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Domesticating the church: the reuse of urban churches as loft living in the post-secular city

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ABSTRACT
In recent years, numerous mainline Christian denominations throughout Canada have sold their places of worship in the real estate market in response to declines in religious membership and participation. At the same time, a growing demand for creative residential spaces by a group of the new middle class encourages the redevelopment of churches into upscale lofts, a practice connected to but divergent from the post-industrial loft living made popular in cities like New York. In this paper, I explore how the production and consumption of churches as lofts represents a novel terrain of private urban redevelopment. Church lofts are an emergent form of housing and the latest frontier in the remaking of material, cultural and religious landscapes in the post-secular city – a context where novel forms of secularity take shape alongside new expressions of religion. With an empirical focus on Toronto, I investigate how ‘redundant’ worship spaces are appropriated and transformed into private domestic spaces of commodified religion and heritage. Rebuilt as unique but exclusive places to live, church lofts are part of a secular upscaling of the central city, a process that increasingly remakes the city as a place of capital reinvestment, middle-class colonization and socio-secular upgrading.

Domestication de l’église: habitat de lofts dans la ville post-laïque

RÉSUMÉ
Ces dernières années, de nombreuses confessions chrétiennes traditionnelles ont vendu leur lieu de culte sur le marché de l’immobilier dans tout le Canada en réponse aux déclins du nombre de fidèles et de participation. En même temps, une demande grandissante pour les espaces de résidence créatifs de la part d’un groupe de la nouvelle classe moyenne encourage le redéveloppement des églises en lofts de luxe, une pratique liée, tout en étant divergente, à l’habitat post-industriel de lofts rendu populaire dans les grandes villes comme New York. Dans cet article, j’explore la façon dont la production et la consommation des églises en tant que lofts représentent un nouveau terrain de redéveloppement urbain privé. Les lofts d’églises sont une forme émergente d’habitat et la dernière frontière dans la récréation...
Introduction

Standing on the corner of Pape and Danforth Streets, in what is known as Toronto’s Greektown, Carl and I gaze at the building looming before us. Nestled among turn-of-the-century Victorian houses sits what was once a centre of the Presbyterian Church of Canada. Built in 1912, the Riverdale Presbyterian Church accommodated over one thousand people and was the regional headquarters for the Presbyterian community. Carl tells me that, just days after moving in to what it is now, the Glebe Lofts, he met an old member of the church on the front steps. ‘He stood there weeping’, Carl said. Concerned, Carl consoled the man and discovered that he was one time, long ago, the church organist. ‘As he sat out there crying in the street … he told me how the building just brought back so many memories’, Carl recounts. Knowing all of this, it is hard to look beyond the structure’s distinct architecture and religious features to see a loft building; ‘isn’t that the point?’, Carl asks. The 20-foot
ceilings, historic character, community feel and the fact that it ‘isn’t a claustrophobic box in the sky’ are all part of the allure, ‘part of the package’, he explains.

The Glebe Lofts is part of a wider trend of loft construction that began in the early 1970s when new domestic spaces emerged in the abandoned shells of manufacturing and warehousing properties in places like Manhattan (Zukin, 1989). Artists were among the first to make these spaces into ‘living lofts’, a practice that eventually helped to remake the gritty blue-collar image of the inner city. Close on their heels were the new middle class, a group whose growing affluence was matched only by their developing tastes for alternative urban lifestyles and aesthetics rooted, partly, in the counter-culture ambience of the loft lifestyle. The appropriation of these spaces eventually resulted in the wider transformation of the culture and economy of local neighbourhoods and the housing markets on which they depended. From what seemed like a Manhattan oddity, loft conversions quickly spread to other deindustrializing and gentrifying cities in North America, Europe and Australia (Hamnett & Whitelegg, 2007; Podmore, 1998; Shaw, 2006).

Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of habitus is central to the production and display of loft living. Habitus is best understood as both a ‘system of classified and classifying practices’ and the differentiation of these practices and products (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 171). For Podmore (1998), the loft-living habitus is defined as a social location (often in the inner city) in which class identification is produced by linking aesthetic dispositions and social practices. The media, loft consumers and loft developers, for instance, play a combined role in constructing the material and social landscapes of lofts as distinct spaces of new middle-class identity. However, the development of the loft habitus is not limited in its expression to post-industrial spaces. While the Manhattan style is the basis of loft living, new types of housing expand the aesthetic frame upon which the loft form circulates. As with manufacturing lofts, post-institutional buildings like churches offer spaces couched in historic architecture and distinct cultural iconographies that fit the aesthetic demands of discerning middle-class homebuyers.

The Glebe Lofts is also unique. The building’s history and its 32 custom loft spaces make it unlike any other housing product on offer in Toronto. In Carl’s top-floor suite, for instance, the original roof trusses, certified with a 1912 Algoma Steel stamp, hang like room dividers acting as what he calls ‘an authentic reminder’ of the building’s unique past (Figure 1). These and other ‘reminders’ are crucial aspects of the changing values of such buildings, from sacred places, to everyday living spaces and real estate products. Such features represent explicit narratives of distinction and quality, potentially raising the economic value of the property. But so too, the apparent contradictions between form (church) and function (home) reflect not simply a sense of novelty in the market, but also highlight the complex relationships between the sacred and the secular. For some scholars, church lofts are ‘enduring and novel spaces of secularity’ in the emerging post-secular city, a context where ‘countervailing forces of secularization and desecularization have converged with particular intensity’ (Hackworth & Gullikson, 2013, p. 72).

In this paper, I explore an alternative reading of the loft-living habitus that takes into consideration the context of church conversions. I focus on Toronto’s inner-city church lofts to explore how the domestication of churches presents a context where changing religious and consumer culture intersect with the transforming residential demands of the new middle class. I engage directly with recent calls (see for instance: Hackworth & Gullikson, 2013) for a deeper exploration of the emerging morphology of post-secular urbanism, particularly in regards to uncovering how secularization is expressed in the contemporary urban landscape.
In this case, I highlight how the consumption practices of church loft housing owners contribute to the processes of secularization and gentrification in the post-secular city.

This paper begins by exploring the forms of loft living – from empty warehouses to empty churches. Second, I explore and link literature concerning consumer culture and secularization with a specific focus on their role in transforming consumers’ taste for urban housing. Third, I analyse the demand and consumption preferences of church loft owners in Toronto’s downtown neighbourhoods. Using interview data conducted with owner-occupiers of church lofts in Toronto, I examine how owners perceive, use and construct ‘home’ in a church loft. As we shall see, these expressive forms of housing represent new articulations of the loft living habitus, and novel expressions of secularity in the post-secular city.

**Emerging geographies of loft living**

In *Loft Living*, Zukin (1989) was the first academic to trace the conversion of manufacturing buildings to living spaces. Focused on the warehousing district South of Houston Street in Lower Manhattan (SoHo), Zukin highlighted the processes involved in transforming this post-industrial area to a thriving artists’ district, and later to an upscale residential market. From the outset, artists were the innovators of the loft trend as many in their ranks began targeting a growing number of relatively cheap but uniquely large industrial properties for their potential as live-work spaces. Described as ‘the Artistic Mode of Production’, the eventual wide-scale appropriation of industrial loft spaces by artists accentuated, but was also contingent upon, wider shifts in the planning policies of Manhattan and the sociopolitical control of the city. In this sense, Zukin argued that loft living was connected to a process of urban social change and a marketable residential style in a number of North American and European cities which are ‘old enough to retain an early industrial architecture and sufficiently diversified to support an expanding middle class’ (Zukin, 1989, p. 256). Fundamentally, the SoHo loft landscape was part of the deindustrialization of the 1970s. But this was also a process inscribed by wide-scale recapitalization of the inner city. ‘Change in the use of lofts’, she argues, ‘corresponds […] to the movement of corporate-sector investment capital into a
selected number of decaying downtowns’ (Zukin, 1989, p. 256). Rather than a rapid process, however, the emerging loft landscapes were forged from long-term transformations of the City’s political economy, contributing ‘to the de-industrialization and gentrification of the urban core’ (Zukin, 1989, p. 256).

Since Zukin’s work there has been limited yet sustained academic interest in the fate of industrial properties and the impacts of adaptive reuse (Hamnett, 2009; Hamnett & Whitelegg, 2007; Podmore, 1998; Shaw, 2006). From the mid-1980s onward, artists in most urban areas were no longer the dominant group in the loft market as rents inflated beyond their means from the demands of artsy urbanites and new corporate interests looking for higher profits and higher value uses. In Montreal, for instance, Podmore (1998) explored the creeping ‘SoHo Syndrome’, a process in which the distinction of Soho lofts is not bound to its original urban context. Rather, SoHo habits are taken up or ‘embodied’ as social space and an aesthetic disposition, or simply ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1984), that new middle-class urbanites in other cities use as a form of distinction.

In London, loft living had matured by the late 1970s, mimicking the SoHo style. Lofts got their start along portions of London’s de-industrialized riverside, in places like the Docklands, where warehousing districts were rapidly converted to ‘prestige’ apartments (Hamnett, 2009). More recently, neighbourhoods like Brixton and Clerkenwell have been sites of new rounds of residential redevelopment and lower income displacement. Conventional patterns of gentrification mix with ‘new build’ condominium towers (Davidson & Lees, 2010), and brownfield redevelopments (i.e. post-industrial and post-institutional re-uses) (Hamnett, 2009). This transformation is the result of the residentialization of corporate buildings, as opposed to industrial structures, a common practice in most global cities (see for instance: Barnes & Hutton, 2009; Remøy & van der Voordt, 2014). Hamnett and Whitelegg (2007) highlight the emergence of Clerkenwell’s loft market in the late 1990s, a process that has diverged from other London neighbourhoods. The development of these loft spaces did not evolve from the artist community, but rather unfolded from the residentialization of empty office spaces that were casualties of the recession in the early 1990s.

Elsewhere, Heath (2001) explores how Toronto adopted an office conversion strategy as a means to stimulate the local economy while realizing new urban policies geared toward densification and the transformation of downtown spaces into a ‘24-hour city’. Empty office space made available from the fallout of the late 1990s recession resulted in over 16 loft projects across the downtown core. By early 2000, office vacancy levelled off as most of the viable vacant building stock had been converted.

Aside from the conversion of corporate and industrial space, redundant institutional properties are also routinely targeted for loft housing. These properties range from publicly funded and managed facilities like schools, hospitals and government buildings (Schneekloth & Feuerstein, 1992), to religious institutions and their various spaces of worship (Mian, 2008; Morisset, Noppen, & Coomans, 2006). Closure of public facilities is often connected to political-economic shifts, some of which are linked to urban governance strategies that foster entrepreneurial and neoliberal policies at the expense of social services. Such agendas have led, in some instances, to the rationalization of properties as a means to meet public sector austerity measures. Public schools, for one, are assets that school boards routinely sell in response to demographic shifts and budget cuts (Basu, 2007). And while redundant schools typically find a variety of new uses, loft and condominiums, especially in competitive real estate markets, are increasingly attractive options to housing developers (Phipps, 2008).
Clearly, such cases demonstrate how contemporary lofts are spaces where transforming cultural values and changing economic circumstances encourage a re-valorization of the built environment. Considering these emerging terrains of loft living, in the remainder of this paper I focus on the underexplored context of loft living in ‘empty’ churches – a practice that involves the appropriation of religion and the expression of secularity in the making of domestic space.

**Loft living in the post-secular city**

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
And always end much at a loss like this,
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,
When churches will fall completely out of use
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
A few cathedrals chronically on show,
Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?
(Larkin, 1960)

The reuse of churches is not a new phenomenon. Roaming Britain’s countryside in the 1950s, poet Philip Larkin penned his most popular work on the subject. Larkin broods over the fate of churches in post-war Britain, questioning the future of Christianity and the prospects for empty church buildings – what he calls ‘special shells’. His poem was prophetic. By the late 1960s, attendance figures for the Church of England, the largest religious institution in the land, were waning and the need for chapels and churches was on the decline (Gill, 2003). Far from the conditions before Second World War in which mainstream religious groups increasingly demanded urban space, shifts in the spiritual and non-spiritual demands of contemporary societies meant that religious spaces were no longer valued in the same ways. Today, as Larkin predicted, many cathedrals remain on ‘show’, as highlighted points on the tourist map, while numerous rural chapels and urban worship spaces are abandoned to be, as he puts it, ‘let rent-free to rain and sheep’ or simply ‘avoided as unlucky places’.

Since Larkin’s time, numerous scholars have furiously debated the future of religion in the contemporary city (see for instance: Berger, 1979; Cox, 1965; Taylor, 2009). Decades-old predictions of the annihilation of religion by an ever-growing faithless society have given way to a more global view of the patterns and processes of religious practice and observance. According to some scholars, we have surpassed the pall of a ubiquitous secularization and instead have entered into the post-secular period (Baker & Beaumont, 2011; Molendijk, Beaumont, & Jedan, 2010). As mentioned above, evidence for the post-secular period is largely located in the urban context, where ‘secularization and secularism has to negotiate and make space for the re-emergence of public expressions of religion and spirituality’ (Baker & Beaumont, 2011, p. 33). Recognizing this shift, a growing literature has focused on the production and contestation of new spiritual landscapes, especially those linked to surging Muslim, Hindu and Eastern faith communities (Al Sayyad & Massoumi, 2010). Other research is exploring the role of faith-based organizations in urban place-making strategies, some
of which now incorporate values of faith and justice as a means to ‘re-neighbor’ poor areas by residents of a religious middle class (see for instance: Beaumont & Cloke, 2012; Hankins, 2012). However, as Hackworth and Gullikson (2013) point out, much less work has focused on the production of secularity in the urban landscape, despite its importance in ongoing discussions of the post-secular city (cf. Dwyer, Gilbert, & Shah, 2013). Indeed, questions concerning how secularism is expressed in ‘bricks and mortar’ have yet to be fully answered in the post-secular debate.

The reuse of churches as domestic space represents an example of a novel materiality of secularism in the post-secular city. On the one hand, declines in mainline Christian churches (e.g. Church of England, United Church of Canada) and the subsequent rationalization of church properties have fuelled the supply of empty churches ripe for redevelopment. Since the late-1980s, a focus on inner-city revitalization and the proliferation of the loft living trend sparked interest in reusing churches for private domestic purposes. Evolving gradually, a growing contingent of affluent urbanites, conservation-minded city managers, and specialty developers identified the potential for churches in the loft market. Increasing demands by savvy secular home-buyers and the growing cachet of the church loft have since pushed a number of urban worship spaces of various denominations and styles into the realm of loft living.

On the other hand, this emerging trend has also deepened the secularization of numerous inner-city landscapes. In particular, many of the new middle-class groups that have ‘recolonized’ post-industrial inner cities are demonstratively secular gentrifiers (Cimino, 2011; Ley & Martin, 1993). Wuthnow (2010), for instance, highlights how American urban ‘thirtysomethings’ and ‘twentysomethings’, key gentrifiers, have weak congregational ties in their inner-city neighbourhoods. Perhaps more important, the in-migration of the secular middle class also brings with it material and social transformations in local neighbourhoods. In this sense, the upscaling of services and establishments (e.g. housing, restaurants and entertainment venues) catering to the secular middle class can potentially result in the displacement of religious services, either through increased land rents or through changing the local demographic (Cimino, 2011). The point, in short, is that the steady rise of the urban new middle class represents not just a force in accelerating gentrification, but is also a key agent involved in reconfiguring the religious culture of the inner city.

Given the growing interest in church lofts and the potential changes that they afford, it is rather surprising that there is such a paucity of research exploring the wider impacts of these dynamic spaces. How do we account for the increasing demand of church lofts in local housing markets? Are these lofts merely another version of a wider consumer penchant for a post-modern ‘sublime’ (High, 2007), or do these spaces articulate specific social and secular perspectives? Aiming to fill this gap, I argue that the popularity of church lofts is a result of two interconnected processes: a subculture of consumption that increasingly appropriates religion as a secular commodity; and, a rejection of ‘mainstream’ housing cultures, especially those embodied in suburban and high-rise living.

**Appropriating religion as secular commodity**

In post-secular society, the borders between the religious and the secular, between spiritual practice and popular culture, are difficult to draw. In the urban context, some of these blurring boundaries are argued to be the result of the vagaries of postmodernity. Culture, from
art to religion, increasingly features as a commodity – elements reduced to objects of consumption that are bought and sold. As a result, scholars have called much attention to the emerging relationships between postmodern consumption and faith (Lyon, 2000; Miller, 2005). The notion of ‘bricolage spirituality’, where religious consumers claim both conventional religious positions and add on other spiritual elements, is but one example. The rise of this ‘a la carte’ religious marketplace is made possible by appropriating, displaying and embodying certain spiritualities (e.g. Feng Shui, astrology) alongside mainstream theology, a practice that enables alternative ways for ‘seekers’ to participate in religion (Lyon, 2000). Similarly, the church-loft phenomenon is implicated in the emerging relationships between consumerism and faith. In this case, however, the focus is a consumer subculture that appropriates religion, but which also transforms religious values into heritage commodities in an effort to build distinct yet secular identities.

Consumerism is a central feature of the postmodern. With an increasing array of commodities, cultural identities are forged through processes of lifestyle building and selective consumption – acts that ‘affect the ways in which people build up, and maintain, a sense of who they are, of who they wish to be’ (Bocock, 1993, p. x). For instance, building one’s ‘lifestyle’ is possible through the consumption of specific products and branding pitches that offer consumers opportunities to construct identity while in specific socio-economic life-stages. In this case, how people consume is a critical issue. Beyond seeing consumers as dupes, theorists like Veblen (1899) and Bourdieu (1984) explored consumer agency to uncover, for example, what consumers can accomplish through consumption, how they engage the objects they consume, and how they can form individual and/or group identities through the products they own and display. These accounts consider the role of consumer culture in the process of social differentiation and establishing social status. For Bourdieu, this means that consumption represents a key system for forging and maintaining one’s class identity. Furthermore, a multitude of products are used to create social bonds, badges of distinction, and markers of taste or prestige; products whose symbolic values ‘establish boundaries between some people and build bridges with others’ (Featherstone, 2007, p. 11).

In many ways, the church loft presents par excellence the reach of postmodern consumption. Indeed, the reuse of a church (and the retention of religious architecture as façade) for secular domestic spaces relies both on an emerging culture of consumption that appropriates religious items, and the possession and display of unique housing forms as a practice of framing urban middle-class identity. In the case of the former, religious culture is routinely commodified or appropriated in mainstream consumption and places religion among other social and cultural fields (Bourdieu, 1984) as a thing to be consumed; as statements of irony, parody, nostalgia or simply valued for their unique aesthetic qualities (Lyon, 2000). The construction of church lofts speaks to the ways in which consumption unmasks religious items from their ‘sacredness’, repositioning them as commodities that fit secular aesthetic menus. These properties thus represent powerful statements of secularism and reflect one part of the dialectics of secularization and religious revitalization in the city. In fact, converted churches represent a counterpoint to the ‘re-enchantment’ of secular properties like movie theatres and strip malls into spaces of worship and social outreach by a variety of religious groups (Goh, 2011; Vasquez, 2011).

But housing, too, represents a particularly loaded ‘commodity’ in the practice of contemporary consumerism. Beyond its role in building financial capital, housing represents opportunities to build social and cultural capital: as expressions of personal identity (Perkins,
As gentrification scholars routinely point out, the relationships between housing aesthetics, housing form and social class represent key elements linking economic capital and social representation (Bridge, 2001). That is, the ownership and display of certain housing forms offer critical spaces for new middle-class groups to symbolically lay claim to their status in the unspoken hierarchies of urban life. Jager (1986), for instance, shows how the middle-class upgrading of Victorian housing in Melbourne exposes an ‘architecture of gentrification’, a class battle that engages a permanent tension on two fronts: on the one hand, the external restorations of Victorian housing ‘expresses the middle class candidature for the dominant classes’, while, on the other hand, interior renovations distances this group from the ‘lower orders’ (Jager, 1986, p. 80).

Jager’s explanations of the resulting Victoriana aesthetic and the role of taste expectation in the housing market run parallel to the reuse of churches for new middle-class domesticity. In both cases, the ‘cultivation of an aesthetic faculty’ is associated with an attempt to ‘appropriate history’ (Jager, 1986, p. 79). Stripped of its liturgical content, religion is subordinated to an historical aesthetic. In the drive for status, association with a generalized history and the ownership of heritage artefacts, in this case possession of an historic church, ‘testify to the discerning taste of the possessor’ (Jager, 1986, p. 81). These are habits and dispositions that have become inscribed in the new middle-class habitus. But here too, middle- and upper-class desires for history may not simply be a ‘longing for a … halcyon past’, for ‘custom and routine in a world characterized by constant change and innovation’ (Caulfield, 1989, p. 624). Instead, they can represent an impulse for a ‘subjectively effective present’, an escape from a routine ‘placeless space and monofunctional instrumentality’ (Caulfield, 1989, p. 624). In this case, church lofts are overt means for homebuyers to distance themselves in space and time from the supposed ‘placelessness’ of suburbia and ‘homogeneity’ of high-rise landscapes.

**Rejecting mainstream housing cultures**

The social milieu of housing plays a crucial role in producing a new middle-class habitus. This habitus is defined, in part, through its location in the urban core and its differentiation from common housing forms. Specifically, the loft habitus is constantly refined through a rejection of mainstream housing cultures.

The most explicit of these is the rejection of suburbia, frequently argued as an important driver in the middle-class return to city (Ley, 1996; Slater, 2002; Smith, 1987). In particular, Ley (1996, p. 24) points out that the middle-class gentrification of Canadian inner cities was primarily a ‘statement of social identity and cultural politics’. Much like Caulfield’s (1989, p. 625) previous findings of neighbourhood change in Toronto – as he put it, the city’s middle-class housing consumers ‘find suburbs and modernist spaces simply unliveable’ – Ley (1996) argues that gentrification is a class practice that evolved from a marginal counter-culture, situated in the 1960s student movements. ‘Hippies became yuppies’ that localized their rejection of a standardized Fordist culture and mass-produced suburbs in devalued central neighbourhoods (Ley, 1996, p. 24). Neighbourhoods like Kitsilano in Vancouver or Yorkville in Toronto represented ‘oppositional spaces’ aimed at simultaneously counteracting the lack of distinctiveness, and ‘anywhereness’ of the suburbs, and, offered a critical celebration of the possibilities of progressive reform in local urban politics. In time, however, the reform language that was at the forefront of the movement transformed from a sociopolitical critique to...
a ‘language of lifestyle’, from ‘democratic public goals to therapeutic pursuits’ made possible, above all, through a new culture of consumption (Ley, 1996, p. 25).

A rejection of suburbia is partly couched in the design and aesthetics of the suburban neighbourhood – a master-planned landscape allegedly displaying repetition and a wanton disregard of heritage. In their place, older downtown working-class housing and ‘interesting’ heritage properties are targeted as spaces for restoration and renewal through ‘personalized’ aesthetic palates and interior design schemas. Taken together, practices of architectural exposure (of brick, wood and stone), sandblasting, whitewashing and ‘internal gutting’ aim to rewrite and appropriate lower class housing into markers of middle-class taste (Bridge, 2001; Jager, 1986).

But the rejection of suburbia is not the only mainstream housing culture repudiated by segments of the new middle class. In fact, the expansion of high-rise landscapes has also gained detractors (Kern, 2008). High-rise living, specifically understood as living in dense high-rise towers, is perceived by some as an ‘homogenous’, ‘commodified’, ‘cookie-cutter’ landscape that caters to young professionals living a particular urban lifestyle (cf. Gifford, 2007; Lehrer & Wieditz, 2009). Keenan (2011), for instance, argues that CityPlace in downtown Toronto, a 44-acre waterfront redevelopment project with several high-rise towers, ‘has the feel of a university quad, right down to the demographic’. This ‘demographic’ allegedly leaves

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**Figure 2.** Recent church loft conversions across Toronto’s older inner urban suburbs.
an objectionable mark for others seeking an upscale ‘mature’ urbanity. Instead of convivial places for the city’s growing population of creative professionals, Keenan (2011) sees this as a project of building ‘glass-and-steel suburbs in the sky’ – a prelude to the formation of ‘new urban ghettos’ in Canada’s metropolis.

In other cases, the rejection of the high-rise is also expressed in the perceived class lines that are now visible even within individual buildings. As development priorities in large cities press for denser living in towers with multiple points of affordability (Quastel, Moos, & Lynch, 2012), households in different life-cycle stages have to co-exist and manage their housing together. According to one journalist, the class lines are simple to draw as young first-time buyers living on the bottom floors fit uncomfortably with childless couples in the middle floors and the empty-nesters at the top (Browne, 2006). In this account, the generational mix ostensibly amounts to a ‘high-rise hell’ and ‘class war’, a dysfunctional community in different life stages having troubles cohabiting because of conflicting notions about how best to live (Browne, 2006). Whether or not this is entirely true remains to be seen as condominium construction expands across many cities (Rosen & Walks, 2014). At the very least, however, the emerging discourse of class wars inherent in the high-rise potentially pushes certain members of the new middle class with the financial and cultural capital to other forms of urban living that better accommodate their sociocultural needs. In other words, for those who have the means, spatial and aesthetic distance from other subgroups is paramount to constructing their identities and lifestyles. Like the rejection of the suburbs in which the new middle-class demarcated sociocultural space at a distance from the ‘middle middle class’, so too, segments of today’s new middle-class fractions seek their own space outside of the stigmatized multi-class high-rise (Bridge, 2001).

In the following sections, I investigate how the rejection of mainstream housing cultures and the appropriation of religion as a secular commodity represent two factors in the making and meaning of church lofts in Toronto, Canada. Interviews with lofts owners highlight how the consumption of religion in the making and display of domesticity connect to and (re) produce a secular loft habitus in the city centre.

Ownership and consumption in toronto’s church-loft market

The City of Toronto is Canada’s largest metropolis; it is a pivotal ‘gateway of international economic, cultural and migration flows’ (Rosen & Walks, 2014, p. 289). This global context sets the stage for an emerging church loft market – arguably the largest in the nation (Figure 2).

As a global city, Toronto’s religious and housing landscapes have been dramatically reconfigured in recent decades. The formation of post-secular and multi-religious spaces, including expanding populations of Muslim and Hindu communities, for instance, has led to a remarkable pluralism in public spirituality and religious expression (Beyer, 2008). But this emerging religious diversity is also marked by the expansion of an increasingly secular urban community with loosening ties to religious and spiritual services. Toronto’s dominant Anglo-Protestant groups have consistently lost members resulting in mounting pressures on local religious organizations and congregations which struggle to meet surging operational costs. In addition, the prioritization of urban conservation by secular institutions has ushered in new protective measures like designations for historic urban properties and is a practice that has expanded the menu of properties ripe for reuse.
As Canada’s global metropolis, Toronto also boasts the nation’s largest housing market. Put simply, Toronto exemplifies a duality of the global city: a rapidly expanding suburban landscape (Keil, 2012), and a booming condo-economy (Rosen & Walks, 2014). This dichotomy, however, fails to account for a diversified housing stock that includes an array of heritage reuse projects. Following an established market of post-industrial lofts, a growing number of developers have targeted redundant churches as hot-spots, a niche market that has been described by some builders as ‘[relatively] untapped premium real-estate’.

To date, over twenty religious properties have been converted to loft housing and many others are in the pipeline. Most of these projects are sited in the older inner suburbs, neighbourhoods with ageing housing stock close to the Central Business District, and with access to public transit and upscale consumption spaces. In particular, neighbourhoods like Little Italy and Dufferin Grove Park in west central Toronto are popular targets of niche developers and housing consumers seeking older but relatively cheaper low-density working-class houses and other unique heritage properties. In the case of Little Italy and the adjacent, Little Portugal, upgrading pressures have resulted in the displacement of Italian and Portuguese communities by an increasing number of middle-class professionals and new retailers (Murdie & Teixeria, 2010). Although originally attracted to properties in the eastern half of the region, a steady progression of renovation and gentrification has slowly migrated westward taking up a variety of properties, including local churches, in its wake. Along with the former Centennial Japanese United Church (CJUC) (now the Church Lofts), several reuse projects for upscale residential spaces are located in these upscaling areas: the former Dovercourt-St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church (now the Hepbourne Hall Lofts) and the former St. Cyprian Anglican Church (now West40).

The experiences of these former churches and their congregations are now common across the city. For the CJUC, a declining congregation (resulting from an ageing and suburbanizing community), rising renovation costs and changing neighbourhood demographics meant that selling the property and amalgamating with another congregation was the most prudent course of action. Similarly, the Bellefair and Kew Beach United Church has recently followed this path. Located in the Beaches neighbourhood, an area of long-standing gentrification pressures sparked by its proximity to beach amenities and low-density character homes (Walks & Maaranen, 2008), the Bellefair and Kew Beach congregation has recently sold its heritage worship space to a local developer for lofts.

It is important to note that only a limited number of developers have capitalized on the emerging landscape of redundant churches. Success in this niche market requires skilled craftspeople with experience in remaking heritage properties. Indeed, the production of church lofts is a complex process involving a combination of specialized actors (e.g. builders, architects, real estate agents) whose role goes beyond physical renovation to include, for instance, the adaptation of built material culture and the promotion of a loft habitus through marketing practices (Lynch, 2014). For niche builders, developing this premium real estate requires exploiting a building’s distinction and uniqueness often through the restoration of exterior façades and the incorporation of spiritual icons in their interiors. Many builders highlight remaining religious iconographies (e.g. stained glass windows), accentuate vestigial spaces like altars or naves, and restore exterior motifs in an attempt to create a religious patina or an ‘ecclesiastical look’ that imparts a type of moral monumentalism (Clark, 2007, p. 62). Clearly, recreating an ‘authentic’ religious past that commemorates the worship space and its former users is not the objective. Instead, selective histories are highlighted as hints
of ‘heritage’ or as ‘pasts’ adapted into novelties intended to separate the church loft from its suburban and high-rise counterparts. So too, the ‘sophisticated but serious charm’ of church lofts, as one architect put it, helps to stage a domestic space with a sense of the sublime – a religious past commodified and transferred into an economic premium in the housing market and a cultural premium for the secular loft consumer.

**Methodology**

The consumption of church lofts is explored through in-depth thematic analyses of 20 semi-structured interviews with church loft owner-occupiers in the City of Toronto from 2009 to 2012 (Boyatzis, 1998). In each interview, the participants shared their interpretations and opinions concerning the ownership of church lofts, religious values and views on city living. The interviews generally lasted between 40 minutes and 1 hour and were often accompanied by a tour of the building and the loft space.

The participants ranged in age from 48 to 78, all had post-secondary education, and the majority (15) had advanced degrees. While occupational profiles varied, the majority of interviewees worked in ‘creative’ industries: 2 acting instructors, 4 university professors/administrators, 4 journalists/media consultants, 4 marketing consultants. Most of the respondents were married (1 widower, 1 single) and cohabited in their lofts. While many interviewees reported having children (11), only one lived with a child in their loft. The majority of interviewees (15) also reported either having no religious affiliation or not being involved in a religious community. Three individuals reported as ‘atheist’, while only two reported as being active in a Christian community. Additionally, many respondents in this sample (12) had previously lived in and/or owned a post-industrial or post-institutional loft in the city.

This limited sample reflects the target market for church lofts, a typical loft consumer according to marketing media (Lynch, 2014) and builder expectations. For instance, according to a local developer:

> Our [church-loft] consumers are a little older and have a higher disposable income than average, in part because they are buying something more expensive, more premium … These folks have professional or personal interest in design issues and they are all pretty much in creative fields … they put value on the creative act.

Importantly, the majority of these ‘creative’ loft consumers are distinct from the working artists who have long been reported as the vanguard of loft living. The clients referred to above are largely ‘loft dwellers’, not ‘loft artists’, consumers who use and define lofts almost exclusively as domestic space. Podmore (1998) has argued that the social space of the loft is critical in influencing how users define themselves in relation to the loft habitus, a practice that explains how one may use lofts to (re)produce identity, taste and class. Unlike the loft artist who uses (post-industrial) lofts in ‘order to build an occupational membership and identity’, loft-dwellers define their position through owning and living in lofts located in distinct inner-city neighbourhoods, and through establishing an avant-garde domesticity in their private loft spaces (Podmore, 1998, p. 293). While limited, this sample fits the category of ‘loft-dweller’, but is also largely an older ‘empty-nester’ group of secular urban professionals. Moreover, based on their occupations and their proclivities for culture and heritage, this small sample is a segment of Toronto’s new middle class. But this profile also offers a contrast to the ‘typical’ condominium consumer: young, single, childless, first-time homebuyers (Kern, 2008). While some of this difference is partly attributable to ‘premium’
prices, there are also key social and cultural factors, like aesthetics and class, which come into play in one's decisions to purchase and live in a church loft.

**Domesticity and aesthetics in church loft living**

The church loft habitus is made possible through the social practices of housing consumers. The ways in which owners use, decorate and display their loft spaces both uncover the practices and judgements inherent in the loft habitus, and reproduce a recognizable housing product. In fact, residents tend to follow a pre-established aesthetic associated with post-industrial lofts. Open spaces, expansive volumes and lots of light, for instance, were routinely reported as desirable features of church conversions, features that have long been the staple aesthetic of ‘authentic’ industrial lofts. Moreover, several respondents stated early in the interviews that, like Isabelle, ‘had this been an old warehouse on the site we would have been just as happy, this just happens to be a church’. This, in part, reflects the notion that the loft is a ‘trans-regional cultural form’, a shared or collective conception and use of space by new middle-class owners (Podmore, 1998; Shaw, 2006). In this case, loft owners, whether they are in a converted garment factory in Montreal or a reused church in Toronto, seek a space that is consistent with an enshrined loft style most conspicuously represented in modernist designs, like the production of multipurpose interior spaces (e.g. live-work) and the celebration of a functional aesthetic. ‘Authenticity in loft spaces; according to Podmore (1998, p. 290), ‘revolves around retaining as much open space as possible while adapting the loft to new social practices’. The opportunity for owners to manipulate space and apply their own designs, many of which circulate in a collective field, are crucial elements to forging both a sense of personal domesticity and a legitimate connection to the loft habitus. Before I turn to that discussion, however, it is important to explore another common theme that links the church loft experience, uniqueness.

The concept of uniqueness and novelty is of critical importance. Owning and living in a place of marked heritage are explicit ways of connecting with a sense of authenticity – a key feature of postmodern urbanism and the loft aesthetic writ large (Zukin, 1989). During many of the interviews, prolonged discussions circulated around the value of uniqueness and, in several cases, respondents qualified their earlier views that warehouses could indeed function in the same way as churches. For Benjamin, owning a church loft offered a cultural value that is generally not possible elsewhere. ‘The quality of the spaces’ , he explained, incorporated some sense of the history of the [building]. Very different for the multi-story condo blocks which [my spouse and I] on the whole, actively detest … we were looking for uniqueness. This [unit] is unique, there are no other units like this in the building.

Similar sentiments were shared by Darryl, who valued his loft for its sense of individuality:

> What I like about it is that sense of history, it’s novel, no one else has it. I think that a lot of people that buy into places like this are looking for something different; they’re looking for something other people don’t have.

When pressed to define the source of the uniqueness, many respondents discussed the role of architecture and religion. For instance, religion was often oriented as a commodity – an ‘interesting’ but relatively depthless detail. David, for one, explained that the religious past of the church was not a functional aspect of the experience of the lofts. As he put it: ‘It’s neat to live in a church. It’s sort of a *niche* thing to say but the religious aspect doesn’t really mean anything.’ This ambivalence toward the building’s religious past is perhaps not surprising,
given the largely secular values of the interviewees sampled. While religion may play a part in the symbolic construction of the church loft, it does not feature with any cultural depth other than as a façade, a spectacle or a story line that adds a sense of novelty in the housing market. This ambivalence also reflects an inherent linkage to the loft habitus in general as the histories of previous use(s) are selectively adapted, disarmed and re-ascribed as a means to produce both a functional aesthetic and a form of distinction.

This point is most evident in Isabelle’s church loft. As atheists, Isabelle and her spouse have no connection to organized religion but do have specific interests in religious architecture and heritage. Reflecting on her loft space, Isabelle explains how religion has influenced her housing choice:

I grew up in a very Christian background … My mother actually thinks that maybe this will save me, living [in] a church! … Coming from that background and being an atheist and moving into a church had no meaning to me other than it’s a good structure, and I love the notion that buildings that were created on the dollar of religious institutions, I finally get to take advantage of them, I finally get to live in a nice space because they built a nice building.

Detached from its religious origins, the commodified church is now a place that Isabelle can fully appreciate and ‘take advantage of’. This shift, however, is not simply made possible by the erasure of a formal religious presence. Through material and symbolic renovations, the church has also transformed into a secular commodity and a heritage ‘space’ that sustains the tensions inherent in the class display of a gentrification aesthetic (Jager, 1986). For instance, Isabelle’s choices of interior decoration enact a specific display of commodified religiosity. Throughout the loft hang religious images and masks depicting Eastern deities, and in the basement, the loft houses the original crypt – items that she says have no personal religious significance, but that instead play an important part in creating an ‘interesting’ and ‘exotic’ feel. ‘We have a Buddha and Garuda on our porch,’ she noted, ‘it’s interesting because we have the Buddha standing with his back against the church, so apropos. It spooks our Hindu friend just a little bit, he says, “you’ve got every symbolism in here except Christian!”’ The crypt, in particular, plays an important role in this loft. Rather than remaining a religious symbol, Isabelle sees this as an interesting story line, a special space with which to display and present the loft’s inherent uniqueness:

[W]e have this little room which is the old crypt, now that makes people really fearful. You go down the stairs and we’ve got this little old Nepalese mask with skulls and everything and let’s face it, we camp it up, we adapt it for our own use … when we use the word ‘crypt’ [some of our friends and visitors] assume that the spirits of those dead who were buried and had their funeral services here are still around!

For Isabelle these ‘spiritual’ features offer an ironic but intriguing contrast within this post-sacred context. Much like the material church itself, religion is ‘adapted’ for their personal use and is commodified through decontextualized symbols that are ‘camped up’, ‘adapted’ and redeployed as interesting narratives. Such texts and signs are key discursive elements used by these owners to inscribe new meaning of place and domesticity. These explicit postmodern statements connect with a decor that is not just conspicuous, but also one that communicates their tastes and values. Reflecting on these matters, in the latter part of the interview, Isabelle amended her earlier comments about the relative insignificance of living in a reused church over a post-industrial space: ‘[this building] has an intensity, it’s a landmark. I talk about this building as a landmark, and I think we want to keep it as landmark building. The fact that this [was] a church, well that’s important’.
But of course not everyone responds to the symbolic and aesthetic aspects of these places in the same ways. Jennifer, also an atheist, highlighted this point:

A large number of people might be creeped out to live in a church …., With my history you might think that I would be one of those. I come from bible thumpers on both sides, and I didn’t believe as a kid but I had all the practice of it. I think of my grandfather, he would roll over in his grave to imagine that I was living in a church.

Although Jennifer is not ‘one of those who reads the re-used church negatively, her previous involvement in Christianity has framed her experience and left some lingering questions about the morality of domesticating churches. In this case, her comments point out how reused churches carry with them residual religious value, so that far from simply becoming just another building, church lofts continue to embody unique cultural meanings.

In this way, church lofts connect with a pre-established loft aesthetic and a loft habitus that (re)produces a particular secular new middle-class lifestyle that is distinctly urban. The adaptation and appreciation of residual religious value, redeployed as stage, narrative or landmark, is a powerful expression of secularity in the urban landscape. The domestication of a church speaks to an appropriation of the materiality of religion in the restoration and display of the exterior (or the ‘special shell’), and the re-inscription of religious culture in the making of ‘authentic’ and distinct domesticity. Simply put, the secular reuse of churches confirms and legitimates the displacement of particular religious expressions in the city centre.

**Church lofts as counterpoint to the ‘phony suburbs’ and the ‘ant-hill’ high-rise**

Besides the aesthetic value of church lofts as distinct housing, all of the respondents reflected on issues of location and commented on the value of their spaces in the ‘older’ inner city as key reasons for buying into the church-loft market. Indeed, the majority of church conversions are located in desirable neighbourhoods outside of the high-rise corridors, but still at a short distance from the downtown core. As mentioned above, the majority of church lofts are located in older inner suburban neighbourhoods where contemporary upgrading and gentrification is well established. Neighbourhoods like Summerhill and Roncesvalles increasingly attract affluent residents with rich consumptionscapes, older housing stock, transit connections and walkability – lifestyle features that are routinely factored into consumers’ housing decisions.

For Paul, owing a unit in one of the city’s most prestigious church conversions located in Rosedale, is fundamental to building a ‘European lifestyle’:

This [neighbourhood] is the best place in Toronto if you can afford it … This is very much a village atmosphere, we live a very European lifestyle … I don’t buy food even a day in advance. I’ll go to the butcher shop and see what catches my fancy just like if you were living in Paris; pick something up on the way home from work and cook, not something pre-made.

But Paul has not always lived a European lifestyle. In fact, the choice to buy his loft was made after 20 years of living in one of Toronto’s distant suburbs. ‘This was a radical change for us,’ he explained, ‘I got absolutely sick of the commute, sick of wasting my time. The suburbs didn’t make sense to how we wanted to live or who we really were.’

Distinct neighbourhoods and an individual’s place within them are part of this particular loft habitus. Instead of edgy or bohemian neighbourhoods that have long been the stamp of legitimacy and authenticity for live-work lofts, and the more commodified post-industrial lofts that have followed, the location of church conversions in ‘established’ and upscale...
neighbourhoods is a key aspect of their character. These lofts offer specific consumers not only proximity to a global menu of restaurants and boutiques, but also represent a particular social ‘milieu’ which contrasts directly with ‘suburban’ and ‘high-rise condominium’ settings. Inner-city living, especially in key neighbourhoods, represents a socio-spatial strategy for new middle-class gentrifiers (Ley, 1996). Character housing in specific neighbourhoods offers owners a way of displaying taste, but also affords a symbolic avenue with which to distinguish themselves from the values associated with both suburban and high-rise identities. The church loft habitus is thus partly (re)produced through both the physical and social access to consumption in distinct neighbourhoods, and in the fact that such neighbourhoods become themselves symbols of class and identity distinguished by their social locations in the city.

The rejection of the suburbs, evident in Paul’s comments above, was a common theme throughout the interviews. In various degrees, every interviewee described their interests in church lofts as a response to suburbia. Both the loft spaces and the neighbourhoods in which they are located were routinely regarded in stark opposition to a suburban identity, its lack of distinctiveness and its disconnect to spaces of upscale consumption. Reflecting Paul’s comment on the ‘European lifestyle’, Darryl categorically rejects the consumerism inherent in suburban living:

I don’t want to shop in Loblaws [grocery chain] … I just want to deal with local shopkeepers and quality products, and who I know. I know every single shopkeeper in two blocks in every direction … versus walking into Walmart in some suburb and getting the phony greeting from the guy at the door? No, I reject that. I’m rejecting the suburban approach to life totally, I don’t want that. I want to be with people who know me, I know them.

For Darryl, suburbia offers little in the way of quality consumption experiences, and this is in part a function of both what he perceives it offers by way of ‘products’ but also by way of its deficiencies in the experience of consuming. That is, suburbia is standardized, ‘phony’ or inauthentic; the inner city is dynamic, genuine and knowable. One’s class identity is thus refined through the types of exchanges in specific social locations, an aspect that many scholars have pointed out (Bourdieu, 1984; Featherstone, 2007). As Ley (1996, p. 307) asserts in his analysis of Vancouver’s Granville Island, arguably the city’s most popular consumptionscape, ‘transactions involve more than use value, consumption is a postmodern idiom of localism extolling the distinctiveness of the unique commodity, a perceived world of difference from the chain supermarket’. Correspondingly, with high levels of both economic and cultural capital, Paul can effectively enact and (re)produce an urban lifestyle that befits his class position.

Unlike the other respondents, however, Benjamin and his spouse left the suburbs for their church loft as part of a lifestyle change sparked by their interests in travel and heritage – an aspect that they described as simply lacking outside the city:

There is a strong architectural aspect [to our choice of owning a church loft], we like beautiful buildings. Why do we like spending lots of time in Venice? Why do we seek those parts of the city to spend our time in that are still reminiscent of the past of the city, which is of course what this whole Danforth Street [Greektown] is … this is a chunk of old Toronto … there is an architectural sense that you are part of something that is not just suburban or a set of bland residential apartments.

Importantly, the combination of heritage value and the ‘village-like Greek feel’ of the neighbourhood are global cultural and social attributes that drew Benjamin and his spouse to this church conversion. The experience of living in Venice brought them back to the city:
'we were] suddenly struck by how easy living [in a loft] was ... we are actually city people, we love the city'.

As I have argued above, suburbia is not the only social space that is rejected by individuals living in Toronto's church lofts. The interviewees also presented their repudiations of high-rise living. In a similar vein to the sentiments shared about suburban settings, many reported a distaste for the material and cultural homogeneity of high-rises, a housing form that was sometimes derogatorily referred to as an 'ant hill', 'the square' or 'boxes-in-the-sky'.

Simon, for instance, explained that his loft is the perfect setting for an urban lifestyle that he and his spouse, now unencumbered by the fact that two of three children had left the home, could finally establish:

We wanted out of the housing market and into the loft market because the lifestyle we wanted to create ... We like the fact that we're not in a square [a high-rise] ... I don't know if it's bragging rights but you feel a little more connected to the building then you would if you are one of ten thousand units [downtown].

The 'square' high-rises, as Simon calls them, are a stifling housing form, a place untenable to the type of lifestyle and community that he and his partner were looking for. Reflecting further on his role as a former condominium manager, Simon added that life in the smaller church conversion 'allows the people who live there to have more pride in the building, to have more sense of wanting to maintain its integrity than just allow a high-rise to be a high-rise'. Living in a converted church offers 'bragging rights' and these are part of an aesthetic, according to him, that is not possible in high-rise properties. Maintaining the look of the building, and as a result how it reflects on its residents, is a function of its community and the willingness of residents to be part of stewarding a particular image and lifestyle. 'I know that I would not be involved if I was in a high-rise', he commented, 'I like maintaining the building because it's unique and I like involving myself with the people because I want to start pulling in the same direction you know, it's a question of community spirit and community involvement'. Similar sentiments were shared by Sharon who repeatedly referred to residential towers as 'ant hills':

I feel I have a little more control over my existence being in a loft, where you know the board intimately and you all have to help ... I would feel fairly insignificant in a [high rise]. There's a sense of individuality that at least we feel that we can create here.

These comments reflect an undesirability of the high-rises, especially in the way that they are perceived to limit individuality and discourage management by a like-minded community. Thus, while part of this critique is levelled at the scale of the buildings – many respondents mentioned a general feeling of 'being out of scale' – it also involves perspectives on demographic and class arrangements. The 'ant-hill' towers, as one respondent argued, are 'not suitable places for us to live, our son likes it, but it's not for us'. Again the church loft offers an appropriate mature and upscale domesticity that this owner concludes is not 'likely living in a high rise'.

Concluding remarks

[At the Abbey Lofts] we hail cabs not Hail Marys. (Church loft owner, 2009)

In this paper, I have explored a new geography of loft living that now includes the domestication of churches. Church lofts are an emergent form of housing and the latest frontier in the remaking of the material, cultural and religious landscapes in the contemporary inner city.
Throughout this analysis, interviews with church loft owners in Toronto underline the significant role that housing consumption plays in constructing identities, class positions and new middle-class lifestyles. Somewhat distinct from their post-industrial predecessors, church lofts deploy religion as a form of material and symbolic currency in the housing market. Religious material culture is routinely appropriated and secularized in the reconfiguration, interior design and display of loft spaces. Deployed as ‘heritage’ though links to an imagery or ‘aura’ of a selective past, religion acts as a symbolic break, creating a sense of uniqueness and authenticity that is valued in the housing market. Through the interaction with diffused religious imageries set within a heritage context, owners construct mature and upscale living spaces and define distinctive inner-city living – socio-spatial practices which intentionally draw boundaries and distance from both suburban and high-rise lifestyles.

Together, these consumption practices and cultural perceptions also represent key features in the reproduction of a secular loft habitus. In these spaces, owners, as individuals and as a collective, are linking to and in turn producing a shared body of dispositions informed, in part, by the popular interpretations of the post-industrial loft aesthetic, but also redefined through a secular consumerism. Similar to post-industrial lofts, these spaces offer niche inner-city housing that fits a particular upscale, mature, secular housing consumer, one that is beyond the functional lifestyle of the artist, at a distance from the suburban middle class, and outside of the ‘temporary’ uncultivated life worlds of younger urban generations.

While updating the literature concerning loft living, this unique investigation has two implications worth outlining. First, and foremost, the expansion of church lofts in Toronto and elsewhere (see Mian, 2008; Morisset et al., 2006) represents a relatively understudied context of the novel material expressions of secularization in the post-secular city (Hackworth & Gullikson, 2013). While valuable research is documenting the various physical and spiritual morphologies of new or resurgent religion in many cities, little work has been done to trace the contours of contemporary secularization in the urban landscape. Fleshing out the practices, perspective and visions of secular communities in the inner city thus represents an important direction in refining our understanding of the dynamics inherent in the post-secular period. A focus on how consumers use and appropriate religious material culture, like former worship spaces, raises many questions about the sociopolitics of religious and post-religious space in the city. Indeed, how secular and religious communities variously contest, collaborate and/or challenge the form and function of inner urban space needs further examination.

Second, and related, this analysis points to an ongoing geography of gentrification. In this case, gentrification has evolved to take root in previously overlooked or undiscovered urban contexts. Post-institutional properties, from churches to schools, are now legitimate targets for developers and housing consumers. Quickly becoming part of the mainstream, church lofts are spaces where older, empty nest, creative and secular gentrifiers, an emerging yet significant cohort, are finding expressive lifestyles beyond the ‘phony’ suburbs and the ‘ant hill’ high-rises. Such patterns are likely to accelerate, especially in global or globalizing cities, as gentrification intensifies in increasingly expensive housing markets (Walks, 2014). But, more important for this discussion are questions concerning the long-term impact of an expanding loft market that privatizes former worship spaces. As the conversion of churches to upscale housing continues, what other use-opportunities, religious or secular, are displaced or neglected? Little research, and even much less political will, has imagined different uses for these former community spaces. In other words, although the privatization of heritage
properties through loft conversion and ownership retains historic urban fabric and fragments of religious culture, it does little to open up possibilities for wider public engagement. While these gentrified spaces offer their owners unique, interesting story-lines and represent investments and enactments of economic and cultural capital, what do they do for the rest of us? ‘And what remains when disbelief has gone?’ asks Larkin (1960), ‘Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky… / A shape less recognisable each week, / A purpose more obscure?’

**Note**

1. The names of interview participants throughout this article have been changed to ensure anonymity.

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