

Artist's Statement: *Mackenzie Place*

Jesse Colin Jackson, University of California, Irvine

j.c.jackson@uci.edu

1. Introduction

I've spent much of my career as an artist looking at tower apartment buildings—mostly mid-century examples made of reinforced concrete—and the ways in which these structures relate to cities. The buildings, the material, and the urban design philosophy that led to their construction emerged in the early modern period, seemingly without precedent. They have since proliferated beyond our wildest imagination, at this point so ubiquitous around the world as to be interchangeable with the city itself: one does not exist without the other. My *Mackenzie Place* exhibition examined an exceptional instance of this urban condition: a lone seventeen-story tower that presides over the center of the small near-arctic town of Hay River (Xát'odehchee) in Canada's Northwest Territories (Jackson 2023). Far from its expected high-density context, the building is a symbol of both the reach and the edge of global capital, settler colonization, and the urban forms these forces engender. *Mackenzie Place* engages you in what the building sees, how it is seen, and the lives lived within its walls.

2. The Place

Officially named “Alexander Mackenzie Place” after the explorer but informally known as “the High Rise,” the tower was completed in 1975 to house workers for the controversial (and ultimately cancelled) Mackenzie Valley Pipeline. Never filled to capacity, and empty since a major fire in 2019, this relic of colonial resource extraction was home to newcomers to Hay River for nearly fifty years, whether Indigenous (Dene, Inuvialuit, Cree, Métis), immigrant, or settler. Since the fire, new owners from “down south” have promised renovations, citing urgent and growing housing needs, but, as of March 2023, no work has begun. Locals are quick to try to divert attention from the building, stating that the tower is not characteristic of Hay River. Yet the tower is omnipresent, both visually and in the narratives of residents and visitors alike; it is the hub of “the Hub of the North.”

Anthropologist Lindsay Bell, a former resident of Hay River, introduced me to the town and its tower in 2013, and it has linked our careers ever since. We set out to create—collaboratively and in parallel—visual and textual representations that “picture the north” as heterogeneous, complex and unfolding rather than reproducing polarizing views of the arctic as a place of extreme fragility or boundless opportunity. Hay River's unexpected urban infrastructure has provided an anchor for these efforts, drawing us back again and again even as our jobs take us further away.

Jackson, Jesse Colin. 2023. “Artist's Statement: *Mackenzie Place*”. *Philosophy of the City Journal* 1, no. 1, 135–141. <https://doi.org/10.21827/potcj.1.1.41118>

Copyright © 2023 Jesse Colin Jackson. This article is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License ([CC BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/))



Figure 1: *Woodland Drive and Commercial Road, Hay River, as seen on April 22, 2013 (Nothing Going On redux)*. Inkjet print, 40”H x 60”W. Jesse Colin Jackson, 2023.

3. How It Is Seen

Hay River’s tower is visible from nearly everywhere in town, and from many kilometers away. It’s a visually dominant gravitational anchor that, like the sun, residents learn to avoid gazing at directly, but live their lives in constant reference to. Two large images in the exhibition attempt to reveal the tower as it inhabits the mind’s eye. Featured on the cover is *3 Capital Drive, Hay River, as seen on June 21, 2015 (NE, E, SE, S, SW, NW, N)*, which collapses images from multiple positions in space into a representation of one aspect of the town’s ambivalent relationship with the building: revolving around but never resolving it. The partner artwork *Woodland Drive and Commercial Road, Hay River, as seen on April 22, 2013 (Nothing Going On redux)* provides another aspect, collapsing images from multiple positions in time into a representation of the building as the feature around which the town’s urban life is organized (Figure 1).

The piece takes its title from a young Dene woman who lived in the High Rise and would watch over the town’s main intersection to see if anyone she knew could be called on to socialize. Often, she would declare to Bell, her then neighbor, that despite the orbiting activity there was “nothing going on”.

A further artist’s portfolio consists exclusively of images taken either of, in, or from the tower between 2013 and 2018 (Figure 2). This served as both a longitudinal experiment and a meditative exercise, exploring different relationships between the tower and its surroundings, and registering its ever-presence through repetition. In the exhibition, a selection of Bell’s raw field notes was arranged above, suggestive of the parallel universe of anthropological inquiry that exists alongside these visual investigations.

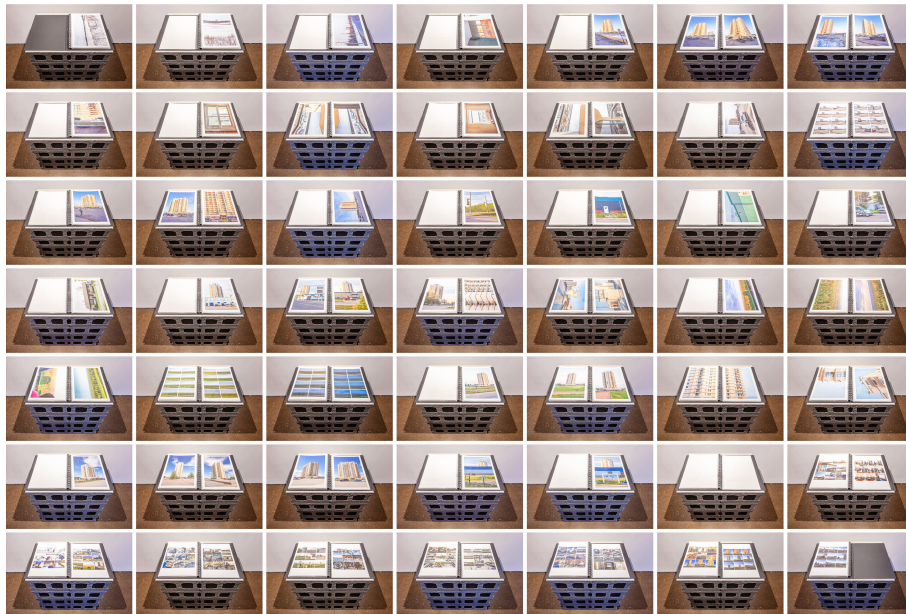


Figure 2: *Mackenzie Place 2013–18*. Inkjet prints, 18”H x 12”W. Jesse Colin Jackson, 2023. As installed at Pari Nadimi Gallery, Toronto, Canada, March 23–July 22, 2023.

4. What It Sees

The tower’s singular presence also provided a unique opportunity for generating creative representation of its surroundings. Typically, towers beget further towers; in this case, “the High Rise” is the tallest structure within hundreds of kilometers, and overlooks the entire town, the adjacent K’atl’odeeche First Nation, and the surrounding wilderness. Shot from the roof of the tower, and derived from nearly one million still images captured over five years, the film *Mackenzie Place* brings to life a panorama of environments and activities across all four seasons (Figure 3). To the north,



Figure 3: *Mackenzie Place*. Multi-channel video, total length 1:00:00. Jesse Colin Jackson, 2023. As installed at Pari Nadimi Gallery, Toronto, Canada, March 23–July 22, 2023.

we see institutional infrastructure such as schools. To the west, we see industrial areas, with the Great Slave Lake (Tucho) visible on the horizon beyond Canada's northernmost train line. To the south, commercial and residential fabric are visible, and to the east, we see the namesake river and the seemingly limitless boreal forest beyond (Figure 4).

The film aggregates the carousel of space and time that the building and its diverse inhabitants bear witness to, year after year. The landscape around the building is sometimes beautiful, sometimes banal, and inexorably evolving. The film's audio is four voices—High Rise residents, perhaps—reading aloud from Bell's book *Under Pressure: Diamond Mining and Everyday Life in Northern Canada*, which tells the building's story and the stories of those who have made it their home (2023). As befits its conflicted position in the local imaginary, the building is seemingly erased from the town in the film, remaining present only as a shadow. Because Hay River is just below the Arctic Circle, the sundial silhouette of the tower evolves from a single moment of visibility on the winter solstice to a full rotation across all four channels on the summer solstice.

The film is also a meditation on creative monomania. The original goal—to capture one image per minute per direction for 365 continuous days—proved elusive, despite years of trying. Freed from this obsession, the film's five chapters instead register the peculiarities of technology, timing, and teamwork present during a given period in the project's trajectory. The final result captures the creative process—and Hay River itself—with more authenticity than a film derived from a complete set of images ever could have.



Figure 4: Stills from *Mackenzie Place*. From Chapter 5: *Chris; Marion; Disappointments; The Fire (September 1, 2017 — October 3, 2018)*. From top: South 8410, East 0359, North 0469, West 0865.

5. The Bigger Picture

Mackenzie Place concluded a trilogy of my exhibitions focused on the consequences of the architectures we construct. Each exhibition presented a variation of the internationally ubiquitous mid-century concrete tower apartment building, inviting us to consider the evolving significance of this type of urbanity. *Radiant City* (2014) examined tower apartment neighborhoods across Toronto, while *Skip Stop* (2019) focuses on the rise and fall of this building type in Toronto's Regent Park public housing project (Jackson 2014; 2019).

The tower that is the focus of *Mackenzie Place* represents an extreme case of the one-size-fits-all logic these buildings represent. But the results on the ground in Hay River, fifty years later, are not unique: the challenges this typology presents are similar to those faced by all cities that built them. As I noted previously, these buildings are “arrival destinations for incoming immigrant populations, essential housing for the city's population, the decaying location of urban poverty, products of modern ideologies gone awry, and locations of past glory, current dynamism, and future potential,” and these complexities are present whether located in a major city like Toronto or a remote town like Hay River, one thousand times smaller and thousands of miles of away. Lewis Mumford described the city as both a container and a magnet, and Alexander Mackenzie Place has amplified and distorted Hay River's capacity for both functions (1968, 97). Per Bell, the tower was constructed “in order to signal urbanization and produce a common visual conceptual paradigm of what it means to be modern,” and across fifty years, its fate has tracked that of modernity, right up to its final evacuation in 2019 (2023, 68). We need new ways of thinking about cities, so that the Hay Rivers of the world can better grapple with the legacies of our old ways of building them.

Acknowledgements

Mackenzie Place was initially pursued with my long-standing collaborator Tori Foster. Philip Otto processed the million images and edited the films. Lindsay Bell introduced me to Mackenzie Place and wrote the script; Madelyn Hertz, David Knapp, Philip Otto, and Zsofia Villalba voiced it. Genevieve Scott introduced me to Lindsay and supported us the whole way. William Amos, Issac Hillman, Aldrin Lupisan, Jared Monkman, Kaeli Morris, and Sharon To helped refine the methods and capture the images. Ken Latour at Aurora College facilitated community partnerships in Hay River. Cindy Lafond, Blaine Maillet, and Harry Satdeo provided access to “the High Rise.” Jacob Barker, Craig Kovatch, Jared Monkman, Kevin Wallington, Sophie Call, Patrick Poisson, and many others provided further local assistance; thank you, Hay River. Pari Nadimi Gallery premiered the work and has supported my practice since 2013; rest in peace, Pari (1952–2023).

Primary funding for *Mackenzie Place* provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada’s Insight Development (2013–15) and Research Mobilization, Creation, and Innovation (2022–23) programs. OCAD University, the University of California, Irvine, the University of Western Ontario, and the Beall Center for Art + Technology provided further funding.

Hay River’s High Rise was built on a gathering place of the K’atl’odeeche First Nation and Dehcho Dene peoples. Pari Nadimi Gallery is located on the historical domain of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. I travelled to both locations from the unceded territory of the Acjachemen and Tongva peoples. Indigenous presence in these lands date back over 10,000 years; colonial actions have irreversibly transformed them in a small fraction of this time.

References

- Bell, L. 2023. *Under Pressure: Diamond Mining and Everyday Life in Northern Canada*. University of Toronto Press.
- Jackson, J. 2014. *Radiant City*. Exhibition at Pari Nadimi Gallery, Toronto, Canada, September 18–November 1, 2014. <https://www.parinadimigallery.com/radiant-city>.
- Jackson, J. 2019. *Skip Stop*. Exhibition at Pari Nadimi Gallery, Toronto, Canada, April 25–July 20, 2019. <https://www.parinadimigallery.com/skip-stop>.
- Jackson, J. 2023. *Mackenzie Place*. Exhibition at Pari Nadimi Gallery, Toronto, Canada, March 23–July 22, 2023. <https://www.parinadimigallery.com/mackenzie-place>.
- Mumford, L. 1968. *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*. Mariner Books.

