



Unofficial Commemorative Bench

The “Commemorative Bench and Tree program” offered by the City of Toronto allows people to purchase and create small monuments in parks of their choosing.¹ For \$1,753 or \$2,530, you can install a plaque with text of up to 120 characters on an existing or new bench, or for \$738, in front of a newly planted tree. Tree options, all native to what is now known as Southern Ontario, include the Sugar Maple, Black Maple, Red Oak, Tulip Tree, Serviceberry, and Skyline Honey Locust. The City promises to maintain the bench for ten years, and the plaque for two years, with a one-time, free plaque replacement. If a tree dies within the first five years, it will also be replaced for free. The City vets all applications and ultimately determines if, where, and when the benches or trees are installed.

Though the program states that it can be used to pay tribute to an occasion, the vast majority of these plaques memorialize friends and family: the sample text on the application form for the program suggests, “To assist you, common phrases include ‘In Loving Memory Of...’” I see many of them around the city, nearly all of them with the name of someone dead and a sentence hinting at what and how they loved or how they are remembered by someone else still living. I appreciate how the plaques are installed at the foot of the trees, as if the memory of the dead person were embedded in the tree, so that the memory is still growing, not fading away or boxed up, but still branching out into many different points.

There is no other official program offered by the City that allows anyone to buy and install what is, in essence, their own public artwork; the Commemorative Bench and Tree Program is the only one. Plaques installed through the Commemorative Program are maintained by City workers, much in the same way that official statues of colonizers/death engineers—Ryerson, Macdonald—are or were maintained, with annual waxings, graffiti removal, etc. What drew me to the program is this fact of the City having to maintain something; its offer, however cryptic, bureaucratized, and limited, to care for something.

I applied to the Commemorative Bench and Tree Program for Glasgow St. Parkette but was immediately rejected. The staff person wrote back to say that “Glasgow St. Parkette has been delisted from the program, would you like to choose another park?” I have not yet heard back as to why Glasgow St. was delisted, but I would guess that it’s because of its recent renovation, which includes new benches, paving, and planting areas. The new benches are curved semi-circles with solid metal backs; they cannot be drilled into easily for plaque installation, unlike the classic wooden park benches. There is not any more room for planting new trees either.

Glasgow St. Parkette was renovated in 2018; before this, it resembled many other parkettes in the city: grass; patches of lilies, shade, and sun; a few benches. Now, it is immediately identifiable as a “revitalized park,” with its pale wood boardwalk, rubbery soft playing surface, silver column lighting, and symmetrical installation of the curved benches. The fancy new furniture stands out in contrast to the size of the parkette, which is approximately one house lot, and used to be home to an auto garage. A possible reason that the parkette exists is because land that hosted an auto garage is too polluted, or too polluted to profitably recuperate, to build a house on.

In the summer of 2017, a year before the parkette renovation, CampusOne, a twenty-four storey, privately-owned, student residence tower opened. Located at 245 College St., the building backs onto the north end of Glasgow St., looming over the lane-way of small, two- and three-storey houses. The tower is unavoidable from all around the Chinatown neighbourhood; you can’t help but look at it when you’re looking at the sky. It looks like all of the other new towers in Toronto, grey-blue boxes that look vacant even when occupied.

CampusOne is owned by Knightstone Capital Management, a real estate development company that, on its website, has seemingly trademarked the term “ACADEMIC ASSETS™” and claims to be “Canada’s leading developer of academic properties.” Marketing prominently notes that CampusOne is a “University of Toronto affiliated residence,” which likely serves its purpose of reassuring the parents of seventeen-year old students. The affiliation, however, is only based on the fact that U of T operates the meal plan, and the tower is located on land owned by U of T.

On Reddit threads about CampusOne, the mandatory and non-refundable meal plan, for those who live in units without kitchens, is one of the residents’ most frequent complaints. As of July 2021, it costs \$1,960-2,050/mo. to rent a studio apartment without a kitchen and without a “living” area. There is no studio apartment option that includes a kitchen. The meal plans range from \$5,690–\$6,150 for two semesters and must be spent at the CampusOne cafeteria location only—it is not transferable to other U of T Food Services locations. Residents say that they try to use up the money remaining on their meal plans at the end of the term on chocolate bars and other non-perishables.

The prices for other unit options are similar to the studio apartment: a two-bedroom apartment without a kitchen and common area costs \$1,860/mo. The prices stay in the \$2,000/mo. range, for three, four, and five bedroom apartments that also do not have kitchens or shared common areas.² The four bedroom apartments are essentially four bedrooms in a row, with two small bathrooms at the end of the hallway. From the sales brochure, which does not list square footage, it’s impossible to tell how big any of these spaces are in relation to each other.

In a Reddit thread from 2018, Arce complains, “Lots of cameras and security everywhere to the point that it’s creeping me out. When I’m in the study room security would come in every 1 hour to take a pic of a barcode to show that they checked that place.”³ In a thread from 2020, igotrejectedfrommath, says, “The biggest money grab on the planet. Leaving there and going to a condo was the best thing I ever did.”⁴ persistingpoet says, “super shady

business practices, i warn everyone i know against moving there.” And although all of the marketing is geared towards students, I found out over email that you do not need to be a student to live at CampusOne.⁵

When the proposal for CampusOne (or 245-251 College St., as it was then known) was first announced, in 2010, the proposal was for a forty-two storey tower. The neighbourhood’s opposition was immediate—in a letter dated February 2011, Ceta Ramkhalawansingh of the Grange Community Association wrote:

...this proposal is perhaps the most insensitive and “out of control” proposal that has ever been presented for the South East Spadina planning district in the four decades that I have lived here. The height and massing of this development at 42 stories pays no attention to its context and will create a harmful precedent for both College Street and Spadina Avenue.⁶

This initial proposal was rejected by the City Planning department: the proposed building would have been 137.55 metres tall, while the zoning for that area is capped at 14 metres. Knightstone Capital then revised their proposal to twenty-four storeys (80 metres, over five times the allowable height), and to expedite the process, appealed to the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) in March 2012. The OMB (now reconfigured as the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal) was/is notoriously friendly to developers, a fairly reliable way for them to circumvent City planning regulations and community dissent. A group of Glasgow St. residents, the Grange Community Association, and other neighbourhood associations came together to oppose the development at the OMB in 2014.

At the time, Glasgow St. was mostly inhabited by Chinese families and seniors. As Julie Lam⁷ writes in her letter to the OMB in 2013, My parents arrived in Canada in the early 1950s and when we moved to Glasgow Street, there were at least 6 other Chinese families on this street. And they (the parents) still live here. Similar to my parents, they do not speak English well enough to communicate with you, thus I feel that I am representing what I understand to be their views as well.⁸

She goes on to say:

As a child, my siblings and I would play with our friends and neighbours on this street. Because it was not connected directly to College Street or Spadina, we could play on the street without worrying about traffic... Visitors are often surprised about the quaintness and tranquil nature of this street. It often feels like a small town – we know each other. We look out for each other. We help each other out.

Julie also warned of how the CampusOne development would set a precedent for other buildings on the south side of College St. and the surrounding neighbourhood.⁹

Ultimately, the OMB ruled in favour of Knightstone Capital and CampusOne and rejected every single one of the community’s concerns about the building, including an alternate proposal for a twelve-storey building. The OMB decision primarily focuses on planning issues like height and massing, with no mention as to the neighbourhood character of Glasgow St. or Chinatown south of the building. The issue of the private ownership of a student residence (for a public institution) that several groups objected to—including a student group at U of T—was dismissed by the OMB adjudicator: With regard to privately owned and operated student residences, the Board has experience with these types of facilities in other municipalities and from the evidence, they are becoming a successful method of delivering required services in light of shrinking financial resources.¹⁰

There is no further explanation as to whose financial resources are shrinking, or how or why; the statement is simply that they’re always shrinking. The development is justified by the threat of scarcity, which can be manufactured through policy: for example, the creation of private student residences offloads the responsibility of the university to adequately and affordably house its students. The threat here is not only described but performed.

When I spoke to Julie Lam on the phone in 2016, she told me that the community members were devastated after the decision. This was echoed by other members of the neighbourhood associations. They thought that they would have a good chance in forcing some changes to the building’s design at the very least, given its extreme deviation from the City’s own planning guidelines.

The OMB ruling also led to the disbursement of one million dollars to City coffers from Knightstone Capital via a Section 37 agreement, which “permits the City to authorize increases in permitted height and/or density... in return for community benefits.”¹¹ The million dollars was split between \$500,000 for Toronto Community Housing Corporation improvements; a “sensory garden” at the public school nearby; and \$350,000 for “streetscape and parkette improvements on Glasgow Street and in the immediate vicinity of the project, including bicycle facilities.”¹² This is how the 2018 renovation of Glasgow St. Parkette was funded.

As in other “community benefits” agreements, it’s not stated how much the developer will actually profit from the increased height or density on their building as compared to how much cash they gave the City up front. In the case of CampusOne, Knightstone was able to build over five times the prescribed height, from 5 storeys to 25 storeys. How many studio apartments does that equal? How much money results from \$2,000/mo. (or another “market” rate) charged per resident in perpetuity? Isn’t multiplying something in perpetuity equal to infinity, equal to the incalculable, equal to the unpayable? Another word for this could be: unaccountable, as in, not able to be justified, not responsible.

The row houses on Glasgow St. were built to accommodate workers in the second half of the 19th century, and were primarily home to the Jewish community before Chinese immigrants (mostly Cantonese and Toishanese) moved in. There is also currently an encampment in the parkette: someone lives in a tent there. One day when I visited this past summer, his tent had been trashed by

City of Toronto workers early in the morning: all of his belongings inside thrown away, his shelter thrown away. He returned later that day regardless, because the parkette is his home.¹³ That same week, the City of Toronto cleared other, larger encampments from around all the city, the police and hired private security violently shoving people out, crushing and bulldozing their tents and belongings; the City called this a “restoration” of parkland.¹⁴

Restoration and revitalization are words that often come attached to calls for public art and proposals for development. They’re also words that, armed with the prefix denoting repetition or “again,” obscure the fact of erasure. Not destruction but a return, like resurrection without death. Or, as in the settler-colonial doctrine of *terra nullius*, land with no lineage, the proclamation of new beginnings without end.

This constant assertion of innocence shapes every environment. For example, what the City of Toronto’s Commemorative Bench and Tree Program allows is for people to memorialize their individual relationships: their own private losses, tragedies, or joys, scattered around in various parks. There are few official sites or options for collective grief, and even fewer for admissions or acceptances of responsibility.

The community’s fight against the CampusOne development and Knightstone Capital is not immediately visible in the landscape of Glasgow St. What can be seen is the shadow of the tower. A tower, the physical evidence of force, is not easily stopped. But its innocence or neutrality can be disproven, as seen in the testimonies of its residents and neighbours.

And I try to imagine the tower as something else, a monument of some kind: maybe it’s a giant waterfall in the sky, continually pouring, splashing, dumping, continually refilling itself, endless, sparkling, prismatic, causing all sorts of rainbows, dumping hard, never reaching the ground, suspended, roaring so loudly that the air around it is shaking, trembling, breaking.

Amy Lam
August 2021

The Glasgow St. Parkette is located in Toronto/Tkaronto, the land of the Anishinaabe, specifically the treaty territories of the Mississaugas of the New Credit, as well as the lands of the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat. I wrote this text on this land, and give my respect to its rightful keepers.

With thanks to Julie Lam, Ralph Daley (of the Grange Community Association), and Blake.

This text accompanies plaques installed on the benches at Glasgow St. Parkette that say: “TO RECOGNIZE THE EFFORTS / OF THE PEOPLE WHO TRIED / TO STOP THE TOWER / AT THE NORTH END OF THIS STREET” and “向曾經反抗 / 此街在北面的高樓發展的社區居民 / 致敬.”

This project is part of The Parkette Projects, 2021, curated by Shani K Parsons and presented by Gallery TPW.

Photo credit: Yuula Benivolski

- 1 City of Toronto Commemorative Bench and Tree program, <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/awards-tributes/tributes/commemorative-items-in-parks/>
- 2 Some of the two to six bedroom apartments do have kitchens and living areas; I was unable to find out what the proportion in the building is of apartments with kitchens and those without. CampusOne sales brochure, <https://indd.adobe.com/view/fbe5400-89c0-4e06-ba3a-3d565914a4c6>
- 3 “Thoughts/Experience on CampusOne?” Reddit thread, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/UoT/comments/8ndjo0/thoughtsexperience_on_campus_one/
- 4 “CampusOne??” Reddit thread, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/UoT/comments/hx5qib/campus_one/
- 5 Especially International students: a banner on the website states, “WE ARE WHERE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS WANT TO LIVE,” and a logo stating “Feng Shui compliant” is clearly angled towards students from China. International (or migrant) students pay close to five times higher than domestic fees, and are “today responsible for almost 40% of all tuition fees across Canada.” Many, especially at smaller community colleges, do not come from wealth but are funded by familial debt. Nicholas Hune-Brown, “The Shadow Business of International Education.” *The Walrus*, August 18, 2021, https://thewalrus.ca/the-shadow-business-of-international-education/?fbclid=IwAR2ALy-oxrZxDbmbuuss8_o5AT4rDPTSTQV5M4ZlP6HfocallB9CmL7R4
- 6 Ceta Ramkhalawansingh, Letter to the City Clerk, February 12, 2011, Grange Community Association website, <https://www.grangecommunity.ca/en/245-251-college-street/>
- 7 No relation to the author.
- 8 Julie Lam, Letter to the Ontario Municipal Board, October 17, 2013, Grange Community Association website, <https://www.grangecommunity.ca/en/245-251-college-street/>
- 9 The recent development proposed for 315-325 Spadina, in the centre of Chinatown, approved by City Council in 2021, is aimed towards students: plans from 2019 include 118 “double studio” units, in which two people would share one studio apartment. Jack Landau, “13 Storey Rental Proposed on Spadina North of Dundas,” *Urban Toronto*, July 31, 2019, <https://urbantoronto.ca/news/2019/07/31-storey-rental-proposed-spadina-north- Dundas>
- 10 Ontario Municipal Board, Decision #20140019, November 18, 2013, <https://www.omb.gov.on.ca/ces/CaseDetail.aspx?n=PL120328>
- 11 “Section 37 benefits,” Planning Act, City of Toronto, <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/planning-development/official-plan-guidelines/section-37-benefits/>
- 12 City Council meeting minutes, December 11, 2014, <http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2015.TE2.24>
- 13 My thanks is also extended to this resident for providing input on my text for the plaques.
- 14 City of Toronto news release, July 23, 2021, <https://www.toronto.ca/news/city-of-toronto-continues-to-help-and-support-people-experiencing-homelessness-3/>