

A Brief History of Rooming Houses in Toronto, 1972-94

Prepared for Rupert Community Residential Services

by Philippa Campsie

Toronto, September 1994

“The most radical thing is a long memory.” (Michael Shapcott)

1. Introduction and definitions

The history of rooming houses in Toronto is the history of efforts (and failures) to house low-income single people. Although identifying people by the housing form that they occupy is an arbitrary way to define a population, the written record (from government reports to newspaper stories) tends to focus more on the houses than on the housed.

Two things distinguish rooming and boarding houses from other forms of accommodation. (Rooming houses provide accommodation only, boarding houses provide some or all meals, and may provide additional services.) First, unlike self-contained apartments, they involve at least one shared facility: bathroom, kitchen, living room. This means that contact between the occupants of a house or a flat is inevitable, and cooperation and compromise (social rules) are required. Those who live in rooming houses are expected to be participants in a community, not simply occupants of space. For some, this is a way to connect to the world in an intimate setting, for others it may just be one more problem to add to their other problems. Either way, rooming house residents must cope with corporate life. And because the personalities and life skills of the inhabitants directly affect this life, they are often subject to the scrutiny of landlords, community workers, other tenants, and neighbours.

Second, rooming and boarding houses are distinguished from hostels and flophouses by weekly rentals and, since 1987, by a formal, legal relationship with the housing provider, regulated in Ontario by the Landlord and Tenant Act. (Tenant protection was extended to those receiving personal care from housing providers by Bill 120 in 1994.) Rooming houses have the potential to be a permanent and secure housing form for their residents, although they are often described as ephemeral arrangements, inhabited by transients.

Housing with these two features may be provided by the private, public, or non-profit sectors, it may be in a single house or a high-rise, it may be linked to social services or independent of them. Housing providers and experts disagree strongly about which is best among these different ways of providing housing. Unprofitable as these arguments may be, the issue is not resolved by saying that different forms suit different people, since this implies that rooming house residents can pick and choose from among the available arrangements. The rooming house population includes a great many people who do not have choices, or whose only choice is between a rooming house and the street (or a hostel, which is not a permanent housing form).

Defining rooming houses is easier than defining the rooming house population. Rooming houses are the bottom rung of the housing ladder, and at any given time will contain people who are on their way up or down this ladder, in addition to long-term inhabitants. No study of rooming houses can ignore potential tenants, such as those who are now homeless, or those who are in other types of housing, but whose tenure is precarious.

Describing rooming houses as the “bottom rung” is not to imply that all rooming houses are in some way inadequate or inferior housing forms, only that tenancy of a single room, paid by the week, is usually the first attainable housing form for many people, before they are able to afford a self-contained unit at a monthly rent.

Some housing experts argue that rooming houses are obsolete and that attempts to preserve this form of housing are ultimately futile. They argue that providing housing at the bottom rung makes it harder to demonstrate a need for better types of housing (just as the provision of hostels detracts from the urgent need to provide permanent housing for the homeless). The opposing argument is that sawing off the bottom rung of the housing ladder will make upward mobility much harder and downward mobility more precipitous. The recent history of rooming and boarding houses in Toronto may shed some light on these two positions.

2. From respectability to invisibility

On 2 October 1972, a 75-year-old man called Gig Yun died in a rooming house fire at 314 Dundas Street West. A three-paragraph story in the Toronto Star noted that the fire had been confined to Yun’s room and that \$4,300 worth of damage had been done.

The coroner’s jury mentioned the deterioration of the building, unauthorized renovations, the “lack of adequate alternative accommodation and concern in the municipality” and recommended licensing rooming houses and enforcing bylaws as a way to improve standards. The inquest looked at Yun’s death as a symptom of a wider housing problem, which marked a change of attitude towards this form of accommodation.

Thirty years earlier, rooming or boarding houses had been taken for granted as respectable places for students, single workers, immigrants, and newlyweds to live when they left home or came to the city. By far the more common arrangement for such people was to lodge with a family, but many preferred the greater independence of rooming house life. Rooming houses proliferated close to large industrial plants such as that of Massey-Harris, and housed workers during and after the Second World War. There were rooming houses in nearly every district of the city, from Rosedale to Parkdale -- wherever there were houses that could be subdivided.

The boom in home building and the growth of the suburbs in the 1950s changed the demographic profile of rooming houses; when private home ownership was within reach, there was no reason for the middle classes to live in shared accommodation. Rooming houses became the housing of those who had no other option: students, the working poor, or the unemployed. For students, rooming houses were a temporary expedient; for the poor, they were often a permanent home. Still, they were an accepted feature of the urban landscape, necessary if unglamorous, and a

decided cut above the flophouses where men on skid row paid a dollar or two per night for a dormitory bed.

If the 1940s were the years of respectable rooming houses, the 1960s were the years of official neglect. Rooming houses and their tenants were looked down upon by those who could afford the rent for an apartment or the down payment for a house, and the aging stock was deteriorating, but the change in the status of rooming houses was ignored in housing policies and official documents.

This ignorance was challenged by a long-time rooming-house tenant called Norman Browne, who in 1969 wrote a report called “Roomers: The Lost Race of Society.” Browne had talked to other roomers about living conditions, rent levels, and relations with landlords, and had examined housing legislation to see if the rights of roomers were protected. He found that roomers were often overcharged by landlords for inadequate rooms, and treated as second-class citizens, probably because they were generally assumed (inaccurately in many cases) to be transients. Provincial housing legislation made no mention of roomers and lumped them in with other rental tenants. Browne sent his report to the Toronto and Metro City Councils, the Toronto Star, the Ontario Housing Corporation, and various city agencies.

After a newspaper picked up the story, Browne worked with the Toronto Christian Resource Centre (a community agency founded in 1964 and based in Regent Park) to expand his research and develop recommendations: these included better use of fieldworkers among the rooming house population, improved health care programs, licenses for rooming houses to ensure minimum standards for facilities, maintenance, and rents, and an amendment to the Landlord and Tenant Act to define and include roomers in its provisions. A Study on Roomers by Mary McMaster and Norman Browne was published in 1972, the year Gig Yun died.

3. Early regulation

Following the coroner’s inquest into Gig Yun’s death, alderman Karl Jaffary sent a memorandum to the Urban Renewal, Housing, Fire and Legislation committee of Toronto City Council urging a study of the jury’s recommendations, which had included licensing for rooming houses, minimum housing standards, inspection, and bylaw enforcement. Rooming house fires during the winter of 1973-74 had caused 20 more deaths, and added to the pressure on the city council to develop regulations and standards.

Peat Marwick consultants and the legal firm of Greenspan and Vaughan were hired to do the study. Their report pointed out the dilemma of regulating rooming houses:

Government has the basic responsibility to ensure that no one is permitted to either live in or operate a dwelling which is below an accepted standard for habitation ... [and to ensure] that no one is left without a place to live, or the means with which to obtain it... Thus, while the City must fulfill its obligation to enforce the standards in its by-laws, and if not met, prohibit a dwelling from being occupied, it must also be concerned if code enforcement results in tenant

dislocation. The City's particular concern must be that the future source and supply of additional lodging house units may decrease.

The City of Toronto's South of Carlton Skid Row Subcommittee (now known as the Alternative Housing Subcommittee of the Neighbourhoods Committee) also presented a brief to the council in 1974, and it too stated that "a strictly enforced rooming house by-law could greatly accelerate the present disappearance of rooming house stock." The report also acknowledged that media coverage of rooming house fires had increased the pressure to enforce standards, but cautioned that "roomers themselves have had to put up with substandard accommodation for the better part of their lives, while public concern has been manifest for only a few months." The comment implied that a hasty reaction to public pressure to enforce standards might do more harm than good. Rooming houses had emerged from obscurity, just in time to become an endangered species.

On 22 November 1974, Toronto City Council passed two bylaws: 412-74, which required the owners of non-owner-occupied rooming houses with five or more tenants to obtain a licence and submit to yearly inspections, and 413-74, which set standards for fire protection and maintenance. Three years later, the Toronto Star reported that almost half of the rooming houses in the city had gone out of business since the passage of the bylaw (582 out of 1202). In order to avoid the expense of structural alterations to provide secondary exits and fire doors, many owners of rooming houses had sold out to developers, decreased the number of tenants to fewer than five, or rented their properties to single families. A few made the improvements, but paid for them by upgrading the entire building to create luxury units with higher rents.

As for the remaining rooming houses, not all of them improved in quality or safety. For example, in 1980 two rooming house fires, one on Caroline Avenue on 5 October and the other on Northcliffe Boulevard on 21 December, each killed four men. The newspapers demanded that the government tighten up the enforcement of standards. In 1985, the Toronto Star described the appalling conditions in a Cowan Avenue rooming house where a tenant had died in July 1984. Councillors demanded an investigation. Six years later, the Toronto Star revisited the same house on Cowan Avenue: nothing had changed. Public interest in rooming houses was fitful and fleeting; money for inspections and for inspectors' salaries dried up when interest waned. Without enforcement, bylaws are just pieces of paper, which is why, despite all the regulations, rooming house fires continued to occur (see Appendix A) until ten people died in the Rupert Hotel in 1989.

4. Blockbusting, gentrification, and the reformers

The decrease in the number of rooming houses was not solely the result of licensing and fire regulations. By the mid-1970s, rooming houses had become part of the urban redevelopment process. Changes in land values downtown led to speculation: investors bought up properties, created temporary rooming houses to earn rent, and sold out at a profit when the time was right. Many homeowners and landlords sold out, since the developers could outbid most other buyers, and the guarantee of a profitable sale was more attractive than the uncertainties of the rental market. When this process was combined with land assembly, rooming houses were seen as

instruments of "blockbusting." John Sewell, writing in 1972, described how Meridian developers in the St. Jamestown area set up rooming houses through middlemen:

Meridian, after buying a property and getting rid of the owner who would move away, would usually turn the house over to a middleman for \$125 or \$150 a month. The middleman then leased it out to tenants... If the house had three floors, then there would be at least three families in the house. When people moved in, the middleman always made it clear that no repairs would be made: the only thing the tenant was sure the landlord would do was collect the rent. ...Tenants could get premises from middlemen with no questions asked: if you were a roomer, the middleman didn't care whether you drank a lot or whether you ever worked. There were no restrictions on children, and there was no prejudice against welfare. ...After a dozen houses had been bought [in this way by Meridian] it was much easier to buy: people wanted to get away from the area, particularly away from the house next door where they had all-night parties and the children never went to school and didn't have proper shoes to wear.

In this context, roomers were seen as undesirables who were deliberately used to "destroy" neighbourhoods in order to make redevelopment possible.

Blockbusting reinforced middle-class prejudice against rooming houses and contributed to the persistent belief that multiple occupancy is incompatible with family housing and necessarily presages neighbourhood decline. It also led analysts to assume that a rooming house was, by definition, an interim use of housing stock. This assumption characterized the Peat Marwick report:

Traditionally lodging houses have been supplied as a byproduct of other economic motivations, i.e., financing a home, resale and investment, redevelopment. Escalating costs of housing and the increasing pressure against redevelopment may discourage further assemblies and interim rooming house operations... Rooming house accommodation is possibly the most sensitive of all forms of housing to market changes.

The 1974 South of Carlton Report on Rooming Houses agreed: "Rooming houses are an interim use and generally have an unpredictable and short-term life span." A 1975 City of Toronto report on housing low-income single people made the same assumption and suggested that the decline in inner-city redevelopment would cause a similar decline in rooming houses:

Much traditional rooming house stock has represented an interim use of older housing on land held for future redevelopment... Even this interim form of housing is rapidly disappearing since fewer developers are assembling land in inner neighbourhoods due to escalating land values, construction costs and emerging City policies which discourage high density luxury development.

Blockbusting did not provide long-term housing, since the temporary landlords did not carry out any maintenance work, but it did provide housing of a sort for those who had nowhere else to go. As long as redevelopment was possible, older stock could be used in this way. There was resistance to blockbusting, particularly in the area south of St. Jamestown, but this did not stop the demolition (although Meridian sold about forty houses to the city, which are now owned and run as rooming houses by Cityhome). Landlords and homeowners simply could not afford to turn down the offers that developers made for their properties.

The election of a reform City Council in 1972 and the creation of a Core Area Task Force led to a variety of development controls to prevent blockbusting, such as downzoning, height restrictions, and neighbourhood secondary plans that discouraged redevelopment of other low-rise residential areas. The Ontario government also passed the Land Speculation Tax Act in 1974 which applied to residential investment properties held for fewer than ten years. Along with rising mortgage rates and increased labour and holding costs, these measures contributed to a slowdown in apartment construction and an increase in the resale prices of houses. When redevelopment slowed down, so did the creation of rooming houses as interim uses of housing stock.

Rooming houses are part of urban change and the “filtering down” of housing stock from one socioeconomic group to another. Although blockbusting was a short-lived phenomenon, it was such an extreme example of filtering down that it contributed to a backlash against all urban redevelopment. Toronto’s reform council, in its determination to stamp out blockbusting and thereby “stabilize residential neighbourhoods,” created a series of controls that not only interfered with the process of filtering down, but contributed to the reverse process: gentrification. As the Peat Marwick report had noted:

The emerging “white painter” market in areas like the Annex and Don Vale may also be outbidding rooming house operators and investors for available conversion structures in Toronto.

Beginning in the mid-1960s, gentrification removed hundreds of rooming house units from the market and caused thousands of evictions. (The process was by no means unique to Toronto, but affected many cities with older downtown housing stock, such as Boston, London, or Melbourne.) The fact that so many rooming houses were unprofitable meant that it was fairly easy for people in the professional class to buy up and renovate these properties. A 1980 City of Toronto planning report calculated that in spite of new construction, the city had a net loss of 5,000 housing units between 1976 and 1979 because of deconversions that had turned multiple-occupancy houses into single-family houses. By 1986, this figure had more than doubled (see Appendix B).

Paradoxically, although the reform council promoted family neighbourhoods and family housing, researchers were becoming aware that the average household size was decreasing and that single-person households were multiplying in Canadian cities (see Appendix C). The need for rooming houses and small units was greater than ever, but the hostility to multi-unit buildings and apartments was deeply ingrained in Toronto tradition.

The assumption that rooming houses are an interim use of stock that is destined eventually for demolition or gentrification and that all rooming house owners make their financial plans with an eye to the ultimate sale of the property has coloured attitudes towards landlords and tenants and affected public policy. If rooming houses are assumed to be temporary, then tenants are by definition transient, since they will have to move sooner or later. Also, if rooming houses are treated as stop-gap housing, here today, gone tomorrow, then preservation appears futile. This attitude may have contributed to the continued disappearance of rooming house stock (see Appendix D).

5. Skid row and flophouses

Flophouses shared the fate of many rooming houses, and many disappeared during this period. Flophouses differ from rooming houses in that they rent for the night rather than the week and provide little more than sleeping space. Unlike hostels, however, they are run as businesses rather than charities or services, and will take in just about anyone who pays the nightly fee of two or three dollars.

A 1977 report on skid row by the City of Toronto Planning Board mentioned that many operators were selling out, although some evaded the licensing laws by decreasing the number of tenants in order to pass inspections and then allowing the numbers to rise again afterwards. The report was concerned with the hardest to house, including alcoholics and ex-psychiatric patients. Contrary to public perceptions, the skid row population was not chiefly composed of middle-aged and elderly men, but included many young, unemployed men. Some were alcoholic, but not all.

Originally skid row had been the centre of a migrant workforce, an accepted (because economically useful) feature of the urban landscape. When work was available, the numbers decreased; during the off-season the men returned. During the Second World War, when all forms of labour were pressed into service, skid rows nearly disappeared. But after the war, as mechanization replaced unskilled jobs, the labour of skid row men became obsolete. Skid row no longer forms a distinct group in the ranks of the homeless and poor.

In Toronto, skid row had long been identified with the Cabbagetown and Don Vale areas. Not only flophouses, but second-hand clothing stores, pool halls, cheap diners, taverns, and pawn shops thrived in these areas. Gentrification of these areas in the 1970s turned rooming houses and flophouses back into single-family dwellings and replaced many of the skid-row-based businesses with cafés and boutiques. At the same time, the casual labour market that once helped to define skid row almost completely disappeared. Once skid row had lost its economic value to the city, official interest in its preservation appeared to wane. (There is no longer a Skid Row Subcommittee at City Hall; it is now the Alternative Housing Subcommittee.)

Deinstitutionalization also added to the numbers of the chronically hard to house. The policy of closing psychiatric institutions and releasing people “into the community” (a euphemism, since few communities had appropriate facilities available to these people, and the money saved on closing institutions was seldom redirected into creating new facilities) had been going on throughout North America since the 1960s, but the closure of the Lakeshore Psychiatric Hospital in 1979 accelerated this process in Toronto. Since rooming houses and flophouses were disappearing at this time, the people who were released often found themselves with nowhere to go other than a hostel or the street.

Any mention of Toronto’s skid row in the 1970s must acknowledge the career of the eccentric Charles Ingwer, the operator of dozens of flophouses in the Cabbagetown area and the bane of the building inspectors’ existence. Although Ingwer resisted demands to repair his properties, he managed to stay in business for years, providing beds at two or three dollars a night for those who felt uncomfortable in hostels and couldn’t afford rooming houses. In 1976 he was ready to sell out, and received an offer from a developer who wanted to turn the properties into luxury housing. In 1977 the city council considered buying the properties just to keep the beds available.

John Sewell, then an alderman, praised Ingwer for “doing a good job,” but councillor Janet Howard protested, saying that the houses were “ghastly and awful.”

Ingwer represented a dilemma similar to that identified in the Peat Marwick study: is any bed, no matter how squalid, better than no bed at all? There is no easy answer, but Ingwer’s flophouses suggest that squalor is in the eye of the beholder. The flophouses were a disgrace in relation to middle-class standards of housing, but they must have looked very different to the men who used them.

By 1979 Ingwer’s original collection of 80 properties was down to 36, of which 31 had outstanding bylaw violations. Nevertheless, the city considered an offer by him to operate a city-owned shelter at 349 George Street known as the Schoolhouse. The proposal fell through because of objections by several members of city council.

6. The bachelorettes: fear and loathing in Parkdale

The housing needs of skid row men, however, were buried in the avalanche of media coverage of Parkdale bachelorettes in the late 1970s. Bachelorettes were small, self-contained units in converted houses that rented by the week; they were not rooming houses, but their fate affected that of rooming houses and of an area in which rooming houses were common. They were concentrated in Parkdale because the area had large old houses suitable for conversion and sufficiently low property values to make conversion financially attractive to developers and investors. However, the combination of large Victorian houses and low property values also attracted gentrifiers, and the competition between the two groups erupted into a war of publicity and public policy beginning in 1976.

The developers argued that they were providing much-needed housing for singles. As one of them, Berislav Ivankovic, put it, the choice was between “building a new city about the size of Oshawa to accommodate the singles looking for housing and loosening up on bachelorette restrictions.” Nobody seriously disputed the fact that housing for low-income singles was scarce. The Parkdale ratepayers, however, objected to the concentration of this type of housing in their neighbourhood. One newspaper article summarized the typical objections in this way: “Bachelorettes threaten the stability of family neighbourhoods, strain community facilities through overcrowding, destroy streetscapes, and bring a host of social problems because of the often rowdy transients they attract as tenants.”

Many of the newspaper reports were exaggerated, even hysterical: one resident said that Parkdale had become “an unbearable hell not fit for decent people,” and the bachelorettes were repeatedly described as a “disease” or “cancer.” Bachelorettes did pose certain problems -- the plumbing in many old houses was inadequate for multiple bathrooms, alterations were often crudely and cheaply done, and owners who had bought the houses as investments had little or no experience as landlords and did not know how to manage the property or deal with disruptive tenants -- but these were all problems that had been experienced with rooming houses and could have been dealt with through stricter enforcement of bylaws and more frequent inspections.

Nevertheless, the city council was under pressure to do something quickly and visibly, and reacted with regulations on minimum room sizes, parking requirements, restrictions on external alterations and additions, and limits on the number of rooms in a rooming house to prevent the creation of many small units. However, since the various bylaws did not use or define the word “bachelorette,” the restrictions all applied to rooming houses as well, with predictable results.

In 1979 John Sewell, by then mayor of Toronto, formed a task force on bachelorettes. The task force soon recognized that the larger problem was the shortage of affordable housing for low-income singles and examined the way in which the ad hoc legislation to curtail bachelorettes had severely restricted the supply of rooming and boarding houses throughout the city. John Sewell’s assistant, Lynn Spink, commented,

The legislation we’re proposing to relax ... was attempting to regulate bachelorettes indirectly, by regulating rooming and lodging houses through parking space requirements and so on. All that was doing was restricting a perfectly satisfactory and affordable form of singles housing. You don’t control an illegal conversion by regulating it, you control an illegal conversion by the building inspection and enforcement process... it makes no sense to penalize boarding and lodging house owners because of what speculators do illegally.

However, one of the Parkdale councillors on the task force, Barbara Adams, disagreed publicly with the legislative recommendations and argued that the task force should concentrate on “ridding south Parkdale of the illegal buildings and the social problems that go with them.” She said she feared that the recommendations designed to make it easier to run conventional rooming houses might legalize some bachelorettes that “the task force set out to eliminate.” The council postponed the legislative changes and referred the recommendations to the planning department. The planners reported back a year and a half later, in 1981, rejecting all the recommendations that would have relaxed the restrictions on rooming houses.

The reasons given for this position were that the controls ... were successful in arresting conversions to bachelorettes and that the planners were not aware of any detrimental impact on bona-fide rooming houses. The planners commented that the alternate controls proposed by the Task Force would not be as effective in stopping further bachelorette conversions and would not encourage more rooming houses. The solution proposed by the planners was for Council to consider higher housing targets for single people under the City of Toronto Non-Profit Housing Corporation.

The council took the planners’ advice when it passed bylaw 501-81; not one legislative change recommended by the task force to allow rooming house conversions was included.

The one recommendation of the task force that was adopted was the creation of a “clean-up team” to get rid of existing illegal bachelorettes. The expression “clean-up” is telling: it is the sort of expression that is used of efforts to deal with crime or the drug trade. No expense was spared. This high-profile group included lawyers Clayton Ruby (at the well-publicized rate of \$900 a day) and Harvey Eidinger. Since most fines were only \$1000 to \$2000, many considered the hiring of Ruby as public relations overkill.

The two lawyers revived an obscure section of the Municipal Act that allowed them not just to fine the owners of bachelorettes, but to get a restraining order that prevented owners from collecting rents until they had paid their fines and complied with the zoning bylaw. The first conviction against a bachelorette owner was obtained in April 1980; Ruby went on to get nineteen convictions before prosecutions were suspended in June.

In December Ian Scott was appointed to replace Ruby; he promised to operate in a less flamboyant way than his predecessor, who was renowned for his frequent press conferences. (Ian Scott's performance was, however, too low-key for the angry ratepayers in Parkdale and by July 1981 they were complaining that he wasn't doing enough to get rid of bachelorettes.)

The fallout from all this legal activity seemed to take people by surprise. The bottom fell out of the bachelorette market, so that even the owners of legally converted buildings could not get refinancing and went bankrupt. Then it began to dawn on people that closing down bachelorettes would mean evictions. Moreover, bachelorettes had rented by the week, and many evicted tenants could not afford the first and last months' rent for apartments that rented by the month, so some of them faced homelessness when a bachelorette was shut down. At this point the media abruptly stopped characterizing the tenants as "pimps, prostitutes and drug pushers" and began to talk about the "widows, war veterans and welfare mothers" who would be driven out of their homes.

Some landlords did not wait to get convictions, they simply abandoned the buildings, removed locks and lightbulbs, harassed tenants to get them to leave, and turned a blind eye to squatters. Fear of prosecution also drove some bachelorette landlords in the Annex and Cabbagetown areas to sell out or to convert their buildings to luxury apartments. A Parkdale Bachelorette Tenants' Association was formed and a member of the South Parkdale Neighbourhood Committee, Beare Weatherup, was delegated to help with relocations (an impossible task), but the damage was done.

The issue dragged on for years, costing the city an estimated \$1 million in legal fees and staff time. Yet every time the topic of relaxing the regulations was broached, certain councillors reacted in horror. A suggestion in 1985 that the minimum room size requirement be relaxed evoked vehement opposition: "Approving this is like asking homeowners to give away the shop and commit neighbourhood suicide," said alderman Michael Walker on that occasion. This is pure economic racism, but since it appears to be directed at a housing form rather than at individuals, it tends to go unremarked.

This unedifying episode in Toronto housing history reveals a number of issues. First, the antipathy towards bachelorettes had to do with the nature and extent of the changes required in the conversions. Rooming houses, which were expected to be interim uses of housing, were assumed to involve minor changes to the physical fabric of a house. Bachelorettes were offensive to the Parkdale gentrifiers because they involved greater investment and more extensive changes and therefore threatened to remain in place longer than rooming houses. The task force was quite explicit on this point:

A boarding or lodging house can be easily and cheaply created in a house that is either a single family home or a number of flats; the reverse process is equally easy to achieve. However, the

creation of small self-contained units in a converted dwelling house involves sizeable capital investment and [is] equally expensive to reconvert to single or multiple family use.

Once converted to a bachelorette, a house was a less attractive proposition for deconversion and upgrading. Bachelorettes did not so much threaten an existing stable family neighbourhood, since many of them had been created from former rooming houses; they prevented the creation of one by incoming gentrifiers.

Second, bachelorettes became the scapegoats for a number of different processes that were said to be “destabilizing” the Parkdale area. Although the displacement of a formerly stable working-class population by gentrifiers was occurring at the same time, no one pointed out that deconversions could be as destabilizing to a neighbourhood as conversions. The kind of stability found in low-income neighbourhoods (which is not necessarily expressed through privacy and quiet, but through mutual help and often noisy interaction) was unrecognized as such (or rejected) by the middle class. Gentrification is like colonization, in which the newcomers belittle the customs of the aboriginal population, eject the natives from the most desirable locations, and talk in terms of bringing “civilization” to the colonized area. Bachelorettes stood in the way of the middle-class colonization of Parkdale; bachelorettes had to go.

Third, bachelorettes in Parkdale were treated as a crisis because they were concentrated in that area. They existed in other parts of Toronto, but they did not attract as much attention. Although the concentration of this form of land use was treated as undesirable in itself, there are a number of reasons why concentration is likely to occur and may even be salutary. For one thing, zoning restricts multi-unit dwellings to certain areas, so a certain amount of concentration is built into the system. Zoning usually reflects and reinforces property values, which were low in Parkdale. Moreover, some areas are more suitable for low-income singles than others; they are close to transit and have inexpensive cafeterias, second-hand shops, or free community facilities that serve this population. Finally, low-income singles may feel more comfortable in a neighbourhood where there are other low-income singles, just as most affluent middle-class families want to live surrounded by other affluent middle-class families. This is not the same thing as “ghettoization,” which implies a lack of choice, it is more like solidarity and sociability. For example, one boarding house in the High Park area had great difficulty attracting and retaining residents, since it was too far away from the familiar Parkdale setting that the ex-psychiatric patients preferred.

Certain badly managed bachelorettes with disruptive tenants were a problem in Parkdale, but it is unlikely that such tenants were in a majority. “One third of the people in the city are single [and] a lot of them do want to belong to neighbourhoods, they’re not all pimps and prostitutes and so forth,” Frank Lewinberg reasoned. As Norman Browne had pointed out ten years before, roomers often stayed in the same place for eight or ten years; just because they were poor did not mean that they were transient or unstable. However, singles are usually renters, and renters are usually assumed by homeowners to be temporary residents, and therefore not really part of the community. (As former roomer Bob Olsen puts it, “People feel roomers should be ‘cured’ to become homeowners.”)

Once again, politicians had over-reacted to a problem that had been magnified by the media into a crisis. Sensible long-term public policy does not incubate in such an environment. Bachelorette

owners were punished for a problem that was not wholly of their making, and the bylaws that were framed in haste remain on the books today.

7. Homelessness and hostels

The media eventually lost interest in the Parkdale bachelorettes, distracted first by the story of the Toronto island residents (a few dozen families whose homes were threatened) and, in the early 1980s, by the “housing crisis” and the “discovery” of homelessness. A series of front-page articles in the Toronto Star brought the world of hostels, soup kitchens, and life on the streets to the attention of its readers in December 1981. By 1983 several reports had been published by Metro Toronto agencies, citing the disappearance of affordable housing for low-income singles as a contributing factor in creating homelessness.

Response to the problem generally took the form of hostels and emergency shelters, even though the Single Displaced Persons Project pointed out that “This strategy, based on the assumption that the problem consists of a short-term lack of shelter, is like prescribing aspirin for cancer.” Hostels, however, had become quasi-permanent residences for many people, taking the place of rooming houses; some residents stayed in hostels for years. Their function as transitional housing was eroded, partly because of the numbers they had to deal with, and partly because there was no long-term option that they could serve as a transition to. For the public, hostels got people off the streets at night (and only at night), but for the users, emergency accommodation was no substitute for real housing, and simply postponed permanent solutions. The Single Displaced Persons Project argued that hostels, far from alleviating homelessness, contributed to it. Bill Bosworth puts it bluntly: “There is no such thing as a `good hostel.’“

Another task force was created, this one by Metro chairman Paul Godfrey, announced in his inauguration speech in 1982. The Task Force on Housing for Low-Income Single People excluded from its study the question of ex-psychiatric patients and the inhabitants of group homes and concentrated on homeless youths, single people displaced by deconversions, the temporarily unemployed, and skid row men. Its report, published in 1983, led to the creation of the Singles Housing Company of Metro (which functioned from 1985 to 1987, with a yearly budget of \$2 million), and in 1987 to the change in eligibility requirements for public housing to admit single (non-senior, non-disabled) people. This important change, which was a response to the disappearance of rooming house stock, further altered the demographics of rooming houses when members of the working poor and formerly long-term rooming house residents moved into social housing.

The task force report suggested that self-contained “mini bachelor units” (presumably no one dared use the word “bachelorettes”) were the preferred form of housing for singles, not rooming houses. To this end the task force recommended measures to promote the intensification of existing stock by individual homeowners. It claimed that many people in Metro were “overhoused” and that opportunities existed to redress this situation by creating more basement apartments. Housing over stores or taverns was also encouraged.

Two years after the report was published, on 17 December 1985, a homeless alcoholic woman called Drina Joubert died in the back of a truck where she had been living. Because she had once been a model and an actress, and because the money that was found on her body could have been used to pay for housing, her case excited more than the usual amount of publicity. The city moved to create more hostel spaces.

The death of Drina Joubert gave added impetus to a proposal by the Supportive Housing Coalition to improve services for psychiatrically disabled people who were ineligible for residence in group homes and who were receiving inadequate care in boarding houses. Habitat Services, funded by the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto, was formed in 1986. It contracts with private or non-profit boarding houses to provide per diem funding for personal care services, monitor standards for facilities and care, and refer clients.

Throughout the 1980s, attempts to deal with the homeless created something of a mini-industry. In addition to hostels, drop-ins, referral services, and food banks, there were street patrols (started by Anishnawbe Health Toronto in December 1989), self-help groups (the Street People's Association), and health programs (the Street Health group). In 1987, the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, more than forty different projects related to homelessness were supported in Canada, twenty-eight of them in Metro Toronto. These included conferences, reports, special issues of magazines devoted to homelessness, music, films, and theatrical productions to raise awareness of homelessness, and even an interactive game called "The Homelessness Maze." StreetCity, which provided housing in a converted postal depot, was started in December 1988 and officially opened in March 1990. The Street Community Enterprise Centre provided jobs and an outlet for goods made by street people. In 1988 Sister Mary Moran at St. Michael's College School started the Out of the Cold program to provide overnight accommodation in church basements during the winter months.

The disparity between the rich and the poor became glaringly obvious in the late 1980s. While people slept in doorways, the city council debated matters such as the proposed Ballet Opera House, the Skydome, the 1988 Economic Summit, the bid for the 1996 Summer Olympics, and plans for Expo 2000. Appalled at the insensitivity of decision makers towards the poor, Michael Shapcott organized a group called Bread Not Circuses in February 1989 to call attention to social injustices. The group held demonstrations, staged media events, and succeeded in scaring off the International Olympic Committee. Shortly thereafter, the recession of the early 1990s changed the city's priorities. When ratepayers were struggling to hang on to their mortgages, both opera houses and the homeless got knocked off the public policy agenda.

During the recession, the fact that people were unhoused seemed to be taken for granted, and new projects got farther and farther away from the goal of providing shelter. Newspapers (The Outrider, Outreach Connection) were started to give the homeless an alternative to begging. University students donated clothing (Share the Warmth) and the public was asked to provide sleeping bags (Project Warmth), as if this would make sleeping outdoors more bearable. The aesthetics of homelessness were explored in a photography exhibit and in the Die in Debt production of Romeo and Juliet, presented under the Bathurst Street bridge in August 1993. Some of these projects made homelessness appear more like an alternative lifestyle than a collective societal failure.

Helping the homeless gave church congregations and social agencies a mission that in some cases brought people together in a common cause. However, when the provision of “emergency” services, food, or shelter did not alleviate the emergency, and the demand continued to grow with no end in sight, a number of workers and volunteers experienced burn-out. Meanwhile the homeless themselves became increasingly dependent on services provided as charity.

Homelessness was linked to the disappearance of rooming houses and flophouses through deconversions, but it was not simply a housing problem. Nor was it a side-effect of the recessions of 1982 and the early 1990s. As Peter Marcuse has pointed out:

Contemporary homelessness is not just like depression homelessness, or nineteenth-century homelessness, or homelessness in the middle ages... Today, those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are likely to be so in good times as well as bad; the figures since 1975 show a steadily rising rate of homelessness as employment falls and also as it rises, as average wages go down and as they go up... Contemporary homelessness is...large-scale, permanent and independent of the short-term business cycle, a combination never before existing in an advanced industrial society.

Despite the official pronouncements of a “crisis,” homelessness did not get the swift political action and expensive treatment that characterized the reaction to the “crisis” of the Parkdale bachelorettes. The last two decades have not been kind to those who have no economic function (except as the subject of a steady stream of task forces and commissioned reports and inquiries).

8. Intensification: the non-solution

During the 1980s, the provincial government began to promote what it called “residential intensification.” Intensification may take many forms, but it has one or more of three effects: it increases the amount of housing in a given area, it increases the number of people in a given amount of housing, or it increases the amount of investment in a given area. It may thus include high-rise redevelopment or the conversion of single-family dwellings to multiple occupancy, but the government chose to link intensification with housing conservation.

In a multi-volume commissioned report on intensification and conservation, published in 1983, gradual, small-scale change was emphasized, even though the need to “build a new city about the size of Oshawa to accommodate the singles looking for housing” was as urgent as ever. However, the Parkdale experience had shown that any attempt to house the homeless in a way that either depleted the gentrifiable housing stock or encroached on a middle-class residential neighbourhood would meet stiff opposition. The problem for the province was to make intensification sound politically acceptable by making it sound as non-threatening as possible; but incremental small-scale change was a hopelessly inadequate strategy to deal with the vast numbers of those who needed affordable housing.

Nevertheless, because real solutions were too expensive or too threatening for ratepayers to accept, intensification became a popular idea. At a conference in Toronto in 1984 called Housing

for Hard Times, the coordinator of Housing Renovation Programs for the Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs, George Przybylowski, said:

Much better use could be made of existing housing stock. There are 1.8 million home owners in Ontario. Half a million could take an additional lodger, boarder, or occupant of an accessory apartment. In the Census Metropolitan Area of Toronto, if one percent of the householders added one person to their house, there would be housing for 10,000 people.

The same idea dominated the 1986 report of the Ontario Task Force on Roomers, Boarders and Lodgers, chaired by Dale Bairstow, which had been created as a spin-off from the Ontario Commission of Inquiry into Residential Tenancies. The task force, which cost \$180,000, suffered from divisions between the chairman and the advisory committee, so that its final report did not represent a consensus. However, many of the pronouncements in the official report chimed in with the provincial government's own beliefs. "There are 850,000 dwellings across Ontario with extra space," it announced.

The report acknowledged that many people did not want to share their homes with strangers, but addressed itself to those who might. It did not, however, estimate the number of people who would actually undertake conversions, nor did it consider that such spare rooms might not be located in areas suitable for low-income singles, and it studiously avoided the question of the hard to house. In encouraging the creation of accessory apartments, the government is unlikely to remind taxpayers that those who most need housing include street kids, alcoholics, or people with psychiatric histories. Nevertheless, home sharing, conversions, and the renovation of non-residential buildings were hailed as future housing for low-income singles. Legalizing bachelorettes was also recommended. The report gave the impression that all the government needed to do to create housing was to revise zoning bylaws.

A key psychological and legal barrier to massive expansion of the places available in the existing stock is the presence across Ontario of by-laws prohibiting more than a certain number of 'unrelated' persons from sharing a single dwelling.

The report mentioned the case of Douglas Bell, who had challenged such a bylaw in the City of North York. The case had gone to the Supreme Court in 1979 and the bylaw had been struck down (whereupon Mel Lastman instituted a study of alternative ways to outlaw rooming houses in North York -- but the Bairstow report did not mention this fact). The implication was that there were many people ready and willing to share, prevented only by irrelevant bylaws. In fact, zoning bylaws are a symptom (not a cause) of housing inequities. Bylaws are just the tip of the iceberg; underneath the water is the larger issue of attitudes towards the poor. Bylaws reflect these attitudes, and removing or altering existing regulations may simply lead to the creation of new roadblocks, as in North York.

Building new housing was flatly rejected as an approach in the official Bairstow report: "The most expensive and wasteful way to produce housing for lower-income single people would be to build it. Such an approach could cost from \$7.7 billion to \$10.7 billion in capital, and between \$385 million and \$585 million annually to operate." There was no question that building special-purpose housing for low-income singles would be expensive, but there was no explanation for the allegation that it would be "wasteful." Amortized over the life of a project, it might have been an

economical proposition, but the task force did not consider the possibility at all. The reasoning in the report seemed to be that because the province could not afford to build all the housing necessary, it should not build any housing.

The report also assumed that private individuals could and should bear the cost of creating new housing, although it did not examine the economics of creating accessory apartments. Renovations to create apartments that meet current building codes can run into tens of thousands of dollars, depending on the age and condition of the house. Even people who are willing to share may find themselves unable to afford to make the necessary changes.

The Advisory Committee, however, although it supported intensification, did not see it as a long-term solution to the housing crisis. In a separate report to the Minister of Housing, the Committee distinguished its position from that of the official report:

In the longer term...the Committee overwhelmingly supports the development of self-contained housing units through new construction and conversions.

The Bairstow report also repeated the assumption that one of the reasons that rooming house landlords stay in business is the “eventual selling price” of the property. If so many were in poor condition, it was because they were only being held until they could be sold. One might suppose that the only way to ensure long-term stability for roomers and lodgers would be to build housing specifically for low-income singles, but Bairstow proposed that more homeowners consider conversions to rooming houses as an interim use of their properties, thereby condemning roomers to continued transience and insecurity.

Reactions to intensification were mixed. Many planners and housing experts were enthusiastic. Frank Clayton announced that it was the “cheapest way” to create the needed housing and that it could “vastly increase” the number of rental units. According to the Toronto Star, where he was quoted, “Housing experts favour this solution because, although Metro has little land left to develop, private homes have a lot of unused space. It’s also cheap because the structure is already built and all that’s needed is some tinkering with the walls.” However, Bill Bosworth of the Homes First Society wasn’t fooled: “People don’t choose, except for economic reasons, to have someone living with them,” he said, and added that the construction of small, self-contained rental units was the only realistic solution.

9. The problems of private landlords

Intensification put the onus for creating new rental units on to private homeowners and investors, but offered few incentives for people to become landlords. The public perception of landlords is coloured by media depictions of slum-like conditions in some rooming houses (this is only to be expected, since there is no news value in a well-run, well-maintained rooming house). Legal clinics who represent tenants are also frequently hostile to landlords. Even Bairstow acknowledged that landlords were treated as pariahs:

Private landlords have not been considered popular heroes among the members of the Ontario public. For some tenant advocates, they have been “the enemy.” ... Some people in the province would like to see the entire remaining rooming and boarding-house stock taken into the public domain, either through municipal or non-profit ownership.

The notion that the privately owned and run rooming house is destined to become obsolete is quite widespread, and probably accounts for the lack of support for private landlords in government programs. Yet certain private landlords manage to accommodate some of the hardest to house, including people who have been rejected by non-profit housing groups.

Life just keeps getting harder for private landlords: no wonder their numbers have been steadily decreasing since the early 1970s. During a provincial debate in 1979 on whether to include roomers in the provisions of the Landlord and Tenant Act, a landlord called Mr. Heselman addressed the committee reviewing the legislation. “Every time you turn over a room...you are turning over \$10,000 worth of plant and equipment against \$25, \$30, \$35 a week in rent... No rental agency will even lend you a \$5,000 car on that kind of deposit.” The emphasis on tenants’ rights has not been matched by an equal emphasis on tenants’ responsibility for such things as fire safety in rooming houses.

Evictions are another area in which the rights of the housing provider and the rights of the tenant need to be balanced. A report prepared for the Housing Conservation Unit of the Ontario Ministry of Housing pointed out that the difficulty of getting evictions could act as a disincentive for homeowners to carry out conversions or create accessory apartments in their houses, but this look at tenants’ rights from the landlords’ perspective is probably unique:

The potential difficulty of getting rid of undesirable tenants, particularly those who are chronically delinquent in their rent payments, serves to discourage owner-occupants from undertaking conversion of their houses. The indicated solution would be to amend the Landlord and Tenant Act so as to allow for the eviction of delinquent tenants in owner-occupied buildings, without affording them the opportunity to “cure” the delinquency which the Act now provides for. Such a change would go squarely against the current trend in rental protection philosophy, and might be considered too high a price to pay for the likely benefit to be secured.

The Toronto Rooming House Association (created for landlords in the 1970s, revived in the 1990s) has about 450 names on its mailing list at present, but suffers from a lack of resources. Its president, Larry Chilton, argues that private landlords can provide housing at less cost to the public than the non-profit sector. For one thing, private landlords draw no salaries and have lower administrative overhead costs (unlike the staff of non-profit groups). Non-profits are also eligible for mortgage write-downs, which are public subsidies. Chilton also cites several examples of non-profits that have spent large sums on renovations, at a much higher per-unit cost than renovations carried out by private landlords “who have to squeeze every dollar.” Chilton suggests that government support to private landlords in the form of a small per diem to make up the difference between operating costs and income would be a better use of public money and would help to keep struggling landlords in business.

For tenants, the attraction of a private landlord may be the possibility of greater privacy. Bob Olsen points out, “Some people would prefer a slum landlord because he accepts you as you are,

all he wants is your money. Non-profits try to govern people's lives, they want to rehabilitate you." This may not be true of all non-profit housing groups, but this perception may be a barrier between the non-profits and potential tenants.

However, some private landlords are inexperienced in dealing with the fire marshals, contractors, inspectors, difficult tenants, and others who affect the running of a rooming house. Education programs and legal advice are needed if landlords are to do their job effectively, but at present there is little support available to them. Even though the provincial government wants to encourage homeowners to carry out conversions (thereby becoming amateur private landlords), there is no help available to train people in the basics of property management.

The lack of resources available to landlords may be related to the assumption that rooming houses are an interim use of property. If it is assumed that landlords are mere speculators, then training them to manage rooming houses better appears unnecessary. (As for homeowners who carry out conversions to create accessory apartments, they are simply availing themselves of an opportunity to improve domestic cash flow and are not seen as long-term housing providers either.) This assumption was tested by the passage of the Rental Housing Protection Act.

In July 1986, Bill 11, An Act Respecting the Protection of Rental Housing, received royal assent. It was to remain in force for two years and then be reviewed. The deadline was later extended to 1989, at which time the Act was upheld. The Act was intended to curtail the demolition of affordable rental housing or its conversion to condominiums or luxury rental units by requiring municipal council approval for demolitions or conversions of housing with four or more rental units.

The Association of Municipalities of Ontario criticized the Act, calling it a "band-aid solution to the greater problems created by imposing a rent review system which stifles the necessary flow of new development into the housing stock" and suggesting that it would create a disincentive to carry out repairs and renovations, since the only way to sell a rental property legally would be to allow it to deteriorate until it became uninhabitable. The City of Toronto, however, was generally supportive of the Act.

If private rooming houses were indeed interim uses of property, the expected effect of the Act would be to forestall the creation of new private rooming houses, since once created, they could not easily be removed. Certainly the numbers of licensed rooming houses in Toronto continued to drop as they had been doing since the 1970s, but not at a noticeably accelerated rate. Clearly there are private rooming house owners and operators who consider rooming houses to be long-term cash-generating investments rather than speculative ventures. Yet the stereotype of the fly-by-night operator remains. (Conversely, it cannot be assumed that housing created by a non-profit group will be permanent and secure. Some groups have converted housing from one form to another: from singles housing to family housing, for example.)

10. Boarding houses and rest homes

In March 1979, a feature article in the Toronto Star investigated the care of the elderly in “rest homes,” or privately run boarding houses and found many tenants living in poor facilities, inadequately cared for. (The term “rest home” is not defined by law, but it implies accommodation in which not only meals but some form of personal care or health care is provided. Unlike nursing homes, rest homes are not licensed.) Later that year, planner Susan Berlin sent a strongly worded memo to the Toronto Board of Health about the living conditions of the elderly and sick in rest homes. Apparently standards were being enforced by the buildings department, not the health department, which had more stringent requirements. William Connery, the director of the health department, pointed out that too strict enforcement might entail evictions, which the department was anxious to avoid.

A report by Metro Toronto’s social services department on homes for the aged and former psychiatric patients was issued the following year and contained the widely quoted assertion that conditions in rest homes were no better than those in nineteenth century poorhouses. Standards set by the Queen Street Mental Health Centre for the care of ex-psychiatric patients were met by only 450 out of 700 places. In addition to licensing and enforcement, the report recommended support services, advocacy and outreach for those in care. In 1984, the Mayor’s Action Task Force on Discharged Psychiatric Patients, chaired by Dr. Reva Gerstein, also reported on adults in residential facilities, and recommended the creation of the Contract Aftercare Program that would provide low-interest loans to allow boarding house owners to make physical improvements in return for providing regulated personal care services.

Most newspaper reports blamed operators for poor conditions in rooming houses, and there were many stories of exploitation and neglect. Government assistance went directly to the owners of the boarding houses, leaving only \$20 or \$30 a month for the residents as spending money, which meant that many people were confined to the house, since they could not afford proper clothes for going out, or TTC fares, or the price of a snack in a coffee shop. Overcrowding (four or five people to a dormitory) was not uncommon, although this could partly be blamed on minimum-room-size bylaws that prevent subdivision of a room into smaller, private rooms. If all the work in the house was carried out by staff, there was no opportunity for the residents to learn life skills.

Social service agencies wrestled with the question of the best way to provide services to those in rooming or boarding houses who needed them. The individual case-work format, which required setting goals and frequent meetings with a social worker, was not suitable for everyone. Residential facilities that were linked to services (the group-home model) had numerous drawbacks:

When housing is assumed to be a vehicle for delivering a social service, eligibility for residency and length of tenure get defined according to programme goals rather than a person’s need for a home. Particularly in situations of housing scarcity, people have had to choose between “institutional” housing and living on the street, or to present themselves with a “problem” in order to be admitted into the housing, regardless of the programme offered.

Linked services means not only that one has to have the “right problem” in order to get access to housing, but also that the problem cannot be solved or removed, since that means leaving the housing.

The Single Displaced Persons Project recommended “facilitative management” for those who needed it: a hands-off, services-on-demand approach. Although the theory behind this approach is generally sound (provided that the client involved is capable of responding), it is hard to achieve in practice. Maylanne Whittall, who helped write the SDPP report, explains that in the short term, facilitative management involves “planned inefficiency,” which is a difficult idea to grasp. It does not mean that services are not provided or provided inadequately, only that they are provided at a rhythm and in a way that suits the client, not the service provider. As Carmel Hili of the Christian Resource Centre says, managers have to be prepared to learn alongside the tenants.

As every business manager knows, delegation -- letting people choose their own ways to work, make their own mistakes, and learn from them -- is one of the hardest techniques for a manager to master, mainly because it doesn't feel like “management” at all. How much harder, then, for a social or community worker who is supervising people with low self-esteem, few life skills, or little education? Trained professionals expect to use their skills actively and most employers reward them for doing so. Facilitative management requires judgement, discretion, and sensitivity, but for idealistic workers who are longing to help others, it no doubt seems too passive an approach.

As with many related issues, the debate came to a head because of a death. In November 1987, former psychiatric patient Joseph Kendall died as the result of an attack by a fellow resident at a private boarding home called Cedar Glen in Orillia. The inquest took place in 1990, and led to a commission of inquiry led by University of Toronto social policy professor Ernie Lightman, which produced 148 recommendations in 1992.

The Lightman report reiterated the comparison with Victorian England, but rejected a comprehensive regulatory approach (other than minimum safety standards) in favour of voluntary contracts with operators as a way of improving standards. Support services were to be provided by an agency other than the housing provider (i.e., delinked from housing). The report also recommended that rest homes be included in the protection for tenants provided for by the Landlord and Tenant Act (this was done by Bill 120).

The Lightman report promoted “empowerment” for vulnerable adults, but the term “vulnerable” suggested a group that needed protection, advocacy, and support. As those who work with ex-psychiatric patients know, there is no one-size-fits-all approach: some consumer/survivors (as they are called) can handle increasing measures of autonomy; others find an unstructured environment bewildering and frightening and will always depend on service providers.

In July 1991, the City of Toronto passed the Personal Care bylaw (413-91) to regulate boarding houses that provided care and services. This improved the situation in rest homes somewhat, but cutbacks in funding for enforcement made it less effective than it might have been.

11. Tenants' rights and the hard to house

Most of the reports of the commissions and task forces that looked at rooming houses or rest homes recommended the expansion of tenants' rights. In 1987, after lobbying and demonstrations

by tenants' rights groups, the Landlord and Tenant Act was amended to include boarders and roomers in its provisions. However, tenants who received personal care services were not protected by this amendment; more lobbying by social service groups led to the further amendment of the Act in 1994, with the passage of Bill 120.

Security of tenure is an essential aspect of permanent housing; landlord harassment and the "garbage bag evictions" of the 1970s and 1980s (in which tenants were evicted without due process and their belongings left outside in a garbage bag) were contrary to basic human rights. However, the dilemma of tenants' rights is the need to balance the rights of the individual with the rights of the collective. Tenants sometimes need protection from each other, not just from landlords. Some tenants can be violent, noisy, addicted to drugs or alcohol, or engaged in criminal activities. Some of them, like Gordon Freeman, who deliberately set the fire that destroyed the Rupert Hotel, are a danger to others. Some suffer from psychiatric disorders that make it difficult for them to establish stable relationships. Not all tenants can respond appropriately to situations in which they are required to take responsibility for the management or maintenance of their living quarters.

Rooming houses and other forms of accommodation that involve shared facilities require much more cooperation and interaction than self-contained apartments, which means that collective rights are essential to their management. One disruptive tenant can make an entire house uninhabitable, and can put a landlord out of business. Even community non-profit organizations run by churches have found that there is no alternative to the eviction of tenants who are patently unsuited to a cooperative lifestyle.

As the government was preparing Bill 120, various groups involved in housing for low-income singles argued that a process of fast-track eviction should be included in the Landlord and Tenant Act to allow for the removal of tenants who harassed other tenants or who used their rooms for criminal activities. However, Bill 120 does not incorporate this provision, and in fact makes it harder to landlords to evict violent or abusive tenants.

Tenants, however, are usually seen as the victims rather than the persecutors in any conflict. Taking their side is popularly accepted as the moral high ground (because landlords, even those struggling to make ends meet, still have more money than most tenants), and avoids the complicated and messy business of trying to make individual judgements on individual cases.

Fast-track evictions will not solve the problems of the hard to house, but they would provide something of a safety net for housing providers who cater to this group, and protect roomers from abuse by their fellow tenants.

Expanding tenants' rights without balancing these rights with those of landlords may make landlords very selective in picking tenants. Although human rights legislation forbids certain types of discrimination in access to housing, there are still many ways of screening tenants (by advertising in certain locations only or not advertising at all, by demanding references or checking credit ratings, and so forth). This drives a wedge between the hard to house and the rest of the rooming house population.

What makes someone hard to house? For some people the hard to house are those who have difficult getting access to housing: single mothers, ex-convicts, the handicapped. For others, the hard to house are those who find it hard to stay housed because of personal, financial, or behavioural problems. Larry Chilton refers to the hard to house as “the most expensive to house,” because of their need for services, support, or special facilities. And Frankly Bob, the “mayor” of Street City distinguishes between the hard to house and “the impossible to house” (those who are consistently violent or destructive).

The dilemma of the hard to house is summarized by Bob Olsen: “Persons with limited social and interpersonal skills are expected to live in shared accommodation, sharing kitchen, bathroom, etc. This is often difficult for a family, let alone for isolated anti-social persons.” Collective living demands constant adjustments and compromises, which in turn require patience, tolerance, and the ability to negotiate. This is a lot to ask of people who may have a history of psychiatric problems, alcoholism, or abuse.

12. Purpose-built rooming houses

Several recent projects in Toronto have demonstrated the potential for purpose-built rooming houses: 90 Shuter Street, 319 Dundas East, StreetCity, and the Singles Housing Opportunity Program of Cityhome.

90 Shuter Street was developed by the Homes First Society, a non-profit group that had been founded in 1983 by the Single Displaced Persons Project and the Fred Victor Mission. It was originally known as Third House, because it was the third long-term housing project created by this group. Using funds provided by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Homes First built an eleven-story apartment building containing seventeen apartment units, each with four or five single rooms and shared kitchens, dining rooms, and living rooms. Various agencies took responsibility for different units by referring their clients to 90 Shuter Street and overseeing their residence there. The building, which opened in November 1984, was intended to demonstrate the potential for shared housing on a scale larger than that of traditional rooming houses. The stacked model does not suit everybody, but it can provide a lot of units more quickly and in some cases more cheaply than houseform arrangements.

319 Dundas Street East was developed by All Saints Church through the Homes for Tomorrow Society to develop permanent housing for the homeless people the church served in its drop-in centre. Unlike 90 Shuter Street, the sixty-one units are self-contained. The building was opened in January 1987, and was the occasion on which the Ontario Minister of Housing announced the change in policy to allow low-income single people into social housing projects. Within the same building (but with a separate address and entrance) there is shared housing for women, known as the Cornerstone Residence, which was developed after extensive consultation with the homeless women who used the All Saints drop-in.

StreetCity is not, strictly speaking, a rooming house, but a hybrid housing form somewhere between a hostel and a rooming house. It was created in an abandoned postal depot at 393 Cherry Street, leased from the City of Toronto for one dollar a year. Starting in 1989, the residents

worked as labourers on the project, creating apartments within the building, at a cost of about \$5,000 a unit. Staff from Homes First and various support groups and government departments provided help and advice. The structure was more like a little village than an apartment building, with its own laundromat, variety store, bank, catering, and cleaning service. The arrangement was intended to be temporary, because the area was to be redeveloped as the Ataratiri neighbourhood, so requirements for such things as environmental protection and insulation were waived. When the Ataratiri plan collapsed, StreetCity kept going. It is still fully occupied, although it is starting to show signs of wear and tear.

StreetCity II is being planned for a site in the west end. The City of Toronto has contributed a suitable property and begun to prepare the site. However, although the project is supported by the Ministry of Housing, as of September 1994 it was still awaiting Treasury Board review.

The Singles Housing Opportunity Program (SHOP) was announced by Cityhome in 1989. The city acquired four houses containing nineteen units that were to be used for low-income single people in “family” groupings. Houses are operated in partnership with community-based agencies: for example, the three that were opened in 1991 were operated in collaboration with the Canadian-African Newcomer Aid Centre of Toronto, the Toronto Board of Education’s Contact Alternative School, and Sistersshare Living. As of 1992, SHOP was operating twenty houses in Toronto. (Cityhome also operates a number of rooming houses in the St. Jamestown area that were acquired from Meridian in the 1970s.)

Rooming houses and other forms of permanent housing for low-income singles are also provided by groups such as Ecuhome, Houses Opening Today Toronto (HOTT), Christian Resource Centre Self-Help, Houselink, or First Step. Each takes a slightly different approach and caters to a particular group of clients. These differences became significant when the Rupert Coalition brought many of these groups together.

13. The Rupert Coalition and community development

On December 23, 1989, ten people died of smoke inhalation in a fire at the Rupert Hotel, 182 Parliament Street. The coroner’s inquest was held in March and April 1991, and made fifty-three detailed recommendations about fire safety, rooming house licensing procedures and requirements, and public education about the rights and obligations of landlords and tenants.

Even before the inquest had been held, however, a group of community workers, rooming house tenants, and housing experts came together in January 1990 to talk about ways to improve the living conditions for people in rooming houses or single-room occupancy hotels like the Rupert. A coalition was formed that included staff from three provincial ministries (Housing, Community and Social Services, and the Office of the Premier), the City of Toronto, nine non-profit housing groups and social service agencies, and several private landlords. In January 1991, the provincial cabinet approved funding for a pilot project that would create or upgrade 525 bed units for the hard to house population.

The history of the Rupert Coalition has been recounted in a self-evaluation document and an outside evaluation by Jim Ward Associates. The project succeeded in creating secure and affordable accommodation for more than 300 rooming house tenants, and in collectively developing a series of recommendations that are under consideration by the provincial housing ministry. However, there were many disagreements and a few failures of individual projects. Some participants were disillusioned by the inability of others to accept new approaches to housing and service provision -- Jim Ward calls this "getting trapped in ideological boxes." Others felt that once housing providers had received funding, they did not feel obliged to participate in discussions or to consider the recommendations of other members of the coalition.

Despite its failings, the Rupert Coalition promoted what it called a "community development" approach to housing and services, even though community development means something slightly different to each person who uses the term. In general, the term implies a shift away from a focus on individuals and their problems and a greater appreciation of the way in which the case-management approach tends to blame the victim (no matter how hard an individual case worker may try not to think in this way). There is also a greater recognition of the way in which community organizers need to work with not for the poor.

Another way of looking at community development has been suggested by John McKnight of Northwestern University. He uses the term to mean identifying and mobilizing a community's underused capacity and rejects the old-style "needs assessment" (which defines a community in terms of what it lacks) in favour of an inventory of a community's assets (which defines a community by what it has to offer).

Another contribution of the Rupert Coalition is that it brought people together, even if it could not get them to agree. Most participants still believe that coordination and a team approach are essential in dealing with the overlapping and conflicting problems of housing, and that landlords, tenants, public health nurses, housing providers, community workers, and municipal and provincial government officials must work together if any real improvement in housing for the poor is to come about. Ideological differences and an unequal distribution of power among these participants are formidable barriers to effective action and will be slow to change, but as long as these people have a place to come together, the possibility of teamwork still exists.

14. Conclusion: The context for rooming house policy

After all the task forces and commissions of inquiry into rooming houses and homelessness have produced hundreds of recommendations, after hundreds of thousands of dollars have been spent on consultants and surveys and investigations, there are still thousands of people in Toronto who are without housing or inadequately housed.

The history shows that the government tends to notice the problems of rooming house tenants only when there is a death or a perceived crisis. The city's approach to regulation might be characterized as "Ready, Fire, Aim," whereas the province's approach to a crisis is simply to aim another task force at the problem, and to postpone firing for as long as possible. By the time the task force produces a report, the sense of crisis has usually waned.

As a result, at the municipal level, rooming houses are hemmed in by a thicket of conflicting regulations and bylaws, most of which were developed in response to some kind of public pressure, either by homeowners hostile to rooming houses or by anti-poverty activists. Creating new rooming houses is an exercise in frustration, as one Rupert Coalition member pointed out:

We found it extraordinarily difficult to do anything that was a “different” model of housing. Thousands of regulations and by-laws and even the rules of the Coalition were a configuration which allowed and promoted only one or two models of housing. Almost every regulation in the area of housing was established as the result of a problem or abuse... What ensues is a hodge-podge of contradictory, sometimes self-defeating regulations which defy logic and common sense at times.

The difference between a “legal” and an “illegal” rooming house may have nothing to do with safety, cleanliness, or maintenance, it may simply mean that a rooming house lacks the required number of parking spaces or is located in an area where rooming houses are not permitted (although media reports about “illegal” rooms tend to give the public the impression of squalor or underhanded dealings with tenants). Meanwhile, requirements for rooming house retrofits keep mounting. If, for example, the recommendation of the coroner’s jury on the Rupert Hotel fire that sprinkler systems be required in all houses with more than ten tenants is adopted, more rooming houses may go out of business.

Non-profit groups, churches, and coalitions litter the landscape with acronyms and good intentions, but not all are equally effective or reliable and some are potentially counterproductive. The public tends to assume that because a well-meaning group is grappling with the problem of housing for the poor, that it must be doing something right. The Rupert Coalition revealed the flaws in this reasoning for those who paid attention.

At the federal or provincial level, funding becomes available for short periods (such as the Rooming House Tenant Project or the Rupert Pilot Project), which means that policies must be developed on the run in a way that will show some quick, demonstrable “success.” This discourages community groups from tackling long-term projects, or dealing with complicated issues. There is a limit to what can be achieved with quick fixes. In the words of Bob Yamashita: “Spot-welding is useful for some problems, but the whole ship is leaking.”

It is not that the government doesn’t realize that the ship should be rebuilt. It’s more that spot-welding is what it knows how to do, so it keeps looking for opportunities to spot-weld. If the City of Toronto produces a report that demands action from the province, then the province studies the problem all over again before it acts. Part of this process is called “normalization”: fitting recommendations into the existing world view of a government ministry. Complicated material may be simplified, ambiguous data must be made black or white, square pegs must be honed down to fit into round holes.

In this context, it is hardly surprising that rooming house policy has not come very far since the days when roomers were completely ignored in government policies and programs. New forms or challenging ideas get smoothed into familiar shapes. After a while, one task force report starts to look much like another. Very few fresh insights have emerged. Yet most reports try to avoid the unavoidable: the fact that successful housing for the poor requires a combination of money,

commitment, time, and difficult and unglamorous work. There are no shortcuts or easy answers, no new programs that will run like clockwork after the key is turned. And nothing will make the problem go away. As the Lieutenant-Governor's Committee on Housing Conditions in Toronto wrote in its 1934 report:

The general improvement of housing conditions is clearly a lengthy, expensive, and complicated process. It needs strong public support to sanction the necessary expenditures and legislation. It needs constant propaganda and the assistance of the press. It requires a long-term plan if it is to be effective; and care must be taken that state action supplements rather than supplants private enterprise. It involves the consideration of a multitude of human relationships. Lastly, and perhaps most important, it demands the co-operation of landlords and tenants, of official and voluntary organisations, and of local authorities and the central government.

In 1972, an old man died in a fire in squalid surroundings; seventeen years later, ten people died in a fire under similar conditions. At this moment there are still many Torontonians in substandard housing and thousands of people without any housing at all. This is not only inhumane, it is a waste of human potential. If housing the poor is considered simply as charity, then efforts to provide housing will always fall short of the goal. If, however, ensuring secure and adequate accommodation for all is seen as a collective good that will benefit everyone by allowing formerly marginalized people to contribute to society, then progress in housing for low-income singles may finally occur.
