

# City as Opportunity: Refugee Integration in Toronto, Canada

Safira Lakhani

University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

[safira.lakhani@gmail.com](mailto:safira.lakhani@gmail.com)

Sneha Sumanth

Hilditch Architect, Toronto, Canada

[snehasumanth@gmail.com](mailto:snehasumanth@gmail.com)

## Summary

Through a comparative spatial analysis of the neighbourhoods of Thorncliffe and Meadowvale (Fig.1), and their connections to Canada's regulations for refugee assistance, this paper outlines the agency of architecture and urbanism in the successful integration of refugees into Canadian society. By making visible the limits of existing policies, the urban realm becomes the space of opportunity, a mechanism for resilience and connectedness, which cultivates a sense of place, identity, and ownership for arriving populations.

## Introduction

The state of being displaced and seeking refuge in a new country is a topic of growing concern in policy and political studies.<sup>1</sup> Truly understanding the contemporary phenomenon of refugees however, requires a more multifaceted and multi-scalar approach that studies refugee integration into urban fabrics and networks. Presently, solutions for refugees are either aimed at the macro level of the state, or the micro level of the household.<sup>2</sup> Herein, the city offers a middle ground for successful upward mobility through which networks for social and material resilience can be achieved. Private and public spaces that refugees inhabit play a vital role in the creation of their lives in new cities, and must be supported through appropriate government investment in parallel social-services systems. Coupling architecture and urbanism with policy offers a means of strengthening the processes of community-building and economic empowerment necessary for effective integration.

## Canadian Refugee Policy

Canada has opened its doors to immigrants and refugees for many decades and today almost twenty percent of the population is foreign-born.<sup>3</sup> Canadians hold a strong self-perception as a nation of immigrants with the collective mindset that the country is a land of pluralism, diversity, and inclusion.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, the integration of newcomers to Canada is becoming an important aspect of the political, economic, and social actions of the country, reflected in the 2016 mandates of the Trudeau government. Toronto, as Canada's 'gateway city,'<sup>5</sup> receives the greatest concentration of people each year,<sup>6</sup> the majority of whom are settling in suburbs in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). This new dispersed

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<sup>1</sup> Romola Sanyal, "Urbanizing Refuge: Interrogating Spaces of Displacement," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38, no. 2 (March 2014): 558.

<sup>2</sup> Doug Saunders, *Arrival City: The Final Migration and our Next World* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2011), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Leslie Young, "Census 2016: More than one fifth of Canadians are foreign born, proportion from Asia growing," *Global News*, October 25, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Mary-Lee Mulholland and John Biles, "Newcomer Integration Policies in Canada," *Metropolis Project, Citizenship and Immigration Canada* (August 2015), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Saunders, *Arrival City*, 82.

<sup>6</sup> Toronto today is the most cosmopolitan city in the world, in the truest sense of the word; more than 50% of the city's population is foreign born.

settlement pattern<sup>7</sup> increases the isolation and segregation of incoming populations, which is perpetuated further by band-aid solutions that offer little consideration for long-term livelihood and upward mobility.<sup>8</sup>

Under present regulations, refugees in Canada receive financial support for one year,<sup>9</sup> or until they can support themselves, whichever comes first. Primarily, this state-level support encompasses basic physical needs: shelter, financial aid, health care, and resources for daily life.<sup>10</sup> In addition, refugees receive the support of Service Provider Organizations through Canada's 'Resettlement Assistance Program' which provides social and community assistance to adjust to life in Canada. While these mechanisms of support meet immediate needs, the intermediate scale of integration for incoming populations – that of their intangible connectedness to the fabric of the city, its residents, and one another<sup>11</sup> – is neither well understood nor well facilitated. Little consideration is given to the diverse backgrounds and experiences of refugees. Rather, they are grouped together as a single entity, which in turn prescribes 'one-size' solutions that are not adaptive to individual needs.

Upon their arrival into the country, refugees are placed into temporary housing facilities for the period preceding their hearing. The large influx of refugees and asylum seekers, however, has extended the period of temporary housing significantly, adding to the severe housing shortage in Canada's major cities, including Toronto.<sup>12</sup> The City of Toronto's solution to this shortage has been to increase funding for refugees' temporary housing.<sup>13</sup> This, however, is a quick-fix solution with long-term ramifications for integration: "prolonged stay in temporary accommodation delays access to resources [such as health-care providers, schools, language training, and job counseling] that are needed for settlement, in turn delaying economic self-sufficiency."<sup>14</sup> Especially when temporary housing solutions include hotels and shelters, there is absolutely no sense of welcoming, and the system tends to shock asylum seekers.<sup>15</sup> Such solutions highlight the fundamental disconnect between the country's intention to aid displaced peoples and the limits of the policies in place to do so.

Moreover, because of the rising costs of housing in Toronto, new arrivals, upon achieving refugee status, are pushed to the fringes of the city,<sup>16</sup> in commuter neighbourhoods whose physical design, zoning, and transportation infrastructure disable any sense of participation in the city or access to networks of social

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<sup>7</sup> Sandeep Kumar Agrawal, "Neighbourhood Choices and Housing Patterns of Immigrants," *Region of Peel Immigration Discussion Paper* (February 2010): 4. In the past, migrants have typically settled in clusters in the downtown core. Today, they directly settle in suburban areas, usually in a dispersed pattern. The new settlement pattern is a result of the gentrification of urban-core neighbourhoods.

<sup>8</sup> Saunders, *Arrival City*, 215.

<sup>9</sup> Carla Turner, "Refugee Agencies make headway in housing Syrians, but thousands still need homes," *CBC News*, March 8, 2016, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/refugees-housing-moving-in-1.3476893>. Government assisted refugees receive about \$25,000 per family, and families range in size from six to thirteen members.

<sup>10</sup> "Get Government Assistance-Refugees," Immigration and Citizenship, Government of Canada, accessed January 15, 2018. [www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/help-within-canada/government-assisted-refugee-program.html](http://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/help-within-canada/government-assisted-refugee-program.html).

<sup>11</sup> Romola Sanyal, "An Architecture of Displacement: Spatializing Identity and Refugee Space in Beirut and Calcutta," (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2008), 258. The importance of feeling welcomed, of the certainty of their place in the new society is critical to refugees' successful integration.

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Keung, "Toronto shelters struggle to cope with surge in refugee claimants," *The Star*, February 2, 2017, [www.thestar.com/news/immigration/2017/02/02/toronto-shelters-struggle-to-cope-with-surge-in-refugee-claimants-1.html](http://www.thestar.com/news/immigration/2017/02/02/toronto-shelters-struggle-to-cope-with-surge-in-refugee-claimants-1.html).

<sup>13</sup> Lauren Pelley, "City may spend \$20M more on settling rising number of refugees in local hotels," *CBC News*, October 16, 2017, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/refugee-hotels-1.4357406>.

<sup>14</sup> Damaris Rose and Alexandra Charette, "Housing Challenges for Refugee Newcomers: Existing research and its relevance to the #WelcomeSyrians experience," *Canadian Housing and Renewal Association* (Université INRS Centre Urbanisation Culture Société, 2016): 6. <http://chra-achru.ca/sites/default/files/rose.chra2016.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Ravi Subramaniam, Manager of Strategic Partnership & Organizational Development, *The Neighbourhood Office*, personal communication to author, April 20, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> The money allocated for rent by Canada's integration policies does not compare to rising costs for housing.

capital.<sup>17</sup> Further, the settlement of refugees outside higher-density, inner-city neighbourhoods has created challenges in terms of allocating social services that provide orientation and develop social networks.<sup>18</sup> The result is segregated, isolated neighbourhoods of refugees, where integration is low, and there is a high risk of ghettoization.<sup>19</sup> The lack of mobility and empowerment that this condition produces often generates breeding grounds for violence.<sup>20</sup>

### **Meadowvale, Mississauga**

One such fringe community is Meadowvale, Mississauga, situated just east of Toronto. This is an established residential community whose urban design is reflective of planning philosophies of the 1960s and 1970s. What this looks like today is homogenous, low-density, single-zoned areas that produce suburban sprawl (Fig. 2). There are no mixed-use zones, and the low density of suburban housing parcels any open space into private pieces. Where open space is expansive, it tends to be primarily parking lots, as a means of supporting the sprawl of the neighbourhood (Fig. 3). This also renders Meadowvale less accessible from a pedestrian perspective; to access most services, residents must use vehicular transportation, which, for refugees, can be an additional financial burden. Further, there are not enough settlement services provided in suburban neighbourhoods, and those that exist do not have the capacity to serve the volume of refugees in the area.<sup>21</sup> These services, coupled with the low-density character of the neighbourhood, do not encourage self-sufficiency, in terms of entrepreneurship and promoting small term businesses, as well as employment, and educational growth.<sup>22</sup> This is exacerbated further by the distance from Meadowvale to downtown Toronto where such opportunities are more readily available (Fig. 4).

Separation and segregation of zoning types thus very clearly limits opportunities for informal interaction and encounter. When the most important space for consolidating the notion of community has been the immediate collective space of the neighbourhood, the further away these spaces are, the more it strengthens an identity of isolation, and breeds an 'us' versus 'them' narrative (Fig. 5).<sup>23</sup> Sending arriving populations to suburban neighbourhoods is also detrimental in the long-term with regard to the ongoing housing shortage: by way of its low-density planning, Meadowvale is expected to reach its development capacity within the next decade or so, noting that the population growth is projected to increase by only one percent by 2031.<sup>24</sup>

### **Thorncliffe, Toronto**

For their successful integration, arriving populations need opportunities for ownership, education, security, business creation, and connection to the wider economy.<sup>25</sup> Spatially, this translates to density; connected urban spaces that have accessible pathways to the city around it, especially with regard to transportation, education, and places to launch small businesses (Fig. 6).<sup>26</sup> Such spaces additionally enable informal community interaction, empower social networks, and foster upward mobility of its residents. This is evidenced in the Thorncliffe neighbourhood of Toronto which has become a significant platform for urban inclusion of newcomers: "the people who enter...have an amazingly consistent record

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<sup>17</sup> Saunders, *Arrival City*, 318.

<sup>18</sup> Agrawal, "Neighbourhood Choices and Housing Patterns of Immigrants," 9.

<sup>19</sup> Turner, "Refugee Agencies."

<sup>20</sup> Saunders, *Arrival City*, 318. For example, in 2006, an elaborate Islamist terror plot was intercepted by police in the neighbourhood of Meadowvale, Mississauga.

<sup>21</sup> Agrawal, "Neighbourhood Choices and Housing Patterns of Immigrants," 9.

<sup>22</sup> Ravi Subramaniam, personal communication to author, April 20, 2018. Particularly when growth in the city is driven by capital, supporting growth of local businesses facilitates long-term integration.

<sup>23</sup> Sanyal, "An Architecture of Displacement," 266, 269.

<sup>24</sup> "Population, Demographics, and Housing," Mississauga Economic Development, City of Mississauga, April 2015. The federal government would do better to reinvest resources in the construction of low-rent social housing for families, especially large and multigenerational families.

<sup>25</sup> Saunders, *Arrival City*, 83.

<sup>26</sup> Saunders, *Arrival City*, 33.

of entering the middle-class urban mainstream within a generation."<sup>27</sup> This is only possible because the urban conditions support, and are supported by, investment from the state.

Unlike Meadowvale, mixed-use zoning is highly prevalent in Thorncliffe: plot sizes are much larger, and a variety of building types can be found within one plot (Fig. 7). The density of the neighbourhood is also significantly higher; the majority of buildings are mid- or high-rise, and in turn, zoning rules dictate that higher Floor Area Ratio (FAR) requires greater open space (Fig. 8). Given the nature of higher density spaces, open space in Thorncliffe thus tends to become collective space. Public spaces in Thorncliffe are therefore inclusive and exist at multiple scales. They accommodate the needs of multi-generational households, providing intimate nooks for gathering – and therein, support networks – which are important for demographics that may be less fluent in English (Fig. 9).<sup>28</sup> Particularly for those people who have experienced trauma, nooks create safe spaces for healing.<sup>29</sup> Familiarity, generated in these spaces is critical to integration; the concentration of arriving populations within proximity to one another fosters a sense of belonging and a space from which to engage with broader Canadian society.<sup>30</sup>

In Thorncliffe, an important shared space for all members of the community is the East York Town Centre mall which provides multiple opportunities for nooks of gathering: in the morning, the mall is occupied by elderly men and women who are retired and come to meet their friends; in the afternoon, the mall is populated with mothers of school-age children; and in the evening, the mall becomes a hub for youth.<sup>31</sup> Seasonally, outdoor public spaces such as parks, walkways, and open areas provide similar opportunity for places of informal encounter. Community and faith-oriented gathering spaces are also integral in the building of social networks. The multiplicity of gathering spaces produce varying degrees of inclusivity based on needs for retreat and safety. They are neutral, and create physical space for equality. They allow for an informal growth of networks within, and between, communities, and are thus a key component of the long-term solution necessary for effective integration.<sup>32</sup> Over time, the activities arising from these networks can contribute to informing public policy.

## Conclusion

Integration is a long-term process that has no single solution. Integration is not just about proximity, but about familiarity. It is about place, and it is about belonging; it is about equal participation, and about membership.<sup>33</sup> When it comes to successful integration, self-sufficiency is therefore not about the individual, but about the collective and the community. Shared space is thus essential to the integration process. It engenders familiarity and cultivates a sense of ownership of space, and therein fosters belonging and agency. Additionally, such spaces of encounter and interaction can undo an 'othering' that would otherwise be generated in isolation. The built environment thus plays a critical role in emphasizing a collective conscience between existing and arriving populations. In these instances, architecture becomes a means of operationalizing compassion.

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<sup>27</sup> Saunders, *Arrival City*, 314.

<sup>28</sup> Agrawal, "Neighbourhood Choices and Housing Patterns of Immigrants," 5.

<sup>29</sup> Ravi Subramaniam, personal communication to author, April 20, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Agrawal, "Neighbourhood Choices and Housing Patterns of Immigrants," 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ravi Subramaniam, personal communication to author, April 20, 2018.

<sup>32</sup> This is immediately visible, for example, in the origin, work, and results of The Neighbourhood Office (TNO). A grassroots organization, TNO grew out of informal community gatherings in Thorncliffe in the 1980s-1990s, and is today a key agency in the self-actualization and self-sustenance of incoming populations.

<sup>33</sup> Sanyal, "Urbanizing Refuge," 566. The right to space within the city is a means by which larger claims to citizenship in the nation-state are articulated.

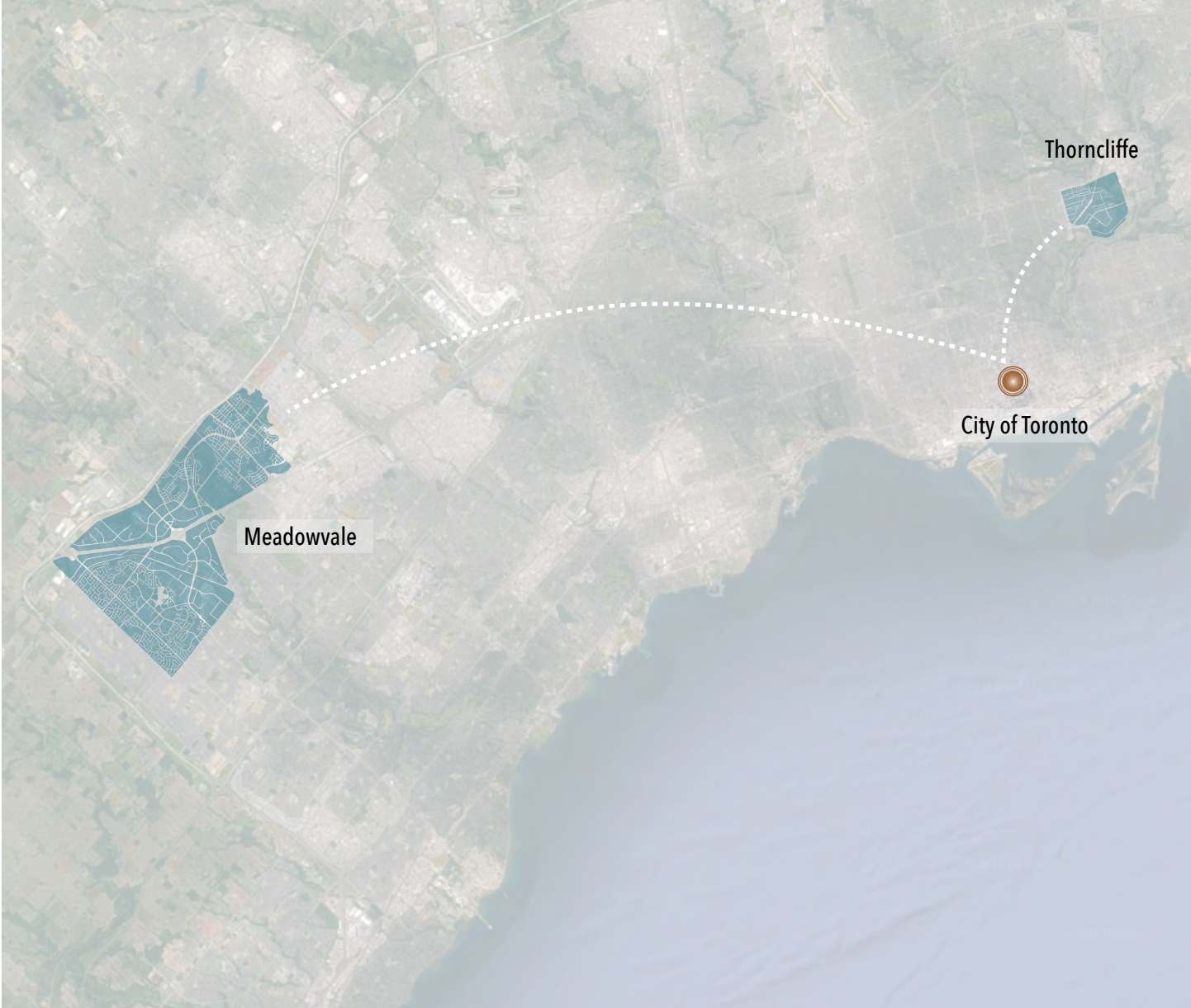


Fig. 1. Key plan.

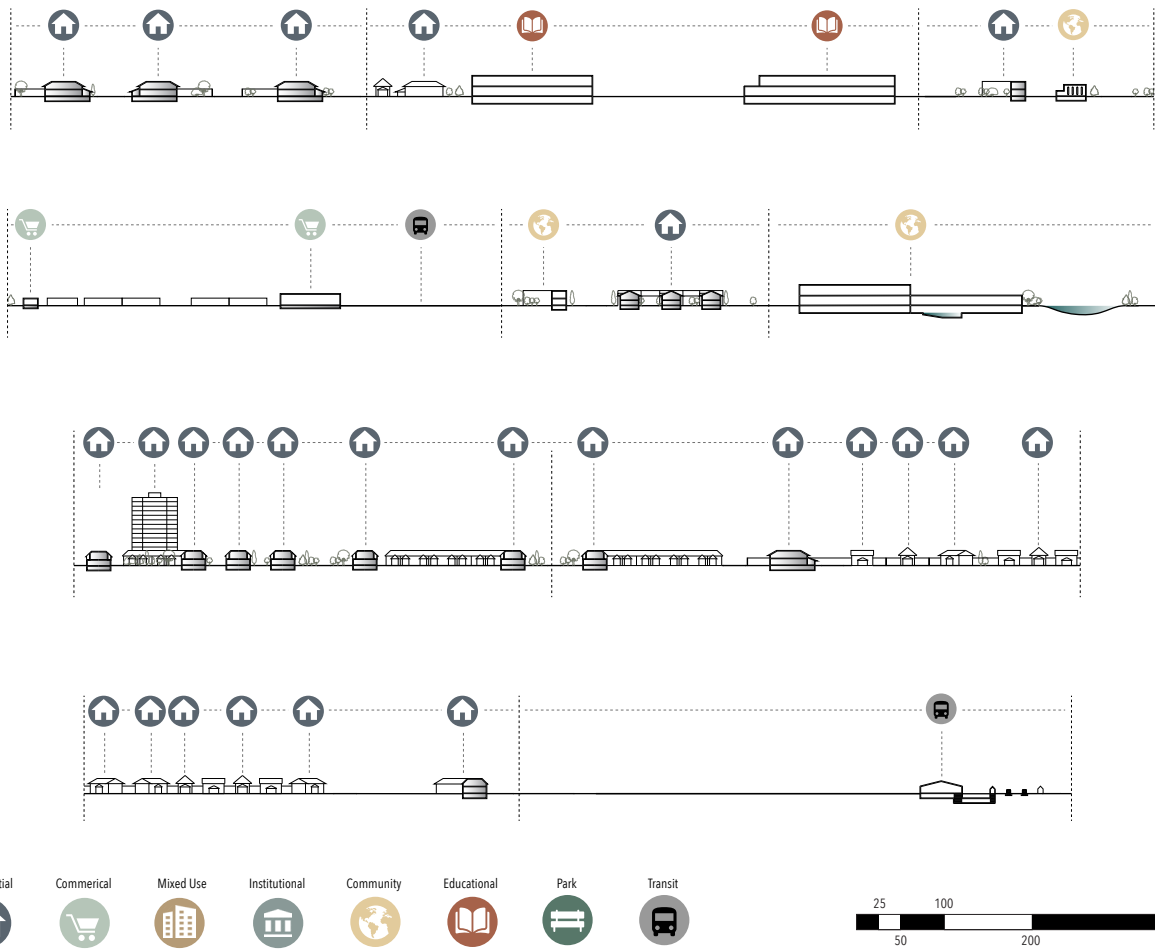


Fig. 2. Sections, Meadowvale.

- Industrial
- Residential
- Commercial
- Mixed Use
- Institutional
- Community
- Educational
- Park



Fig. 3. Land use, Meadowvale.





-  Transit
-  Low Density
-  Mid Density
-  High Density



Fig. 4. Density and transit, Meadowvale.





Fig. 5. Public and private space, Meadowvale.

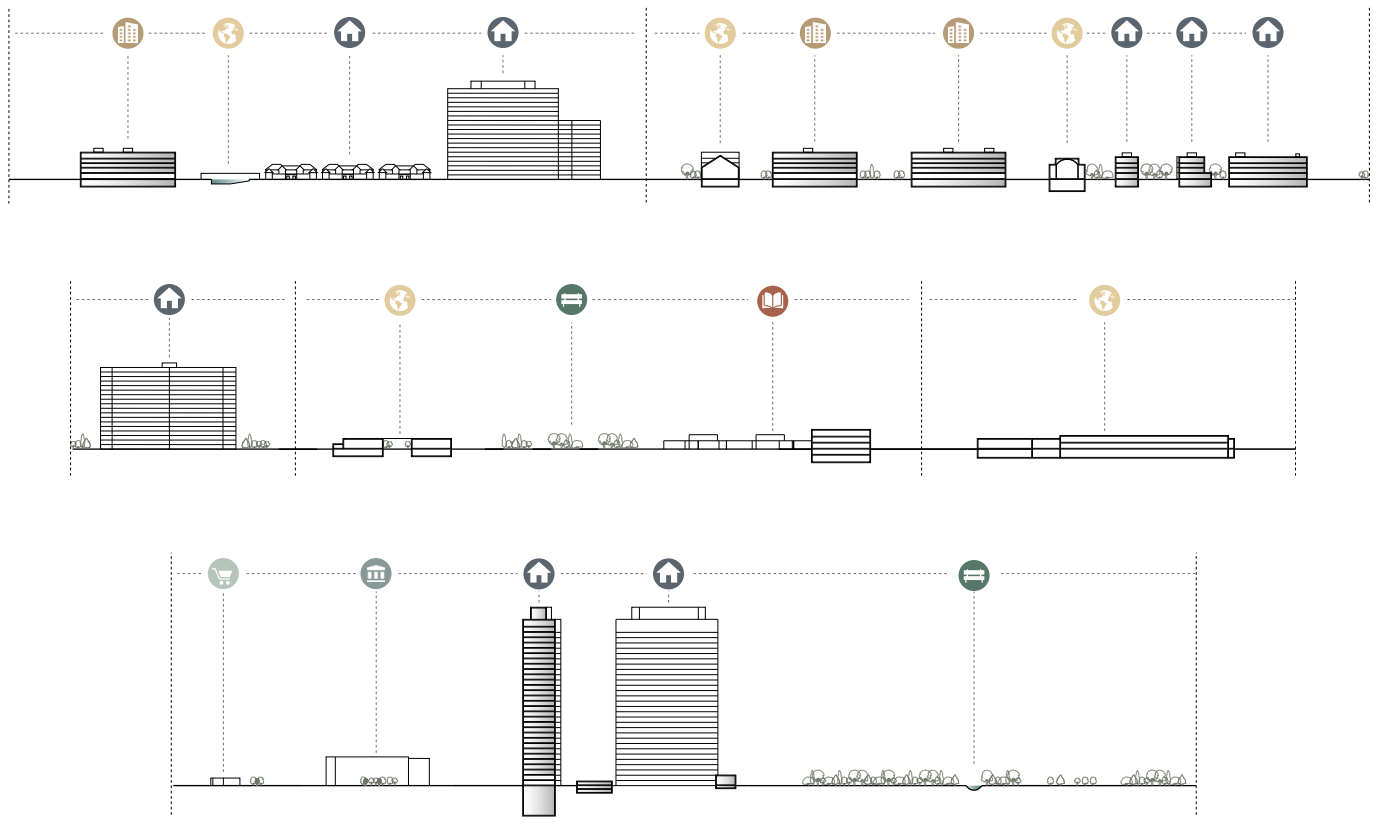


Fig. 6. Sections, Thornccliffe.

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- Park



Fig. 7. Land use, Thorncliffe.



Fig. 8. Density and transit, Thornccliffe.



Fig. 9. Public and private space, Thorncliffe.

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