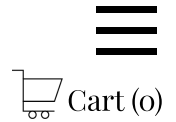


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By Angel Callander



The year 2020 was, for many, characterized by forcing our collective attention toward myriad social issues, emphasizing not only their interdependence on each other, but on exploitation and class differences as well. It became clear very quickly that ‘essential’ jobs are the ones that cannot be done from home; they are also the ones with the lowest pay and little to no health benefits or sick days. Large numbers of people already in precarious positions lost their jobs, their income, and for many, their homes. Demands for rent cancellation and mortgage relief, particularly for those in large Canadian cities, underscored the cycle of working people living month-to-month who pay large portions of their paychecks to landlords, most of whom use tenants’ rents as their only income, and who in turn give that money to the bank for their mortgage. But who did the government ultimately bail out? Amidst subsidies for banks, there was never rent cancellation or legislated relief for tenants, just calls from government officials for landlords to “do the right thing.”

Housing activists, such as London’s Vicky Spratt, point to the concept of ontological security, the human need for stability and safety, as some psychologists suggest housing stress is one of its most undermining factors. (1) From November 16 to December 28, 2019, Hearth Garage’s inaugural show, *New Strata*, focused on the embodied, human dimension of housing—specifically in how physical space is connected to spiritual and emotional states. Conceptually, the exhibition situated itself within the nebulous subject of comfort as it opens up into matters of sanctuary, family, precarious employment, gentrification, community organizing, and how ‘comfortable space’ is both material (in its arrangement of cherished objects) as well as sentimental. What the exhibition could not have predicted is how the issues of housing and precarity would become naturalized in mainstream discourse just months after its opening.

← An alternative art space running out of a rented garage in downtown Toronto, Hearth evokes the history of artist-run-centres as part of a self-determining framework for emerging artists that gives a home to non-institutional artwork, operating on a mandate of artistic collaboration that situates artists in their lived contexts as workers, tenants, and community members. In its own right, Hearth’s very existence draws attention to the uniquely stratified economies of housing and arts-related work in Toronto. Taking ‘stratification’ as a starting point, artists Misbah Ahmed, Cadence Planthara, Andrew Harding, and Shannon Garden-Smith used the space’s first show to demonstrate the many layers inherent in the concept of home: as a residence, a neighbourhood, a place of origin, or a stable feeling of belonging. Ebbs and flows of activities and relations across personal, social, and geopolitical levels emanate from the works as emblems of living and place-making, such as familial traditions and colonial legacies that have sought to undermine the multigenerational home. →

This idea of place-making exists within the tension of ‘home’ as, at once, a sociological and emotional concept. Considering how space is conceived of abstractly and lived in physically, the reasoning for disconnect between political decisions around housing policy and the needs of regular people becomes more prominent. Conceived space relates to ideology, and is organized by urban planners, architects, and politicians, most often in service of capital interests. It is observable within increases of “luxury” developments; deregulated rent caps, housing markets, and building standards; and poor public transit infrastructure. To speak about lived space requires a more holistic understanding of culture, social life, and class relations, and is present most often in the ways in which we choose to cohabitate. This definition has been tested more than ever in the lockdowns we’ve endured over the past year, and even now we are seeing the negative side effects of being cut off from community resources, social connections, and public spaces on overall mental and physical health.



Image: *Untitled (quadrant painting)*, 2015–2019 by Cadence Planthara. Photo by Philip Ocampo.

In *New Strata*, each artist was given the opportunity to tend to the various domestic and social aspects of lived space, and what it means to create a home. Cadence Planthara's piece, *in the wall* (2019), was patterned across the walls in the delicate gestures of a housewarming ritual by tucking freshwater pearls and peppercorns into small holes and cracks. The significance of this action is in the continuation of tradition: the work exists as both a purely decorative gesture, and also a generative act in its determination to confer good luck in the space and those who inhabit it. The tradition speaks to a mode of thoughtfulness and moving forward by wanting better for one another; an encouraging gesture for communicating more effectively.

Shannon Garden-Smith's site-specific work, *Sand Candle* (2019), consisted of several mounds of sand each cradling a layer of gel candle wax with several burning wicks. Sporadically placed across the garage floor, they acted as reserves of warmth and observance—somewhere between fireplace and altar—for gathering as a means of place-making. The work represents the kind of metaphysical desire of the homemaker to create an enduring home out of people and their objects, contrasting with the more cynical, abstract demands of a real estate market which creates spaces that exist only to be bought and sold.



Image: *Sand Candle*, 2019 by Shannon Garden-Smith. Photo by Philip Ocampo.

← *Untitled (tribute)* (2019) by Andrew Harding provides the space with laser-cut gargoyles in orange, symbolic guardians from mythology and familiar icons of classical architecture. Beyond mere decoration, the functional use of gargoyles is to divert water from the sides of buildings, which in this case symbolically allows Garden-Smith's fires to continue burning. Another work, *Urban Hide* (2019) creates 'hides' from the kitschy t-shirts often found at gas stations that portray misrepresentations of North American Indigenous culture. In his approach, Harding identifies with the dichotomy of the insincere consumer product and his own identity, making a wall display that emblemizes colonial legacies through something essentially iconoclastic.

Misbah Ahmed's work continues on the theme of tradition and touches on the challenge of embracing one's cultural heritage while living within the confines of a colonial nation. *Champa* (2019), a wood panel in four sections painted with several layers of imagery, depicts three portraits in profile, unfinished architectural forms, and a flowering tree; symbols which come together like various layers of a family history.

An accompanying text for this work by Rowan Lynch contemplates the familial, oral tradition of home remedies, in this case gargling salt water for a sore throat, followed by other axioms of living that include the banality of opting for whole wheat over white bread, to the pessimism of spending most of one's time toiling at a day job in order to pay for food and shelter.



Image: (left to right) *Champa*, 2019 by Misbah Ahmed; *Untitled (tribute)*, 2019 by Andrew Harding. Photo by Philip Ocampo.

The works in *New Strata* were able to present a lighthearted tone in upholding non-capitalist ways of private living through familial and cultural traditions, while revealing the harsher undertones of participating in contemporary city life. For artists in particular, the concept of home is constantly destabilized by networks of class and identity relations, and economic policies of austerity. This means that the reality of creating the infrastructure for affordable housing and spaces for artists is still a long way off, as our current cultural and political spheres continue to disagree with one another. For example, the Toronto Arts Foundation released its 2019 Art Stats report in December 2019, surveying 1,500 artists and arts workers. Of those who responded, 80 percent did not even think it was possible for them to make a living wage, with half of artists reporting an income of less than \$30,000 a year. Seventy-three percent have considered leaving Toronto altogether. Many more who were not included in this data likely feel the same way—not necessarily because they want to, but because they are being pushed out. Hard statistics like these bring into sharp relief that the metaphysical desires and requirements of making a home will undoubtedly come up against the sociological realities of housing and the ever increasing cost of living. Gentrification alone does not just produce these issues, but housing as a commodity more broadly, since the cultural cachet of an area translates into its political economy—but rarely ever in service of the people who already live there. Condo and community planning developers often use young artists desperate for opportunities to inadvertently contribute to their revitalization schemes, such as Westbank Corp’s development at the former site of Honest Ed’s in Toronto, or their Vancouver House condos.

Artist Shellyne Rodriguez, in her 2018 essay, “How the Bronx was Branded” (which I highly recommend reading), highlights developers’ “artwashing” tactics for attracting artists to working-class neighbourhoods, and with them more capital investment, setting in motion a process of displacing long-time, low-income residents that ends with pricing out the artists, too. She writes: “How would an artistic practice that aims to disrupt alienation appear in our hallways, elevators, and all the spaces we share in our communities? What if these considerations were practiced outside of the art world, without foundation grants or institutional support as just an act toward freedom?” Identifying the shared disaffection of all people struggling against the stranglehold of the wealthy on all facets of life is a key factor in practicing real solidarity, and the frontier of housing and a sense of belonging—two sides of the same coin—provides a significant vantage point for this process.

In a review of the Queens Museum exhibition, *After the Plaster Foundation, or, 'Where can we live?'*, Andreas Petrossiant asks one of the enduring questions of art's relationship to gentrification: "Can art adequately reckon with the politics of displacement when its very institutions remain integral to cities' gentrification processes?" In tandem with the questions posed by Rodriguez, the answer will always lie in the ability of artists to remain involved with their communities and to work in their shared interests. Importantly, it was a group of artists who started Toronto's (o) Encampment Support Network. In this sense, Harding's work also reminds us that housing activism can and should engage with Indigenous struggles against the state's manufactured monopoly on land use and property rights, as both ultimately have a vested interest in decommodifying housing and organizing against the private and political interests that allow corporations to destroy neighbourhoods and green spaces.

New Strata is not a museum exhibition; it exists outside the institutional arts framework by gathering the works and unique perspectives of local emerging artists, and being independently funded and run by artists themselves. Ironically, the show reviews the various aspects of the one thing that should be constant and safe: adequate housing security. By allowing the physical to counterpoise the metaphysical—that of housing and space, with that of comfort and belonging—the exhibition's narrative presents a more well-rounded dialogue than any straightforward discussion of gentrification ever could, since the concept of ontological security requires both sides. Modestly housed in a rented garage beside a convenience store, Hearth chooses to emphasize and showcase the human aspect of Toronto's arts community by using its inaugural exhibition to both literally and figuratively make a home for artists.

1. More information on this phenomenon can be found in studies and articles by sociologists and social workers (some unfortunately paywalled), see the following: <https://www.tasc.ie/blog/2018/03/06/housing-precarity-and-the-private-rental-sector/>, <http://europepmc.org/backend/ptpmcrender.fcgi?accid=PMC1934341&blobtype=pdf>, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277953621000666>, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14036090120617>

New Strata ran from November 23 – December 28, 2019 at Hearth Garage in Toronto, ON.

Feature Image: Installation view of *New Strata*, 2019. Photo by Philip Ocampo courtesy of Hearth Garage.