have to do two weeks in, two weeks out. I can’t go to school and raise three kids when I have to be alone half of the time.”

I asked her about other employment possibilities for her boyfriend, but she was adamant:

“The mines pay really well; we will be able to get ahead.”

Michelle did not return to the college for her final semester of her GED. In the new year, she and her family left the High Rise and moved in with her parents. Her boyfriend had not had much luck getting a job in the mines, so they needed to cut expenses before the baby arrived.

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The High Rise was at its inception an instance of “infrastructural prospecting,” meaning that in anticipation of the arrival of mega-projects, local and non-local investors stake claims on the kinds of supporting infrastructure those mega-projects may need.

The importance of infrastructural prospecting struck me as I interviewed Albert, the first manager of the High Rise. In the 1970s, he left his position as the town’s school bus driver to take the new job. He recalled the early years of the High Rise in a tone that tacked back and forth between enthusiasm and remorse. Now in his seventies, with weathered tattoos and living in a small modular home, Albert told me about the eagerness of local business owners to see the High Rise happen.

“It was all about the town’s Big Wheels, you know what I mean? The

Big Wheels wanted it. And they got it.”

As Albert’s comments about the “Big Wheels” reveal, the High Rise stood for a future very few local people wanted. The local newspaper referred to it as a “human filing cabinet.”

While the building owners advertised it as offering “modern, cosmopolitan living on par with cities like Calgary,” local people saw it as an imposition that represented all that is wrong with urban life.

For its supporters in the 1970s, the High Rise was a clear sign that the North was “ready” for development and modernization. However, during construction of the High Rise, plans for the pipeline were shelved as a result of Indigenous activism, a growing Canadian environmental movement, and the falling price of oil.

Holding a coffee mug that said “Believe” in cursive lettering, Albert described the High Rise as “a white elephant.” In North America, “white elephant” is a term used to refer to an expensive burden that fails to meet expectations.

The construction of the High Rise was a feat in its own right. The company that built Toronto’s CN Tower was brought in to erect the structure. Building materials had to be shipped in by rail, a process that was stalled when rail workers went on strike before all of the materials had arrived.

The cost to build the High Rise was far more than anticipated. Occupancy once it was completed was much lower than expected, creating almost immediate financial problems. Albert described having to take materials like toilets from empty apartments on lower floors to replace broken items in the occupied units.

“There was no money left for upkeep, so I had to make do with what was around.”

The High Rise was meant to house new middle-class professionals, which has not been its fate.

In the High Rise, top units are renovated and have better views. These units are generally occupied by white public servants. Indigenous and immigrant renters tend to be clustered in poorly maintained units near the bottom.

I was told explicitly by many people in town that I should try and get a unit on a higher floor to avoid “the worst of it.”

Even if the building was and remains a financial disappointment—it has been sold five times since construction and has gone into Receivership more than once—it is part of the architecture of extraction in that it houses a “just in time” labour supply for resource booms and busts.

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Two structures mark the centre of the subarctic transportation town of Hay River. The first is an eight-foot inuksuk. The second is the “tallest residential building” in the Territory, the Mackenzie Place high-rise.

Across the street from the High Rise, the inuksuk stands on the lawn of the fire station and town hall. Inuksuit are stone cairns once used as navigational markers on arctic landscapes that otherwise held few distinctive features. While inuksuit are typically built from found stones, this one is an imitation made of a tan resin and is hollow inside. Inuksuit often symbolize permanent connection to place, landscape intimacy, and reference Canada’s northernmost ethno-cultur-

al group: Inuit.

The High Rise and the inuksuk present themselves as distinct symbols with separate semiotic duties. They each point to configurations of time and space outside of the present.

The inuksuk points to a distant past, while the High Rise was intended to mark the way to a “modern” future. Simultaneously “modern-in-the-making” and “ethnically traditional,” Hay River is often talked about in terms of these temporal polarities, always reaching out and away to some other time, never fully being a kind of acceptable present. Despite their differences, both structures were erected in the latter half of the 1970s, on the heels of a pipeline that never came to pass.

Infrastructure from past projects—even failed ones—animates contemporary concerns over extractive futures.

Chapter 4

[silence]

August 27 – 31, 2017

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Chapter 5

Chris

Marion

Disappointments

The Fire

September 1, 2017 —

October 3, 2018

Chris had been in Canada for seven years and had not once returned home.

He emailed me to set up his interview and I could not place his name from his message, although I had been in the building for six months by the time I put up recruitment flyers. I had never seen him before the day I showed up at his two-bedroom apartment on the third floor.

In a spare bedroom he had set up a recording studio where he sang and recorded Filipino folk songs, as well as original works in what he simply referred to as “my language.” He would send the CDs he recorded to his wife and children, who still lived in the Philippines.

From our conversation, I learned that Chris had trained as an engineer and worked in the capital city of Manila before graduating. He then went to Saudi Arabia for five years to work for a German company. He used his savings to return home in the late 1980s and started a small business, which then failed. He arrived in Canada to work for Magna, an automotive systems company. He thought he was going to work in Toronto but

was told by his employer that he was “mis-oriented” and would need so-called “Canadian experience” for those positions. He was given a job in Magna’s factory in St. Thomas, Ontario. He held it for two years before being laid off.

Chris took a job at a local fast-food chain. He described it as being “a little bit embarrassing” when he told me that he kept the job in order to support his family. When he saw a six-month contract with the NWT power corporation, he applied for it. He was on his second six-month contract when we spoke in the High Rise. Although he was extremely proficient in English, Chris seemed certain that without learning to minimize his accent, he would never get a better position. He often asked me for English lessons, as ESL courses were unavailable in town.

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Marion pulled up to the High Rise in a Ford Focus station wagon in November. Her possessions filled the back half of the car. In the passenger seat was Sadie, her French bulldog, dressed in a sailor’s costume. Marion was one of four new tenants in the High Rise who had come to work as nurses or nurses’ aides in the new assisted living facility. Marion was close to retirement and felt financially underprepared. She was a registered practical nurse working in Ontario and had come up north in the early 1990s to earn the higher salaries afforded to Northern and rural public servants. She had saved enough to return to Ontario and buy a house. However, over the course of her four years in the North, the conditions of work in health care provision had changed significantly.

The deterioration of conditions of

work in other parts of the country is a large part of why people move north.

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Although the Mackenzie Place High Rise sits on a relatively flat stretch of subarctic landscape and can be seen from seventy kilometres away, for many residents—both in the town and in the tower—it is often described as a sight better left unseen.

Wearing out in ways common to postwar towers, the slow decay of building materials and of its internal functions have been expedited by four months of sub-zero winter temperatures, incessant sun in the summer months, and unpredictable rental income that ebbs and flows with the region’s mineral and gas economy.

The exterior paint is dull and chipping. Some balconies are now condemned. Signs warning tenants not to go out on the unstable concrete have been taped to sliding glass doors.

For many local people and visitors to the region, a weathered tower on a subarctic landscape fails to meet expectations about either industrial progress or natural purity of the Subarctic. The 2008 Lonely Planet travel guide for Canada called Hay River “hard-bitten,” which caused quite a stir locally and was primarily blamed on the unsightly High Rise.

For the Northern middle class, the material failures of the building are often blamed on tenants who are presumed to be transient and thus disinterested in the arts of domestic care. My two years in the High Rise proved otherwise. Most tenants took great care to have their apartments reflect them. Walls were adorned

with neat rows of photographs of friends and family. Surfaces might have a single knickknack made by a relative or Northern craftsperson: a birch bark basket, or a stone carving of a bear.

The upkeep of the units was an opportunity for self-expression, but was equally a way for some tenants to distance themselves from the accusations that all High Rise residents were, as one of my interlocutors put it, “riff-raff.” Many tenants I interviewed described the building as “ghetto” and maintained that they would not be living there for long.

An important part of being in the High Rise was expressing that you didn’t truly belong there.

Tenants expressed many disappointments with the accommodations in the High Rise. Most glaringly was having to pay a rental price near double the national average for a unit in disrepair. Other disappointments seemed small but gained weight by their everydayness.

Like trying to get through the narrow entranceway with large bags of groceries and tripping on peeling linoleum tiles.

Or having to evacuate when the aging fire alarm goes off.

Or having to wait for 10 minutes for an elevator because the other one is out of service.

Or having to hear couples fight and trying to decide “how serious” it is and whether you should react.

While tenants expressed many laments about the physical state of the building and the behaviour of their fellow residents, there were intimacies afforded by the thin walls

and slow, cramped elevator everyone had to use. One afternoon when my collaborator and I entered one of the two elevators and a tenant, a man in his fifties said,

“I guess this isn’t the one?”

His eyes ran over the perimeter of the scratched shellacked wood-panelled elevator walls.

“Guy said an elevator was covered in blood this morning. Blood everywhere.”

The man was in the building while on a short work contract to install stucco ceiling at the new hospital.

For newcomers, these visceral events, and possible traces left in the elevator, offered an opportunity to engage.

“I hear it wasn’t no one from the building,”

We then noticed three thin dark red streaks on the door close to the bottom. For the rest of that day, everyone will use elevator exchanges to try to piece together what could have happened. Those who sit and smoke at the picnic table out front will get pieces of the story from the property managers, who are out watering their struggling plants. One manager repeats the same joke to each passerby:

“Twenty-three hours of sunshine. You think this shit would grow faster.”

His wife hauls a green watering can in and out of their ground floor unit. These events and others that were much more serious—domestic violence ending in death, people falling from balconies, physical fights in the parking lot—drew people’s curiosity and criticism. Who or what was responsible for these types of violence?

These spectacular events—although less common than people reported—as well as people’s mundane everyday difficulties are what people wanted to talk about most.

It became clear through countless interviews that these concerns were not interpreted as failures of expedited resource development but of the building itself.

People, for the most part, wanted out. But there was nowhere to go.

It is in the wanting to leave the High Rise that high wage work in mining comes to make sense. For the underemployed, to secure work in a mine was often a stated goal. For the professional-class tenants, their time in the building and in the community was to amass “experience” that could be used to bolster their chances of finding a job somewhere else, and moving on.

Disappointment creates a sense of wanting an otherwise, a collective feeling of “not this kind of future, but another one.”

More often than not, when I told anyone that I was in town for research and living in the High Rise, I would be told, “that’s not the real Hay River!”

Hay River is sometimes described as “not the real North” on account of its physical location as one of the southernmost communities in the NWT and its population being half non-Indigenous.

How can spaces like a transportation community so crucial to national and global economic markets be considered “not the real” North?

How can a good segment of the working class be considered “not the real” Hay River?

How can a building that can be seen from anywhere in the community be interpreted as separate from it?

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I received a photo of billows of black smoke coming from the High Rise via text in March of 2019. As the day went on, the same photo and the accompanying news story were sent to me multiple times from various friends living in the NWT. The High Rise had a massive fire.

All 150 tenants were evacuated, and temporary shelters were set up in the town's recreation centre, in the friendship centre, and on the K'at'l'odeeche First Nation Reserve. The cause of the fire was unknown.

To this day, there is nothing conclusive about how, or perhaps who, started the blaze. The High Rise remains condemned. Residents have not been allowed to move back in. Many found other sources of housing, while some people continue to be without permanent shelter.

The local newspaper estimates that over a dozen people, primarily Indigenous residents, including some elderly people, have yet to find stable housing.

After the fire, the High Rise was purchased by what a local newspaper described as "a sophisticated Western Canadian company".

The company, Heritage Valley Capital, has a limited web presence. They self-describe as "providing double digit returns for investors looking for passive, secure income, through real estate development projects and cash flow products".

The purchase of the High Rise is the latest iteration of infrastructural pros-

pecting. Past failures become future extractive opportunities for those who can afford them.

In talking to local media about plans to renovate the High Rise, the investors imagine the desires and aspirations of future tenants who are not yet there. One developer commented:

"There's nothing stopping that building from having a gym, having a theatre, having a quartz countertop and being the same that you would get in Toronto".

The investors told local news that their aim was to help address the region's housing shortage, but just who will be housed in the next iteration of the High Rise is unclear. As of March 2023, no work has been done on the property.