

## Regarding the Ruins: Dehousing and the Places Where Nothing Remains

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to reframe the way we think about the rise of “dehousing” (Hulchanski et al., 2009, p. 3) in Toronto. Outsourced private security and militaristic, colonial policing by the state (Kanji & Withers, 2021) displace people from warm air vents, tiny homes, tarps, tents, and other secluded places of refuge. Rather than see empty public space or fenced off parks as neutral ground amidst a housing crisis, I propose that these sites constitute a “ruin.” How might the ruins bear witness to the violence of dehousing? I frame my analysis through Crane’s premise (2021) that Nothing must be seen as a *Something*. She reveals how photography can help us in the documentation of Nothing (Crane, 2021). With the help of photographs, this paper attempts to animate the pedagogical witness of the places where Nothing remains. Rather than being conceived as a natural result of some “generic human tendency” (Crane, 2021, p. 121), ruins can be understood as part of presently existing unjust systems that must be changed. The “ruins of dehousing” turn us toward histories of colonial displacement, our relationship to public space, and our obligation to become conscious of Nothing.

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This paper seeks to reframe the visibility and visit-ability (Crane, 2021) of the ongoing housing crisis. The recent surge of encampments, and their subsequent displacement during the COVID-19 pandemic, is an example of sites where, in Susan Crane’s (2021) words, “Nothing is the way it was” (p. 220). Rather than see empty public space or fenced off parks as neutral ground amidst the dehousing of citizens<sup>1</sup>, I propose that these sites constitute a “ruin.” As both outsourced private security and militaristic, colonial policing by the state (Kanji & Withers, 2021) displace people from warm air vents, tiny homes, tarps, tents, and other secluded places of refuge, how might the ruins bear witness to the violence of dehousing<sup>2</sup>? Have the efforts to, once again, remove dehousing citizens from view (Arnold, 2004; Connolly, 2003; Feldman, 2006; Mitchell, 2003), reconstituted the vision of the public park or plaza as a kind of civic *tabula rasa*—a blank site, ready to be returned to its “appropriate” uses? As Crane (2021) might ask: has Nothing happened, *again*? Using three case studies of displacement in Toronto, I examine Nothing as a Something. In keeping with Crane’s argument, I use photographs to help me with this process of *seeing* Nothing. Amidst the banality of contemporary dehousing, Crane’s work reminds us that “Emptiness [is] a sign of the crisis” (p. 92). Thus, with the help of photographs, this paper attempts to animate the pedagogical witness of the places where Nothing remains. I consider dehousing as a failure of memory. In alignment with the work of Ann Chinnery (2010), I ask: can we learn not only knowledge concerning our troubled past, but from the ruin-as-witness (Chinnery, 2010)? The

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<sup>1</sup> I want to clarify that, by “citizen,” I am not referring specifically to those who have conformed or assimilated to a particular national identity, but rather, to those to have (or have not) been deemed “fit for political participation” (Arnold, 2004, p. 17) in general. Arnold (2004) defines citizenship as “having the cultural, economic, political, and social space in which one can pursue one’s individual and community life” (p. 48). Thus, the present conditions of dehousing actually undermine who can access this category.

<sup>2</sup> Some scholars prefer the use of ‘houseless,’ which suggests that the loss of the physical provision does not necessarily mean a loss of homeplaces. I opt for dehousing or “dehousing” (Hulchanski et al., 2009, p. 3), as these illustrate the ways that nefarious political machinations have resulted in this loss—rather than the depoliticized labels of homeless/houseless, I think it is important to gesture toward particular processes that are occurring when we speak of unhoused citizens. That said, at times I adopt the language of ‘homeless’ in response to the scholarship I take up in this piece.

ruins here can provoke us to re-consider colonial displacement, our relationship to public space, and our obligation to become conscious of Nothing.

Scroll to the beginning or end of any Google Book and you may see a blank page with the words, “this page intentionally left blank.” This, as Crane points out (p. 55), is a funny case where Nothing is actually acknowledged. Most of the time, Nothing is not noted as a Something. It is therefore difficult to become conscious of Nothing happening. In the book *Nothing Happened: A History*, Susan Crane (2021) considers the relationship between memory and history. “Nothing” often gets used to describe the contingent Nothing—what “should have happened but didn’t” (p. 8)—and this attention to what might have been precipitates greater “attention to silences, absences, and agency in the past” (p. 15). Becoming conscious of Nothingness can, according to Crane, render visible the common sense we have inherited. Amidst official narratives that “[create]...empty spaces in memory” (p. 19), Crane invites us into an ethical practice of historical consciousness that she describes as “readings of texts and images [that provide] a map of the void that has been present all along but overlooked and ignored” (p. 20). I propose that my re-reading of “the void” through the use of photographs can, in Roger Simon’s (2005) words, “unsettle the present” (p. 51). Allow me to explore three case studies in the production of Nothing amidst the housing crisis.

**Figure 1***Trinity Bellwoods Park*

*Note.* Photo taken by the author.

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Garrison Creek was, according to Mayor Arthur Radcliff Boswell, “nothing more than an open sewer” (Brace, 1993, p. 123). There was little opposition to making it, as Michael Cook (2010) writes, “disappear.” Sometimes referred to as one of Toronto’s “lost rivers” (Cook, 2010), it now flows under Trinity Bellwoods park. As Azeezah Kanji and A.J. Withers (2021) pointed out, after the Bellwoods encampment evictions last June, the way in which encampment residents—“more than one-third of whom are Indigenous” (Kanji & Withers, 2021)—were evicted is an echo of the destruction and burial of this waterway. As they write, it is

“emblematic of how the assault on colonised people is intertwined with the assault on the ecosystems that sustain them” (Kanji & Withers, 2021). Just as Toronto’s “lost rivers” walks<sup>3</sup> seek to take notice of Nothing in the form of buried waterways, the mass evictions of June 22, 2021, left Nothing in this park the way it was.

Crane (2021) writes, “Colloquially, when you say, ‘Nothing is the way it was,’ you are acknowledging that change happens over time, but you’re also asserting that the natural temporal flow is more marked in times of crisis” (p. 71). Tracing photographs from 1989 depicting the ruins of East Berlin, Crane articulates how the idea that ‘Nothing is the way it was’ is a moment waiting to be inscribed with new meanings. Past ways of seeing the world can be reimagined in the wake of ruination, as a ruin offers a blank template for “the construction of historical meaning from the ruins of the past” (p. 82). What is left behind—the ruin—is, for Crane, an *object* that can be conceived of as a piece of evidence. What is required, of course, is a mechanism through which to sustain this object’s presence or relevance. As a result, Crane argues that photographs are a kind of ruin, or “remnant” (p. 90). Indeed, as she says, “each photo is a bit of rubble” (p. 88). The object—or ‘rubble’—is the photograph, which forces the onlooker to negotiate with the past and welcome new possibilities for the future. I offer you photos that, for me, constitute some of the ‘rubble’ vis à vis the crisis of state-led violence, in the hopes that these photos help orient us to the counter-hegemonic possibility that things could always be otherwise.

In *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, Rosalyn Deutsche (1998) illuminates the tenuous relationship that housing activism and homeless encampments have with regard to visibility or public recognition. For Deutsche, “...distinctly undemocratic power....legitimizes itself by giving

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<sup>3</sup> These are formal walking tours—with virtual and self-guided options—that explore the waterways of Toronto that have been buried and/or forgotten under layers of industrial and urban development. Founded by Helen Mills, the walks are ultimately a project of The Toronto Green Community and The Toronto Field Naturalists (Hare & The Toronto Green Community, 2022).

social space a ‘proper,’ hence incontestable, meaning, thereby closing down public space” (p. 275). Such strategies characterize the public through the rhetorical formulation of the “universal city dweller” (p. 276), a supposedly well-to-do upper-middle class resident who, as I imagine him, likes to roller skate the paved trails, walk his purebred golden retriever, or play bocce with his wife and 2.2 children. From political discourse to news media, this conflation of the public with the upstanding, neoliberal citizen was on display leading up to and following Toronto’s encampment evictions last summer (Jones, 2020; Kopun, 2020). The risk is that when the state, as Deutsche (1998) writes, “...exercises its monopoly on legitimate violence...both state power and homeless people will fade into invisibility” (p. 366). As Crane (2021) insists, “As both you and the police already knew, there’s genuinely Nothing to see here” (p. 20), both in terms of the invisibility of dehousing citizens and in the hegemonic operations that obscure state power. When state power attempts to naturalize particular social exclusions, democratic contestations are “erased” (Deutsche, 1998, p.289). And what do you have after something is erased? Well, you have Nothing.

## Figure 2

*George Hislop Park*



*Note.* S. Beairsto, used with permission.



George Hislop Park is a small parkette near the intersection of Yonge Street and Bloor Street. As a result of encampments that developed there in the anxious early days of the pandemic, the city built a fence around the entire space. According to the City of Toronto, this is a result of planned construction (City of Toronto, 2020). However, a year and a half later, the park sits eerily empty. This is a case of a landscape lying deserted, which Crane (2021) argues is a kind of ruin. It is a ruin that speaks more subtly, in a kind of coded manner. Only the trained observer can recognize it: "...to the informed eye, this landscape lies in ruin. When there is Nothing left and this absence is being mourned, photographs become an important mode of documenting and remembering erasure" (Crane, 2021, p. 93). To expand upon Crane's thinking, I would add that knowing something about this Nothing involves knowing a Someone. In particular, "Someone who knows what has changed and what is missing will remember what was and recognize its absence" (Crane, 2021, p. 32). Perhaps our relationship to and our ability to identify "absences" in the past has much to do with our relationship to others. If we cannot perceive change, perhaps there are others who can help us notice. Chinnery writes, "...when I encounter another person in the present, I am not just encountering the person I see before me, but I am also encountering the traces of all of that other's past-others" (Chinnery, 2013, p. 260). This is what Chinnery terms a "reciprocity-by-proxy" (p. 261). Could this way of "caring for the past," in Chinnery's words, help make past-Nothings visible to us?

**Figure 3***The Bentway*

*Note.* Photo taken by the author.

Underneath the Gardiner Expressway is a world of ruins. So many that perhaps it is no surprise that the infrastructure is now full of attempts at trendy art installations, construction sites, skating rinks, and other ways to obscure the fact that for years, citizens of our city have been forced to seek refuge beneath an elevated highway system. One such place, known today as “The Bentway,” sits within reach of a former encampment where, a matter of weeks after being cleared in 2019, the city welcomed a pop-up restaurant known as “Dinner with a View” (Manzocco, 2019). As Natalia Manzocco (2019) quipped in *Now Magazine*, diners can “enjoy a luxury meal from the comfort and safety of your own little bubble” (para. 1). She later described this as “a deep wound within a city that’s struggling to define who is entitled to take up space (and where)” (Manzocco, 2019, para. 25). What The Bentway has served to do, amidst other forms of gentrification in the city, is cultivate the idea of the Gardiner’s history of tent cities as nothing more than a blank space.



Nothing could be more accurate than the phrase “We’re glad you made it,” uncannily addressing Deutsche’s ‘universal city dweller’ on the sides of one of the Gardiner’s concrete pillars at this entry point to the Bentway. Crane (2021) reminds us how “Blank spaces have....appeared on pages in....nefarious ways, inscribing absences onto the historical record to deliberately erase actual presences” (p. 61). In Toronto, these take the shape of ghost-construction projects, dinners in a bubble, and lost waterways in so-called “public” space.

It is my contention that ruins can aid us in “reframe[ing] how we live in relation to the past” (Chinnery, 2010, p. 403). Yet it first involves a recognition that the blank spaces are themselves ruins. They are what is left when a “place remains visible, visit-able, and at the same time lamentably ruined; the home has vanished, and yet there is Nothing left and one can see that” (p. 103). In attending to these photographs, is it possible to imagine these spaces as ruins? And what does the ‘ruin-as-witness’ teach us? First, to be truly public, this space requires contestation. Second, once conceived as a ruin, these spaces invite us to observe how settler-colonialism inscribes and re-inscribes itself in spatial terms. It is an ongoing, iterative process of obfuscation and reinvention, not unlike a housing crisis amidst mass gentrification. Third, we learn that the city is full of the rubble of dehousing. If we are surrounded by emptiness and rubble, then we are implicated in how we choose to walk through the rubble. In a scathing critique of German citizens who Crane accuses of “doing Nothing” (p. 120) at the end of the Second World War, Hannah Arendt (1950) wrote,

...the indifference with which they walk through the rubble has its exact counterpart in the absence of mourning for the dead, or in the apathy with which they react, or rather fail to react, to the fate of the refugees in their midst. (para. 3)

By attending to the past-others of those we encounter and by taking notice of Nothing happening, perhaps we can then avoid the temptation to walk through the rubble with indifference.

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