

The Piper's Tune? The Scholarly Housing Boom

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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The Piper's Tune? The Scholarly Housing Boom

HOUSING IS A HUMAN NECESSITY that has always attracted attention from an array of disciplines that include public administration, urban planning, architecture and virtually every branch of social science, including history. But the scholarly housing boom has accelerated lately, driven perhaps by that popular crisis known in housing circles as "affordability". Certainly, the largesse of government departments and agencies involved in housing has also fueled this boom, for they have commissioned the authors, financed the research, underwritten the publication or otherwise assisted in the production of several books reviewed here. To a notable extent, the authors of those books reach conclusions that advance the interests of the institutions funding them. Nothing blatantly corrupt is suggested here. Most probably, like-minded scholars and agencies seek each other out through a process of natural selection. Yet it is worth noting the contrast with more traditional, non-commissioned scholarship, where research and publication costs may be funded by university grants, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Social Science Federation of Canada. The agenda of those agencies is simply the perpetuation and expansion of the scholarship business itself and (one hopes) nothing more. The resulting books still exhibit interpretive and ideological biases, but they spring from the predilections of the authors themselves, rather than the agencies that fund them.

A notable contribution among such scholarly non-commissioned studies is Michael Doucet and John Weaver, *Housing the North American City* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991). Despite the title, this hefty volume of 572 pages is actually a local case study of the history of housing in Hamilton from its 19th century origins to the present. Nevertheless, the book is widely informed by other studies, including those in other disciplines. The authors identify three distinct periods in housing history: pre-1880, when individualism characterized virtually every aspect of housing; 1880 to 1945, when corporate involvement increased; and post-1945, when state intervention became more pronounced. Curiously, however, the authors do not actually divide their study according to this periodization. Nearly all of the chapters are organized topically. These examine an array of themes that cast housing within the broad context of land speculation; subdivisions and suburbs; the organization, materials and techniques of building contractors; government programmes; the social psychology of home ownership; the demographic characteristics of home owners; the relationship between landlords and tenants in houses, flats and apartments; residential segregation; the quality of neighbourhoods; and housing standards.

Most of these topics can be traced over broad sweeps of time in individual chapters. Many readers will appreciate the extended discussions on methodology and conceptual problems that are provided for most themes, but others will grow impatient for the authors' conclusions. Throughout the book, they stress how continuity has characterized the history of housing. Its fashions, techniques, technology and organization changed only gradually over time. Moreover, each dwelling erected had a long life-span in the community before it was replaced, and

thus a heavy legacy from the past could be found in the city's housing stock at any point in time. In the authors' view, evolution rather than revolution characterizes changes in housing.

The book does not carry heavy ideological cargo, but the authors suggest that the free market, together with limited but growing assistance from government in the 20th century, has managed to house most Canadians in decent fashion, and they specifically condemn historians for exaggerating the extent of squalid housing at various times in Canadian history. In large measure, their argument is convincing because they resist the easy temptation to judge the past by current standards and expectations. Their reasoned interpretations and careful use of evidence on this, and many other aspects of housing history, sets a standard of scholarly excellence that few other books in this field can match.

Another valuable contribution is John C. Bacher, *Keeping to the Marketplace: The Evolution of Canadian Housing Policy* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991). Here, one encounters the effective use of theory from economics and political science to produce a volume of considerable interest to both expert and general reader. It is exceptionally well-documented, clearly written and forcefully argued. The thesis is informed by the work of the late George Grant, one of Canada's premier political philosophers. As such, it claims that housing policy reflected the triumph of laissez-faire liberalism over weaker labourite and Red Tory ideology. Like Grant, Bacher laments this fact, charging that in the realm of housing policy, it resulted in an almost criminal neglect for publicly-funded accommodation. His models for emulation are the Scandinavian countries, where a powerful social democratic tradition resulted in decent lodging for all and curbs on destructive speculation. By focusing on the plight of the Canadian poor, the book is much more critical of government housing policy than the study by Doucet and Weaver, and it is more self-consciously ideological in its arguments.

The early heroes in this story are progressive businessmen such as Herbert Baxter Ames who not only took surveys of the appalling slum conditions in turn-of-the-century Montreal, but also launched some housing projects for workers. The major villain emerged in the 1930s: W. Clifford Clark, Canada's Deputy Minister of Finance. Bacher makes him responsible for much of Canada's "heartless" housing legislation, beginning with the 1935 National Housing Act (NHA). Rather than dealing with the growing ranks of homeless people during the Great Depression by approving subsidized housing (something accepted even in the United States under the New Deal), Clark developed a policy of reducing down-payment requirements by having the government enter into partnerships with mortgage companies. Portrayed as a right-wing ideologue who feared that public housing would undermine the position of private developers, Clark closed his eyes to the fact that at most only one-fifth of the population could afford the 20 per cent down payment required by the Act. As a friend of developers and finance capital, Clark, according to Bacher, deliberately ensured that provisions for public housing first enunciated under the 1938 NHA were too onerous for municipalities or the provinces to utilize, a problem perpetuated after the war by the 1949 NHA.

Clark died in 1952, but according to this book his influence persisted. In an effort to promote private sector economic growth, Ottawa sponsored urban renewal

schemes that callously destroyed inner-city, working-class neighbourhoods to make room for towering office complexes. The first *bona fide* foray by Ottawa into public housing came about to assist the displaced casualties of this policy. But even in the process of approving subsidized housing, Ottawa's commitment to private enterprise remained paramount. Intentionally constructed under the provisions of the 1964 NHA, argues Bacher, was accommodation of poor design and quality which, it was hoped, would inspire people to strive for something better. To the rescue, he writes, came Toronto Red Tories such as Susan Fish and Michael Dennis. Their 1973 report condemning the ghettoized and alienating features of that city's public housing, along with a middle class reform movement disenchanted with urban mega-projects, paved the way during the mid-1970s for the approval of aesthetically attractive co-operative housing. Unfortunately, the process began reversing itself in 1979 with the return of a majority Liberal government pressured by stagflation to cut costs. Not surprisingly, the book ends with a denunciation of the late Mulroney government which, because of its supposed passion for the free market, cut funding for co-operative housing — a move that pleased groups such as the Toronto Real Estate Board, but also produced a homeless population the likes of which had not been seen since the Great Depression.

While Bacher makes a strong case for the shortcomings of Ottawa's housing policies, the thesis is pushed too far. He concedes little to the rationale for the marketplace approach and the success it achieved in the post-war era in providing decent shelter for the majority at affordable prices. He questions the sincerity of those who believed that private capital would generate maximum national economic benefits, but applauds the likes of Humphrey Carver, the "community-minded" Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) research director, for promoting "greener, warmer, and more compassionate landscapes" (p. 278). As an explanatory tool in historical analysis, this tiresome good guy-bad guy dichotomy has little utility. *Keeping to the Marketplace* provides a wealth of information and a thesis which will inspire spirited discussion, but it is plagued by a sentimentalism which unfairly portrays those who support private developers or finance capital as promoters of a cruel society.

While Bacher focuses on housing through the lens of public policy, an entirely different perspective is offered by a team of sociologists led by Raymond Breton in *Ethnic Identity and Equality: Varieties of Experience in a Canadian City* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1990). This study reveals that some revision of traditional assumptions about ethnic ghettos is in order. Scholars have often seen these enclaves as reception areas where the immigrant could find cheap housing, familiar institutions and the friendship of fellow countrymen while gradually adjusting to the dominant culture. Supposedly, as those in the community acquired skills and money, they moved into the wider society. This pattern is valid, as the authors show, for the Germans, Scots, Irish, Scandinavians and several other ethnic groups that came to Canada. But through an examination of more than 2,000 interviews conducted in Toronto, Breton and his group discovered that a correlation did not always exist between a ghetto postal code and low socio-economic status. High incomes and residential segregation were evident, for instance, among Jews,

Italians and Chinese. As well, each group enjoyed a high level of education and political participation, and it was common for the second and even third generation to continue living amongst their own. Of course, instances existed, such as with West Indians and a number of other visible minorities, where ethnic segregation remained linked with economic degradation. The book does not gloss over the relationship between neighbourhoods and racial prejudice, but it helps readers get beyond shibboleths and appreciate the complex nature of the modern city where the existence of ghettos does not always imply racism. Moreover, it tells us that to continue assuming such a relationship is to caricature both the dominant culture and the ethnic quarter.

A geographer's approach to the ethnic neighbourhood is offered in David Chuen-yan Lai, *The Forbidden City Within Victoria: Myth, Symbol, and Streetscape of Canada's Earliest Chinatown* (Victoria, Orca Books, 1991). Lai looks at streetscapes to reveal the characteristics and experiences of those living in Canada's oldest Chinatown. It is a popular account geared to the general public and thus should not be criticized for failing to conform to the usual canons of scholarly protocol. But while lenience is appropriate on the matter of format and documentation, there remains legitimate concern about argumentation. *The Forbidden City* illustrates the potential of streetscape analysis in showing how ethnic neighbourhoods manifested traditional culture as well as adaptations made by newcomers to Canada. For instance, Lai writes that the roof-lines typical of Chinese buildings harken back to the shape of tents in ancient rural China, while the construction of a "cheater" storey in Chinese dwellings aimed to deceive "nosey" health officials concerned with overcrowding.

While the book succeeds on this level, Lai's background as chairman of Victoria's Chinatown Redevelopment Committee and a recipient of the Order of Canada for promoting a positive image of Chinese-Canadian culture has apparently played a role in producing a book permeated by political correctness. In making the neighbourhood more intelligible to outsiders, Lai presumed that Canadians still consider Chinatown as a "forbidden" place laden with vice and poverty. Hence, one finds a chapter informing readers that no secret tunnels ever existed in this locale through which drugs and other illegal items could be transported, although he notes that the narrow alleys of Chinatown facilitated escape from the police who harassed Chinese gambling establishments. While *The Forbidden City* illustrates that an analysis of urban design and housing can reveal much about a culture, this book, like so many others of its genre, strives to celebrate or exonerate the behaviour of minorities and reserves all negative characterizations for the dominant group in society.

In contrast to the foregoing books, where biases, imbalances and ideological orientations seem to belong to the authors alone, another collection of recent studies express views that tend to advance the interests of the agencies that funded them. An important example is John R. Miron, ed., *House, Home, and Community: Progress in Housing Canadians, 1945-1986* (Montreal, Kingston and Ottawa, McGill-Queen's University Press and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 1993). The CMHC has long been active in sponsoring research and publications, and this is its most comprehensive volume to date, offering no less than 23 articles

and 454 pages on a sweeping array of topics related to housing and its community setting. Editor Miron, who previously published his own monograph on post-1945 housing,¹ exhibits no false modesty in announcing that “arguably, this is one of the most important volumes on housing ever produced in Canada” (p. 3).

Indeed, the book does offer some impressive features. The editor has weeded out much direct duplication of information from the many contributors, has wisely produced a single bibliography of references that serves for all the contributions and has added an index that allows the reader to track down items covered by different authors. Moreover, there is a useful glossary of terms that identifies and explains the multitude of housing acronyms and government programs that have appeared over the past half-century. There is also a handy “Key Event Chronology” that identifies major policy initiatives taken by governments between 1912 and 1987. Miron further performs yeoman service by providing an article that summarizes important aspects of his 1988 study, *Housing in Postwar Canada: Demographic Change, Household Formation, and Housing Demand*, and he adds a good concluding chapter on the “Lessons Learned From Canada’s Post-war Housing Experience”, that binds together many of the specialized articles.

Given CMHC sponsorship, it is not surprising that most of the articles relate particular aspects of housing and community to federal public policy. Those interested in the technical minutiae of housing issues will find much of value here, but most contributors also try to place their details into wider conceptual frameworks. In spite of Miron’s judicious cutting of duplication, many entries have a quality of sameness about them in terms of approach and findings. Most also share the same problems. Although an array of disciplines are represented in the authorship, history is not among them, a curious omission considering that the book presents itself as a history of post-war housing. The result is a clumsy social science approach to history that does not always handle chronology well in the organization of the material. Instead of seeing government policies as a reflection of different historical circumstances in particular time periods, many contributors use shifts in government policy to determine their historical periodization.

Since the articles are heavily slanted towards federal policy, less attention is paid to regional, provincial and local variations. Here is one example of how CMHC sponsorship shaped the focus of the authors, and also tempered the views expressed. None of the authors level devastating critiques at CMHC or other government policies. They generally agree that early post-war initiatives aimed to promote widespread home ownership without competing directly with private housing enterprises. The state largely limited its action to liberalizing and expanding mortgage financing and establishing construction standards. The authors also acknowledge that gradually, but increasingly, government policy assumed more and more social goals, especially with respect to providing housing for various low-income groups. The authors register no serious complaint with either policy. They concede that the government legislation and housing agencies made some mistakes, but once having recognized them as such, corrected them with better

1 John R. Miron, *Housing in Postwar Canada: Demographic Change, Household Formation, and Housing Demand* (Kingston and Montreal, 1988).

legislation. Some of the authors argue that the government could have done more, and seven contributors call explicitly for further government intervention. Nothing in that suggestion will upset housing bureaucrats. Certainly no one has the temerity to suggest that government should withdraw from housing entirely, or even reduce its role significantly. Only editor Miron is impolite enough even to raise the question. But as one contributor put it, regulation is "inevitable", so government should focus on ways of making it more "efficient" (p. 130). There is a quaint naiveté in many of the calls for more government action, posed as they were in 1986 when most of these articles were completed, and before criticism escalated about government debt and deficits and costly intrusions into the economy. Viewed from another ideological perspective, it is equally noteworthy that no Marxist was invited to shriek about deliberate conspiracies against the poor in order to enrich grasping developers.

If most of the articles express views palatable to the book's sponsor, there is even greater promotion here for expanding the busy industry of housing scholarship itself. No less than ten of the articles cry out for more monitoring and research. Editor Miron leads the charge here; in the "Prologue" he argues that the contributors did not foresee events that have occurred since 1986 that might affect housing, and he supplies an impressive list of new research projects that need urgent consideration, thus justifying in advance another thick study sponsored by CMHC. In spite of this book's many merits, one cannot fail to notice how well it serves the interests of the research sponsor and the researchers alike.

A different kind of commissioned history is Bruce S. Elliott, *The City Beyond: A History of Nepean, Birthplace of Canada's Capital, 1792-1990* (Nepean, Ont., City of Nepean, 1991). Here a municipal government sponsors an author who is a recognized scholar and whose own roots in the community stretch back several generations. The book has some admirable qualities. Elliott reveals that the community was not simply a physical, political or cultural adjunct of Ottawa, but a place with distinct values derived from an extended rural past. Despite the migration of city folk into its borders, starting *en masse* in the late 19th century, most Nepeanites resisted annexation by the national capital, despite its modern services. They preferred instead to retain a countrified setting characterized by limited government and low taxation. Indeed, resentment festered whenever Ottawa attempted to swallow chunks of its territory. In part, this prompted town councils to introduce zoning regulations and to improve utilities and services to create a more liveable and self-contained community.

The City Beyond offers splendid research on settlement, growth and changing ethnic and class composition. It also convincingly corrects stereotypes about suburbia as a cultural wasteland. But when the author deals with more recent events, problems appear. Here Elliott moves beyond the occasional pot shot at "imperialistic" Ottawa and becomes a booster for his municipal sponsor. Endorsed, for instance, are the aggressive building programmes of Reeve Andy Haydon from 1970 to 1978 which included the construction of a multi-million-dollar sportsplex. Although admitting that Haydon received criticism for extravagance, Elliott casts him as a visionary who enabled Nepean to become a city by the time of his retirement. Moreover, Elliott gives short shrift to the emergence of recent social ills,

while lavishing considerable space on the creation of a town orchestra, the building of a new Civic Square, efforts to attract new businesses and the selection of Nepean by the *Financial Post* as one of the six medium-sized Canadian municipalities providing the greatest value for taxpayers. Overall, the book remains a superior study sure to interest residents of the community and scholars who need to understand the suburban setting of modern dwellings, but if only for the sake of appearances, Elliott should have made greater efforts to retain a more dispassionate style.

Less historically-minded is another work funded by the subject of the inquiry: Michael McMahon, *Metro's Housing Company: The First 35 Years* (Toronto, Metropolitan Toronto Housing Company Limited, 1990). Guided by a political science approach which concentrates on the decision-making process, McMahon traces efforts by the Metropolitan Toronto government to construct 18,000 socially-assisted housing units, 80 per cent of which were for seniors. By scouring the files of this publicly-financed and privately-run city enterprise, he traces the manipulations undertaken by its board of directors to secure financing from other levels of government. But the book's major research strength also accounts for its principal flaw; engrossed in company records, the author demonstrates a propensity to present issues solely from the company's perspective.

McMahon presents the company directors as messiahs of public housing. In the 1960s they convinced a cautious CMHC that aesthetically-pleasing high-rise apartments with good amenities could be constructed inexpensively by working closely with major private developers. McMahon also applauds the company's practice of consulting with interested citizen groups and its decision to tie rents to income. Efficient management plus a decision to take in single renters needing less subsidization, helped the corporation deal with funding cutbacks during the Mulroney years. All these efforts, he writes, exempted Metro from the charge of creating ghettos, something which plagued and ultimately undermined agencies such as the Ontario Housing Corporation. McMahon neglects, however, the upward drift of rents charged to seniors in order to constrain deficits, which resulted in vacancies in units designated for the elderly.

McMahon's well-documented and timely study deserves a wide audience since it addresses a problem that will become increasingly significant as the baby boom generation reaches retirement. Moreover, in detailing what he describes as an innovative and adaptive approach to decision-making, the study suggests that ways exist to contend with the mounting problem of how to house seniors. But McMahon's tendency to flatter the patron of his study, even if warranted, should have been downplayed. As the work stands, some readers might dismiss its considerable scholarly merits and categorize it as an exercise in public relations. Such a pitfall could have been avoided if the author had given stronger voice to the critics of Metro's efforts, or if he had at least offered an explanation as to why other communities across Canada have not adopted the Toronto model.

The books by Miron, Elliott and McMahon, all of which exhibit high quality, demonstrate the tough standards which commissioned history must attain to ensure scholarly acceptance. *The Landlord as Scapegoat* (Vancouver, The Fraser Institute, 1991) by sociologist Keith Lehrer, more clearly demonstrates why academics tend

to be leery about work funded by sources whose presence suggests an agenda. The Fraser Institute, which authorized this analysis into legislation regulating the rental market, strives hard to convince Canadians about the benefits of unfettered free enterprise, an ideology clearly shared by Lehrer. By being alerted to its prejudices at the outset, readers might be prepared to give the book more leeway than works purporting to provide dispassionate analysis — perhaps such a disarming approach might even lull people into accepting quasi-propaganda. But no such concern need be expressed over *Landlord as Scapegoat*, which, as its title suggests, pushes argument into the realm of hyperbole; moreover, it is practically bereft of serious research on many crucial points.

The text does not begin that badly. As a sociological work, it takes a theoretical approach to power relationships between conflicting groups. The traditional view, writes Lehrer, is that landlords hold the upper hand over tenants. While this may have been true in the 19th century (and one gets the impression that Lehrer longs for those glorious bygone days), such a situation, he asserts, no longer exists. A succession of pernicious laws have tipped the scales: the landlord cannot choose tenants, set the rent, evict at will nor enter an apartment without 24 hours' notice except in emergencies. The impression is therefore given, which many tenants would undoubtedly consider far from reality, that those who rent are free to make noise, commit damage and consistently pay the rent late without fear of reprisal. To conjure up even more pity, landlords are depicted as recent immigrants, single women or elderly couples, people who need a few extra dollars to get by and are not powerful enough to cope with rude, aggressive and unreliable tenants.

In addition to its sweeping accusations, the book is remarkable for its slim evidence. An account written by artist Emily Carr in the early 20th century about her troubles with tenants is utilized to argue that if those renting so long ago could act in such a presumptuous manner, then the sky must be the limit today. To substantiate his views on present conditions, Lehrer interviewed a grand total of ten landlords from the Toronto area, most of whom, he said, lost money by renting to people who had no regard for property. With little surprise, he concludes that the answer to such problems is to level the playing field by removing legislation protecting tenants. Such is especially important in the case of rent controls, which in his view resulted in fewer residences for let and the deterioration of building stock as landlords could no longer afford to make repairs, much less renovations. Lehrer also asserts that primarily the rich benefit from rent controls, citing as proof such “unrefutable” evidence as his personal observation that fancy cars can be found in the parking lots of rent-controlled buildings.

Sociological evidence can be of considerable use in examining a plethora of issues related to the urban environment. One suspects that such methodology could also aid in determining the impact of measures such as rent control. It is unfortunate, however, that *Landlord as Scapegoat*, does not advance debate on this important subject by producing a serious or even semi-balanced investigation and chooses instead to deal solely in polemics. The pity is that many good studies, including several in Miron's book, provide support for some of Lehrer's views.

In addition to the problem of bias, agencies that commission studies sometimes drive research into areas of dubious utility for which even first-rate research and

writing cannot entirely compensate. An example can be found in a study commissioned and co-published by two provincial government departments: Donald Wetherell and Irene Kmet, *Homes in Alberta: Building, Trends and Design, 1870-1967* (Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism, and Alberta Municipal Affairs, 1991). The book is an excellent reference on subjects ranging from the construction of log cabins and modern houses to the periodization of business cycles and how they affected provincial housing stock. Ultimately, however, the book must be judged by what it reveals about the distinctive character of Alberta housing. Here the authors are forced to admit that building cycles, construction methods and housing designs all followed trends evident elsewhere in North America.

Albertans built crude cabins or shacks until they decided to stay in a community and could afford something better. Under the influence of early 20th-century progressivism, efforts were made to beautify communities, improve municipal services and construct open-plan, airy bungalows incorporating the latest fashions in ventilation and plumbing. In the 1920s the province experienced a housing boom followed by a rapid collapse during the Depression and a shortage of stock in wartime. Using the generous down-payment provisions of the 1944 NHA and the mortgage guarantees offered through CMHC, Alberta then participated in another period of phenomenal housing growth in which it continued to ape North American styles, particularly the ranch house with a large, modern kitchen that exuded domesticity.

Anyone requiring information on Alberta's experience with housing will thank the authors for their labours. Their work also dispels some myths about the isolation of the early frontier and may even be used to counter-balance extreme regionalist interpretations of the Prairies. Nevertheless, one is still left with nagging doubts about the need for this volume. *Homes in Alberta* might be a nice showpiece for its departmental sponsors, but given the authors' conclusion that what occurred in the province essentially mirrored patterns elsewhere makes one think the tax dollars used to support this project might have found a better purpose.

Commissioned studies will likely increase as more municipalities, government departments and public agencies seek accounts of their past or solutions to specific problems. And scholars in a saturated market, fearful of a decline in traditional grants, will be thankful for the work. They should strive, however, to say something of consequence rather than to blindly follow a pre-established mandate. If most of the authors reviewed here have successfully met that challenge, they have been less successful in dealing with the problem of ideological and interpretive biases. Non-commissioned books exhibit those flaws too, but extra care should be taken in targeted studies to produce balanced accounts because, unfairly or not, a greater predilection will exist to write off such works as exercises in public relations.

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