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Review Article

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Nothing is more striking about the contemporary state of Canadian society than how our major cities set abject poverty and lavish wealth cheek by jowl, perhaps more blatantly than at any time since the Great Depression. Only a few blocks away from Toronto's Regent Park housing project, the home of downtrodden victims of the market economy, stands a Mercedes-Benz auto dealership, a conspicuous symbol of the 'nouveau riche.' Among the chic shopping districts in the downtown core of many cities it is common to see homeless women, men and children sleeping on the street or begging for a miserable pittance to survive on. An aspiring modern-day Charles Dickens or Emile Zola would find abundant material in Canadian cities for a lengthy novel or two.

Nevertheless, the World Bank assures us that "Canadians have a lot to be happy

about" and the United Nations consistently rates Canada as one of the best places in the world to live.¹ Politicians and media pundits of all stripes boast that Canadians are far better off than their counterparts south of the border. If such commentators acknowledge hardship, it is underlined with the familiar adage that 'the poor live in what would have been considered castles a century ago.'

These conflicting perspectives shed much light on the two major themes of the books under review: crisis and progress. Walter Benjamin, the influential Marxist cultural theorist, defined crisis as the fact that "everything just goes on."² This is an apt description of Canadian housing in the twentieth century. If the extensive problem of substandard shelter quality and sheer lack of dwellings troubled Canadians in the first half of the century, severe problems of affordability, lack of special-needs housing and homelessness have plagued many of today's rural and urban dwellers. We have witnessed a dramatic re-emergence of a large-scale problem of availability and affordability and the reluctance of government to respond to this situation. In fact, the crisis is severely worsened by the withdrawal of support for social housing and other social services. Yet despite the long waiting lists for public housing, mounting homelessness and growing impoverishment, we still see self-congratulatory proclamations on the great 'progress' Canada has achieved in housing its citizens. At the very least, this incongruity calls into question how a country as wealthy as Canada's defines social progress.

'Crisis' and 'progress' also guide us towards a consideration of the current state of housing studies. For while much progress has been made in the scholarly analysis of housing in Canada in the last

twenty years, there are still significant gaps in our understanding of the housing experience of Canadians. Most of the books under review go some way in filling these gaps, but there is still insufficient appreciation of how housing provision and consumption are the unique consequence of "materially embedded social relations and experiences of struggle and subordination, power and resistance, accumulation and accommodation."³ This broad interpretive impasse is compounded by a lack of understanding of human agency and a feel for the lived housing experiences of ordinary Canadians. In all the books under review, there is scarcely a quote from the people who occupy the homes which are the objects of study.

In addition, when it comes to proscriptions for housing improvement, there is an impoverished vision of change. However problematic and partial, when radical scholarship came storming onto the urban studies scene in the 1960s and 70s, it brought with it a bold vision of social change—of understanding the perverse exploitation, domination and oppression of urban society in order to fundamentally turn it on its head. If they remain genuine in their beliefs in the fundamental rights of workers to decent shelter opportunities, today's housing scholars have accepted what Alex Callinicos calls " 'really existing capitalism' as defining the horizons of possible change."⁴

The Canadian Home not only accepts but celebrates 'really existing capitalism.' It claims that in home building "there is no country on earth that can lay claim to a finer or more diverse product" (p.226). Marc Denhez's misnamed volume purports to deal with the development of Canadian home styles from "Cave to Electronic Cocoon." But this history, commissioned by the Canadian Home Build-

ers' Association (CHBA), reads more like a hagiography where the saints are replaced by building entrepreneurs. It gives ample treatment to certain housing styles and the evolution of construction technology, but the complex range of factors that go into the making of the residential environment take a backseat to the manoeuvrings of the various home builders' associations.

Denhez's excursion through the history of Canadian home designs strives to employ humour and shows a penchant for the bizarre. We learn that homes in the Atlantic region were brightly coloured in order to guide ships through the fog and that the first electrically-cooked meals were served in Ottawa in 1892. But the attempt to spice up the text often ends up as hyperbole. To call the 'do-it-yourself' craze of the late 1970s a "social revolution" is stretching it somewhat (p.174). Similarly, to use the concepts of "financial planning" and "inflation" to describe pre-capitalist aboriginal economies and culture is anachronistic and inaccurate (pp.27, 29). No less than four times is somebody or something accused of being "politically correct." The jokes are sometimes tasteless, such as when the dominance of Modernist theories in architectural schools (one of Denhez's favourite targets) is compared to the Holocaust (p.77). It is unclear whether this is supposed to be a book on housing design and the building industry or solely a grab bag of dubious one-liners.

The sections of *The Canadian Home* on home-building associations promises to shed light on the activities of this important and largely obscure group of actors in the housing sphere. It fails to deliver. Denhez had privileged access to the records of the CHBA and its forerunners, yet he tells us little about the members, composition, structures and internal dynamics of the association. Instead, we are treated to a Cold War-ish chronicle of

how the building industry valiantly fought the creeping influence of socialism, represented by the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) and other public sector interventions in the housing sphere. For instance, housing shortages in the Second World War period are attributed solely to government regulations and the government's Wartime Housing Limited rather than to the cold imperatives of a construction industry that would only build if there were substantial profits to be had (pp.80-83). Denhez neglects to mention that in the throes of economic crisis during the 1930s, many sections of the building industry clamoured for government intervention to boost the ailing construction industry. Virulent anti-state attitudes were discarded when government intervention promised to boost sagging profits. The relationship between government and the home building sector—epitomized by state monetary policies, subsidies and tax breaks—is far more interconnected than Denhez admits.

When dealing with the modern period, Denhez focuses primarily on the housing of the upper classes. It would come as a surprise to most historians of the 19th century to learn that Sir John A. Macdonald's fondness for Italianate villas and Victorian gingerbread homes reflected the tastes "of the population at large" (p.52). The book makes no serious effort to address the housing conditions of the working class nor is there any discussion of the gender and racial dimensions of housing practices: for example, the use by builders of racist residential covenants up to the 1950s to exclude minorities.⁵ The history of housing hardship faced by working people is trivialized. For Denhez, the evolution of Canadian home designs is largely an unblemished story of progress.

The collection of essays in *House, Home and Community* take a more even-

handed approach to progress in housing Canadians in the post-Second World War period, stressing both the failures and successes. The articles deal with topics as diverse as affordability, accessibility, tenure and income relationships, housing supply, housing form and government policies. If there are no articles by historians in the book, each chapter includes a historical overview and comments on the relevance of past experience for policy formation. It is a valuable source book for housing scholars interested in sound statistical work and thoughtful analysis of the complex components that make up Canadian housing.⁶

In the introductory essay, John Miron defines progress as "movement or change for the better" (p.18). He adds the proviso that progress is a relative term. The various authors stake out their own positions on whether or not Canadian housing has progressed: some, such as Miron, take a positive view, arguing that in large part Canadians are qualitatively better housed than in the 1940s. Other chapters by J.David Hulchanski, Janet McClain, Patricia A. Streich, Damaris Rose and Martin Wexler, maintain that restricted residential space for low-income earners, unequal property rights for renters, lack of special-needs shelter and mounting problems of affordability cast a decidedly negative shadow on the notion of progress. For instance, Patricia Streich notes that "Although housing should have become more affordable [in the years since 1945], consumers did not spend a decreasing proportion of their budgets for housing" (p.257). J. David Hulchanski shows that households are increasingly becoming polarized on the basis of income and tenure, resulting in fewer households in the lower end of the income scale being able to afford home ownership (p.74).

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All contributors, the prologue informs us, believe "competitive and efficient markets continue to be important in meeting the housing needs of many Canadians" (p.3). In the face of the growing difficulties of affordability and accessibility, the housing conditions faced by native peoples, and the inability of government and the housing industry to respond to changing social trends, more direct consideration of the problematic and contradictory character of private market-housing provision itself would have been useful. Do the obstacles faced by people seeking housing result simply from "inefficient and uncompetitive markets"? Or are they a result of the inherently anarchic and unstable traits of housing markets and the underlying class and property relations of capitalist society? The ever-present challenges of limited housing opportunities for significant sections of the population requires that we continue to ask these questions.

John Bacher makes no bones about the enormous lack of progress by governments at all levels to develop a vibrant social housing sector to shelter the myriad of low-income earners in need of affordable housing. Bacher delves deeply into the complex intricacies of policy making, uncovering the often-underhanded methods used by government officials to thwart social housing initiatives to ensure the dominance of private-market provision of shelter. The core sections of the monograph deal with the manoeuvrings of W.C. Clark, deputy minister of Finance in the 1930s and 40s, and his conservative allies, to block a public sector approach to shelter provision. It also rigorously details the various efforts across the country, focusing on Ontario, to provide government-assisted housing from the first limited-dividend schemes in the First World War period to the expanded co-operative and non-profit movements of the 1980s. There is

much in this volume for housing historians of all areas to value.

The problem with *Keeping to the Market-place* lies in its analytical framework. Bacher sees the politics of housing provision revolving around the political ideologies of "Whiggism" and "Toryism." He simplifies the development of housing policy by attributing it to the influence of uncaring "Whig" officials in the government and "Red Tory" and social-democratic academics and politicians, inspired with an "ethic of community" (p.ix), who advanced a social-housing agenda. This approach is imprecise and unconvincing. Policy formation is treated largely as autonomous and reflective of individual ideologies. Little attention is given to how the wider material context shapes the ideas and approaches of policy makers: for instance, how in the 1930s and 40s the deep-seated crisis of capitalism, the demands of the war economy and the rise of a powerful workers' movement produced a political milieu in which housing-reform ideas were given a widespread hearing. Or how global economic uncertainty and the wholesale acceptance of the logic of cutback to social services has driven governments, 'Whiggish,' 'Red Tory' and social democrat alike, to slash public housing provision in the last decade.⁷

By neglecting the social and political contours of the welfare state, Bacher also obscures important influences on policy formulation and paints a distorted picture of housing reform initiatives. Research on the gender dimensions of social-service provision is not incorporated into the study.⁸ He also minimizes the importance of political struggles around housing which emanated from below, dismissing the successful direct-action strategies led by housing activists in the 30s and 40s around evictions, rent controls and other issues (pp.x,33).⁹ Moreover, he downplays the limitations of the

public-housing sector in terms of access, affordability, and quality, and glosses over the contradictions of the cross-class reform alliances to which he attributes the modest success achieved in public housing reform. Given the dismal state of contemporary public housing, we need a more critical rendering of the history of the reform movement, showing its limitations as well as its successes and giving due consideration to alternative strategies for reform.

Jill Wade's *Houses For All* is much more satisfying. It is grounded in a wide reading of Canadian and international literature, and blends various levels of analysis: "the local and the national; the social and the political; the ordinary Canadian and the federal elite; and the historiographical and the narrative" (p.6). Wade skilfully draws on a wide range of statistics and qualitative evidence to show that despite the labelling of Vancouver by its boosters and some historians as a 'Pacific Paradise', the housing conditions of a significant proportion of the population were far from rosy, especially in the crisis conditions of the 1930s and the immediate post-Second World War years (chs.1,2,4). She also details the moderately-successful struggles of left-wing activist groups, including the Communist Party (CPC) and the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), to remedy this situation by promoting social housing initiatives. The book is refreshingly attentive to the gender, class and racial aspects of housing environments and struggles for decent shelter, highlighting the role of women in the reform movement and the blatant discrimination against Asians by city authorities (pp.18,25,48).

Wade makes a significant contribution to Canadian social history, shedding much needed light on a little-known and significant chapter of the Canadian working-class experience. But it is lacking in

some areas. While the various positions of the groups that constituted the housing movement are outlined well, there are very few quotations in the book from housing activists or people affected by the housing crisis to illuminate the motivation behind their activism or the reasons they chose particular methods of struggle. We are given little feeling for the verve of the "enormous demonstrations," occupations and eviction rallies employed by housing activists (p.84). For example, the use of 'tin-canning' by housing activists is referred to, but not explained. If it refers to a raucous shaming of public officials by dragging tin cans in front of their residences or offices, as it was used in the nineteenth century,¹⁰ it would have been worthwhile to be informed of the details of this creative tactic and whether or not it was successful. The inclusion of photographs or more thorough commentary on these events, or quotations from leaflets, broadsides and posters would have given us a taste of the flavour of the movement—its enthusiasms, inspirations, excitements, ups and downs, strains.¹¹

Since Wade is rightly interested in providing important historical lessons to today's housing activists, a more extended delineation of the social forces that made up the movement and their strategies and tactics would have been valuable. Her writing lacks an important dimension of the character of the radical currents of housing reform in Vancouver. Perhaps a greater reliance on the radical press would have yielded more sense of the contested terrain of housing politics—the intense debates, discussions and differences of approach which constitute the life of social movements. This is especially important given her conclusion that "cross-class" coalitions (p.168) are the key to success in social housing activism. It is not clear in the book what the respective contributions of the constituent groups were to ensuring a degree of suc-

cess. My reading suggests that it was the radical reform initiatives from below that provided the concrete dynamism of the movement.

John Sewell is more directly concerned with the tasks facing social housing activists in the face of the housing predicament of the 1990s. He clearly investigates the key issues in Canadian housing: home building quality, neighbourhood design, land questions, home ownership, the whole realm of assisted housing, rental housing, and homelessness. Sewell also advances a reform agenda centred on making the plethora of government regulations more efficient and promoting small-scale non-profit housing schemes.

Houses and Homes is an empirical gold mine for the lay person interested in exploring housing in Canada. All the relevant and most up-to-date statistics on a diverse range of issues are included in the volume. Sewell methodically approaches the contentious issues of the field, gives due consideration to the available data and the various theories and stakes out his own position. On the question of affordability, for instance, he carefully evaluates the different types of measurements, pointing out that the proportion of money spent on housing costs has differential impacts on high- and low-income earners (ch.2). A 35 per-cent housing cost/income ratio may be affordable for some households but it is onerous for most. Sewell also dispels some widespread myths: he shows that high housing densities are not necessarily disadvantageous; quality high-density housing can be constructed without resorting to the monstrous high-rises which blemish the urban landscape (ch3). And he details why NIMBYism (Not in My Backyard) is so detestable: social, co-operative and non-profit housing does not decrease property values; NIMBY atti-

tudes are motivated in large part by ignorance and snobbery (pp.72-75).

Most of Sewell's recommendations for housing reform are sound, but one might quarrel with his fence sitting on some issues and his constricted agenda for housing advancement. It is one thing to recognize the ambiguities and complexities of housing needs and another to take an ambiguous position on these issues. On the question of affordability, for instance, he accepts at face value that policies to help low-income earners are politically unpopular and therefore seeks more 'complex' solutions (pp.38,183). This seems to be capitulating to the very right-wing political ideology which he detests: the ideological stock-in-trade that those who are most disadvantaged by the market economy should expect no 'favours.'

Other planks of his reform platform—the promotion of small-scale non-profit ventures and administrative efficiency in housing officialdom—are rather limited. Sewell's frequent touting of Toronto's St. Lawrence and Vancouver's False Creek non-profit housing schemes will come as little consolation to the growing numbers who legitimately seek a decent housing environment. Such schemes are far too small scale to address the dimensions of the problem and their prospects are diminishing as governments at all levels ruthlessly slash funding for social services. He also eschews popular action from below, such as rent strikes (pp.130-131), and says little about how progressive reform in housing must be linked up with a larger reform programme to defend and extend the welfare state. Sewell seems bent on making housing reform 'respectable' to government and business élites. This may gain the ear of the movers and shakers in housing policy but it is questionable whether it significantly advances housing reform. As Jill Wade's study of housing activism shows,

without a direct challenging of the corporate agenda which has driven the attacks on social services, there are few prospects for housing improvement.

Like most other analysts in housing studies, indeed social scientists in general, Sewell accepts the disingenuous 'logic' of balanced budgets and curtailing deficits via cutbacks—that Canada just does not have enough money to afford adequate social programs and therefore alternative solutions are necessary. Yet we know that a country as wealthy as Canada—in which banks alone made over \$4 billion in profit in 1994—can afford decent income redistributive programs for the population.¹² The crux is one of priorities and the task of housing activists seems to be much better focused on struggling to change these priorities rather than accepting the status quo, an ideologically driven fiscal hysteria. Sewell asks "Where Have all the Activists Gone?"¹³ After asking this question in the mirror, he might also ponder the question "Whatever happened to the idea of directly challenging the anti-poor politics of governments and business?"

Housing studies have come a long way in the last decade. Nonetheless, when it comes to the experiences of housing—the daily circumstances, needs, desires, attitudes of ordinary people—we have much to learn. We know almost nothing about what it is like to live in this or that housing environment or how it feels to be involved in political efforts for improved shelter opportunities. And while we understand a great deal about macro-level developments in the housing sphere, much work needs to be done to relate housing to larger developments such as global economic crisis, shifting

social trends, and right-wing political trajectories. In addition, we suffer from a historical blindspot when it comes to understanding the struggles for better housing in the past and what is to be done now. Progress can only be rescued from crisis by concerted oppositional politics that revives the possibility not only of better housing, but of lives that reach past the limitations of oppression and exploitation associated with class, race and gender inequities in the housing realm. We should retrieve the tin cans from our recycling boxes. We all know a few politicians that need a wake-up call.

Notes

1. Chris Morris, "Canadians have a lot to be happy about, says World Bank," *The Kingston Whig-Standard*, 29 December 1994, 1.
2. Cited in Terry Eagleton, *The Crisis of Contemporary Culture*, (Oxford, 1993), 2.
3. Bryan Palmer, "The Poverty of Theory Revisited: Or, Critical Theory, Historical Materialism, And the Ostensible End of Marxism," *left history*, 1 (Spring 1993), 69.
4. Alex Callinicos, *The Revenge of History: Marxism and the East European Revolutions* (Oxford, 1991), 132-133.
5. See John Bacher and David Hulchanski, "Keeping Warm and Dry: The Policy Response to the Struggle for Shelter Among Canada's Homeless, 1900-1960," *Urban History Review*, 16 (October 1987), 151; Michael Doucet and John Weaver, *Housing the North American City*, (Montreal and Kingston, 1991), 99, 123; Kay Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980* (Montreal and Kingston, 1991), 127, 269, n.63. In a question and answer section in a home builder's promotional advertisement the question "Would you sell to foreigners?" was answered "No, Absolutely NOT." See Public Archives of Ontario, Hearst Papers, MU 1311, File 18, W.N McEachern and Sons Ltd, "A Series of Advertisements," 1918.

6. As the editor acknowledges, however, the global recession of 1990-1993 and shifting government priorities in the last decade have significantly altered the housing sphere in Canada. An updated volume may soon be necessary. Hopefully, the interval between completion of the manuscript and publication will be much shorter next time.
7. For a cross-national study of housing policy which calls into question the relevance of focusing solely on the political culture and ideology of government officials, stressing instead the economic context and differing ruling-class strategies see Michael Ball et al. *Housing and Social Change in Europe and the United States* (London 1988).
8. See Margaret Hobbs and Ruth Roach Pierson, "A kitchen that wastes no steps...": Gender, Class and the Home Improvement Plan, 1936-1940," *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 41 (May 1988), 9-38.
9. For militant protests against evictions in Montreal and Ottawa see Marc Choko, *Crises du logement à Montréal (1860-1939)* (Montréal, 1980), 145-181.
10. On tin-canning and other practices of ritual protest see Bryan Palmer, "Discordant Music: Charivaris and Whitecapping in Nineteenth-Century North America," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 3 (1978), 5-62.
11. For example, the excellent essays in *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904-1984*, eds. Ronald Lawson and Mark Naison (New Brunswick, 1986).
12. For a convincing critique of 'deficit hysteria' see Harold Chorney, "The Deficit: Hysteria and the Current Crisis," in *Towards a Humanist Political Economy* (Montreal, 1992) and Michelle Weinroth, "Deficit Hysteria: Nationalist Ideology in Economic Disguise," *Socialist Studies Bulletin* No.37 (July-September 1994), 53-59; "Demystifying debt: nine eminent economists expose the debt/deficit hoax," *Canadian Forum* 72 (June 1993), 8-13.
13. "The Interregnum of Social Housing (or Where Have All the Activists Gone)," *Canadian Housing/Habitation Canadienne* 11 (Summer 1994), 6-8.