

# V!RUS

revista do nomads.usp  
nomads.usp journal  
ISSN 2175-974X  
CC BY-NC

a cidade e os outros  
the city and the others  
SEM1 2013

# HIGHRISE STORIES NON-LINEAR DOCUMENTARY AND THE CITY

MARIA-SAROJA PONNAMBALAM

Maria-Saroja Ponnambalam has a BFA in Film Production from York University. Her documentaries LA CONSECUENCIA DE LA LLUVIA (2008) PRETTY LITTLE BITS (2009) have screened at various festivals around the world. Maria-Saroja has been an integral part of the National Film Board's Emmy-winning HIGHRISE project since its inception.

How to quote this text: PONNAMBALAM, M. -S., 2013. HIGHRISE STORIES - NON-LINEAR DOCUMENTARY AND THE CITY. V!RUS, São Carlos, n. 9 [online]. Available at: <[http://www.nomads.usp.br/virus/\\_virus09/secs/carpet/virus\\_09\\_carpet\\_46\\_en.pdf](http://www.nomads.usp.br/virus/_virus09/secs/carpet/virus_09_carpet_46_en.pdf)>. [Accessed: dd mm yyyy].

All the documentaries mentioned in this article are Highrise productions and can be explored online here: [highrise.nfb.ca](http://highrise.nfb.ca).

I don't think there is anything more powerful than a human story to help us understand the contemporary city and the social dynamics that shape it. The documentary connects us with the city at a human level and a macro-level. I've been fortunate to exercise documentary outside of its traditional structures using participatory methods and interactive storytelling. This has allowed me to perceive the contemporary city in unimaginable and creative ways that go beyond the camera's gaze.

On *Highrise* I've been working as a researcher, editor and community media co-ordinator. *Highrise* is a multi-year, multi platform documentary

experiment about vertical living in the global suburbs directed by Katerina Cizek and produced by the National Film Board of Canada (highrise.nfb.ca). It's collaborative, interdisciplinary and experimental in nature, continually morphing and expanding like a city.

The documentary form helps us humanize critical research, attitudes and information. We are provided with a lens onto an 'other' city that we may not encounter beyond our predetermined paths. Through alternative points of view, we can examine details that go unnoticed in the daily hustle of our lives. Documentary also breaks down geographic and social barriers. We don't need to travel lengths to experience other cities and stories of the world. Affordable cameras and mobile technologies have made it easier for us to incorporate the documentary practice into our everyday lives.

One cannot look at the city without examining its sociospatial relationships. Through documentary, we have the ability to explore space in a highly visual manner. We have the capacity to present issues in an unfiltered way and expose the idiosyncrasies of an environment and the people that inhabit it. This involves letting go of our preconceived notions of places and spaces, and listening and learning from our peers. Through the framing of documentary and its multiple projections, we can reflect on our own individual freedom within the confines of the city and its systems.

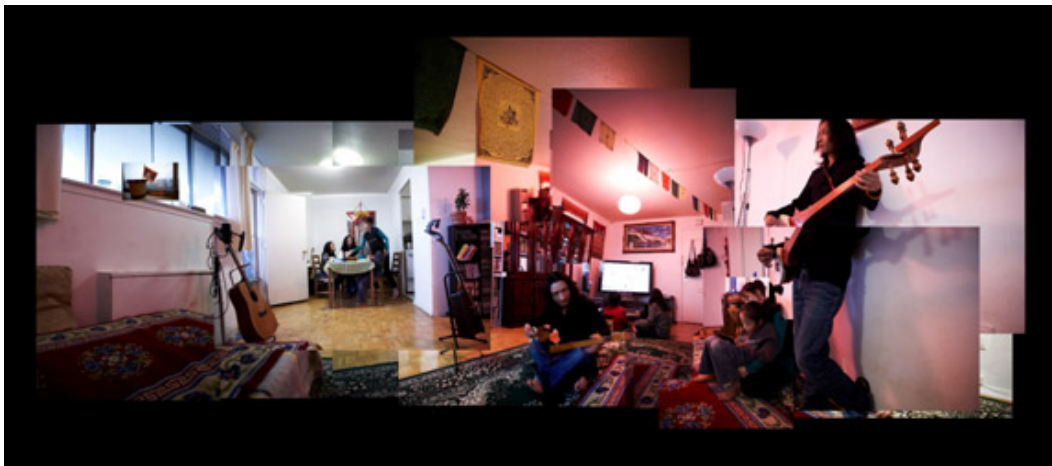
This brings me to the interactive documentary, a form I believe is highly effective when it comes to examining our cities. The interactive documentary goes beyond the physical and extends to the virtual. A glimpse into someone's private life and living space can expand to their online social networks across the globe. The interactive documentary enables us to explore the city in a non-linear, choice-based manner. This may be more reflective of our daily journeys through the city; one is faced with a series of decisions while encountering unexpected obstacles along the way.

*Out My Window* is an example of an innovative non-linear documentary in which 13 apartments situated in different international cities are all part of

one highrise building. Each apartment contains a panoramic view out the window to reveal the resident's interior and exterior environments.



**Figure 1** – Photo Courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada



**Figure 2** – Photo Courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada



**Figure 3** – Photo Courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada

The user can explore each apartment by clicking on objects that trigger mini-documentaries about the resident and their relationship to their home. This interactive virtual highrise stands as a symbol for a global city in and of itself, incorporating the stories of a diverse set of people that share vertical living in common.

On *1 Millionth Tower* a combination of experts from various fields--residents, filmmakers, architects, urban planners, web developers--come together to reimagine a highrise neighbourhood. This virtual 3D world which is made-up of html5 and open-source technology. It reflects the potential of a city and the transformative power of collaboration. Of course, we must consider the issue of access when we introduce storytelling through new forms of technology. How can we reach out to communities that are marginally disconnected from the internet and digital tools?

I think that to understand the city at a micro level we can't just document it; we must use the documentary as an interventionist and participatory tool. I've been living in Toronto for over ten years, one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the world. And despite its cultural vibrancy, segregation exists. I try to understand the spatial disparities of our city by engaging with

residents living in vertical suburbs. With limited access to resources, they have a different concept of the city than those who live in the downtown core. Through residents' stories we can gain a deeper understanding of gentrification, displacement, transit, labour, poverty, gender inequalities, etc. At *Highrise* we place an importance on developing working relationships with residents to enhance their creativity and storytelling abilities. Here the process is just as important as the end product. It's necessary for residents tell their stories from their point of view. This allows us to present the city in a holistic way--one that includes voices of people from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. The ultimate challenge beyond making a documentary and presenting it is to inspire people to become active agents in our cities. Documentary can link the citizens to their city, it can move beyond the lens and mobilize people to transform their spaces in powerful ways.



**Figure 4.** Video: 1 MILION TOWER TRAILER. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzUb6LvOrI&feature=youtu.be>



**Figure 5.** Illustration by: Lillian Chan, Howie Shia + Kelly Sommerfeld. Courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada.