THE LISTING

Residents of historic Toronto building at centre of acclaimed documentary fear development will prompt renovictions

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Spadina Gardens in Toronto.
CAVE 7 PRODUCTIONS

A new documentary about the struggle to preserve a historic building in Toronto may already need a sequel as a real estate developer prepares plans to redevelop the site.

The film, *Charlotte's Castle,* made its debut at the Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival on Sunday (and will be airing on TVO). It stars an eclectic cast of mostly upper-middle-class tenants in Toronto's Annex neighbourhood fighting in 2020 to defend their nearly 120-year-old boutique rental building from a Dutch-based property developer with plans to renovate away the heritage charm.

Spoiler alert: The mix of artists, diplomats and activists do obtain heritage protections for the building. But now, just a few years later, they worry a redevelopment could make it a Pyrrhic victory.

"The truth of the matter is the designation did not protect our tenancies," said Charlotte Mickie, who lends her name to the documentary title in addition to being the head of the Spadina Garden Tenants Association and a vice-president with Paris-based art-house film distributor Celluloid Dreams. "We knew we could be gone, but we felt we owed the building."

There are only 16 units in 41/45 Spadina Rd. The building's owner, ProWinko, has other projects in the city that aim for higher density than that: It has an 87-storey condo tower proposal at Bay and Bloor, and was part of the team that developed the 123-room boutique Ace Hotel in Toronto's Fashion District.

“We’re currently in the very preliminary stages of pre-application consultations with the city to work out a plan for us to develop a structure overtop without impacting any of the heritage aspects of the building,” said Benjamin Rekers, a spokesperson with ProWinko. “Discussing specifics like the number of floors or units is premature.”

A plan to build extra floors on top of the Edwardian building finished in 1906 would likely require tenants to move out for a time, and while Ontario’s Residential Tenancies Act and Toronto planning policies enshrine rights of return for tenants evicted for construction and renovations, the practical reality is that such disruption means many tenants will never get their apartments back.

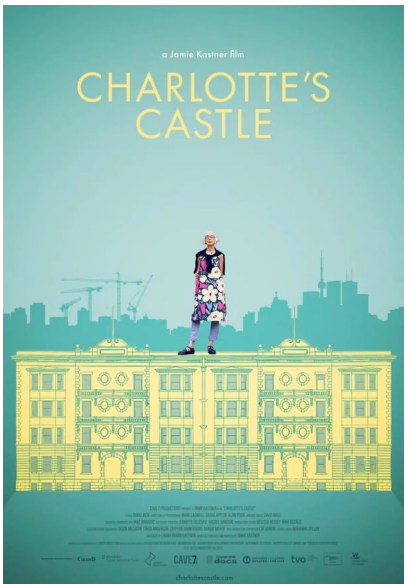
In 2019, the owners of an eight-unit building at 795 College St. were fined $75,000 by Ontario’s Landlord Tenant Board for refusing to let tenants return after a renovation. However, because the landlord had moved new tenants into those apartments, the LTB ruled it had no power to restore the displaced tenants. Later in 2019, the landlord was fined another $48,000 for the episode (and $12,000 a victim) – cold comfort to tenants who were still not allowed to return.

Mr. Rekers appears in *Charlotte’s Castle* and on camera said the price tag for renovations so far was “idiotic” at about $700,000 an apartment. He was also less equivocal about ProWinko’s development plans: “Adding a few floors business-wise would be great.”

But Mr. Rekers’s sharpest comments were reserved for Toronto’s Heritage Planning staff: “I have nothing nice to say about them – they made our life miserable.” When it came to the tenants, he refers to them as “assholes.”

Director Jamie Kastner contrasted Mr. Rekers’s comments with a recent $25,000 grant from the Toronto Preservation Board for ProWinko to facilitate repairs to the building’s façade.

“Here’s the landlord demonstrating a fair bit of contempt for the whole thing while still drawing on the public purse,” Mr. Kastner said. “That seems pretty cynical.”



Charlotte’s Castle made its debut at the Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival on Sunday.

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Images for Charlotte's Castle. Charlotte Micki apartment.

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1 of 16

Mr. Kastner’s company, Case7, co-produced the award-winning 2019 documentary *Push*, which he described as a “helicopter view” of the global housing crisis. With *Castle* he was hoping to create a more character-driven look at the pressures on renters,

even if most of these renters can afford to pay close to double the average rent of a one-bedroom in Toronto while living in massive three-bedroom suites with windows on three sides.

“They are older people choosing to be tenants for life and without other reasonable options,” Mr. Kastner said. “The point is, if they are feeling the squeeze, imagine how bad it is down the income scale?”

One of the documentary’s protagonists was already displaced: Rachel Romu, a model and activist, moved out of her basement apartment before the building received its heritage designation (largely because of constant disruptions from ProWinko’s renovations).

“For me, it wasn’t a concern about the lifestyle or a home I had an emotional connection to. I was experiencing an affordable housing issue,” she said. When she moved back to Toronto in 2021, it was to another basement apartment. “I get to have money going into my savings account: If I went above-ground, I’d be paying double if not more.”

The building itself is like a character in a story about Toronto: It was where Sir Henry Pellatt lived after he lost his fortune while building the grand folly of Casa Loma, and over the years has hosted many notable Canadian artists and performers (such as opera singer Maureen Forrester). In the 1980s and 90s it was the unofficial headquarters of publishing house Knopf Canada under former tenant Louise Dennys, who hosted literary figures such as Gabriel García Márquez, Miriam Toews and Salman Rushdie.

Bobbi Speck, who lives in Sir Henry’s old apartment, was a key campaigner in the Annex’s 1960s battle to stop the Spadina Expressway and was perhaps most poignant about her prospects if she were renovicted.

“The next place that I’m going to move into is going to be either a home, or the ground,” Ms. Speck said in the film. “My husband used to say I’ve got one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel: This is not the age for an interim move.”

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