

Speaking Out: Housing Issues of Youth in Nunavik

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Article abstract

Conference retranscription “Living in Northern Quebec,” special session “Arctic Housing and Community Planning” organized by Mylène Riva and Geneviève Vachon. *Arctic Change 2017 Conference*, Quebec City, Convention Centre, December 14th, 2017.

Speaking Out: Housing Issues of Youth in Nunavik

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AUTHOR

Olivia Ikey is an Inuk from Kuujuaq who has been involved in youth issues and politics for over 10 years. She has been involved in and has advocated for Inuit youth through many special youth programs, the Nunavik Regional Youth Council, and the Qarjuit Youth Council. A graduate of Nunavik Sivunitsavut, Olivia currently advocates for Inuit interests in many different fields such as housing, education, mental health, and identity and reconciliation.

AUTEURE

Olivia Ikey est une Inuk de Kuujuaq. Elle a été impliquée dans les questions relatives à la jeunesse et à la politique pendant une grande partie des dix dernières années. Olivia a travaillé et a défendu les droits des jeunes Inuit dans le cadre de nombreux programmes spéciaux pour les jeunes et du Conseil régional de la jeunesse du Nunavik, le Conseil de la jeunesse Qarjuit. Diplômée du Nunavik Sivunitsavut, elle travaille à défendre les intérêts des Inuit dans de nombreux domaines tels que le logement, l'éducation, la santé mentale, l'identité et la réconciliation.

CONTEXT

Conference retranscription “Living in Northern Quebec,”¹ special session “Arctic Housing and Community Planning”² organized by Mylène Riva and Geneviève Vachon. *Arctic Change 2017 Conference*, Quebec City, Convention Centre, December 14th, 2017.

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1. “Habiter le Nord Québécois: Mobiliser, comprendre, imaginer” (“Inhabiting Northern Quebec: Mobilizing, Understanding, Imagining”) is a research project in partnership mainly housed at the School of Architecture of Laval University. The project’s subject is the culturally appropriate and sustainable development of the habitat of Innu and Inuit communities. It approaches the northern Aboriginal habitat in all its complexity, by examining the three dimensions that structure it, that give it meaning and that orient its development: communities, living environments and governance. “Habiter le Nord Québécois/Living in Northern Quebec” was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada-Partnership (2015-2021) (<https://www.habiterlenordquebecois.org/>).
2. The theme of the special session “Sustainable housing and community planning in the Arctic” are compounded by climate change and urbanization. The provision of affordable, adequate, suitable, accessible, culturally appropriate, and safe housing for

CONTEXTE

Retranscription de la conférence « Habiter le Nord québécois »³, session « Logement et planification communautaire dans l'Arctique »⁴, organisé par Mylène Riva et Geneviève Vachon. *Congrès Arctic Change 2017*, Québec, Centre des Congrès, 14 décembre 2017.

people across the Arctic is an important condition for well-being. There is a need for housing, public space and amenities, as well as biotechnical and sociocultural infrastructure designs and solutions that are suited to northern climate and environmental conditions, and to local lifestyles and cultural preferences. These will also have to be flexible and adapted to the demands of a rapidly growing population and a changing climate. This session aims to provide a space for dialogue and knowledge-sharing between different sectors and disciplines, including construction and design; impacts on health and well-being; energy and infrastructure; planning for an urbanizing Arctic; governance; and more. Actors from different sectors of intervention from Nunavik, Nunavut, Nunatsiavut and Toronto will lead a discussion panel on solutions for arctic housing and community planning to close this day of exchanges. <https://www.habiterlenordquebecois.org/arcticchange2017>

3. “Habiter le Nord québécois: Mobiliser, comprendre, imaginer” est un projet de recherche en partenariat principalement logé à l'École d'architecture de l'Université Laval. Le projet a pour sujet d'étude l'aménagement culturellement approprié et durable de l'habitat des communautés innues et inuit. Il aborde l'habitat autochtone nordique dans toute sa complexité, en examinant les trois dimensions qui le structurent, qui lui donnent un sens et qui en orientent le développement: les communautés, les cadres de vie, la gouvernance. Habiter le Nord québécois a été financé par le Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada-Partenariat (2015-2021) (<https://www.habiterlenordquebecois.org/>)
4. Le thème de la session spéciale “Logement durable et planification communautaire dans l'Arctique” sont aggravés par le changement climatique et l'urbanisation. La fourniture d'un logement abordable, adéquat, convenable, accessible, culturellement approprié et sûr pour les populations de l'Arctique est une condition importante pour le bien-être. Il est nécessaire de concevoir des logements, des espaces publics et des équipements, ainsi que des infrastructures biotechniques et socio-culturelles, et de trouver des solutions adaptées aux conditions climatiques et environnementales du Nord, ainsi qu'aux modes de vie locaux et aux préférences culturelles. Ces solutions devront également être flexibles et adaptées aux exigences d'une population en croissance rapide et d'un climat changeant. Cette session vise à offrir un espace de dialogue et de partage des connaissances entre différents secteurs et disciplines, notamment la construction et la conception, les impacts sur la santé et le bien-être, l'énergie et les infrastructures, la planification de l'urbanisation de l'Arctique, la gouvernance, etc. Des acteurs de différents secteurs d'intervention du Nunavik, du Nunavut, du Nunatsiavut et de Toronto animeront un panel de discussion sur les solutions pour le logement arctique et la planification communautaire pour clôturer cette journée d'échanges. <https://www.habiterlenordquebecois.org/arcticchange2017>.

Hello everyone. I'm the newly elected vice president of the Qarjuit Youth Council and was elected in September. Housing is not one of our mandates, but we understand at Qarjuit that housing has a huge impact on youth life and other aspects. On a personal level, I've been working on housing issues for over 10 years now, so this is a part of my personal work that I'm trying to bring into the mandate of our Youth Council.

So, what is happening to the youth in Nunavik because of the housing crisis? Right now, our youth are having children at a young age. A lot of teenagers are having multiple children because one of the requirements to get housing is having children. There's a lot of family violence, as well as drug, alcohol, and sexual abuse within overcrowded houses. Youth are dropping out of high school in order to get a job—most likely they are very low-paying jobs—this gets you extra points to get a house. Also, youth who are attending college do not return home after completing their diplomas because there is no housing available for them.

Youth are conforming to the housing point system. The point system we have right now is led by the Kativik Municipal Housing Bureau (KMHB) in partnership with the SHQ (Société d'Habitation du Québec). Because this point system concerns social housing, we do not have a market to choose from, we have social housing, we have company housing, and we have private home ownership, which are not easily accessible to the youth in Nunavik. So, the point system in Nunavik works like this: If you have children, you have more points; if you have a low-income job, you have more points; if you are in an abusive relationship, you have more points. For this last scenario, we are often told to go to Social Services to get a letter stating that our lives are "in danger" and that we need a house, and this is how we get more points. So, if you are a youth with no children, if you have a good job, if you are educated and you're from a good family, your chances of getting a house are very slim. So, it's easy to see why the youth are conforming to these standards that are set by our housing bureau.

Nunavik youth are also not taking job opportunities. The other housing market is company housing. A lot of the times, locals cannot receive company housing. There is a requirement that you have to live 50 km away from your office. All of us live in our community, so we can't get housing when we work for an Inuit organization. As a result, we are losing a lot of educated Inuit for these jobs because they are taking other jobs out of their community in order to get houses, so we are losing our youth because of these requirements.

About the housing priorities for youth in Nunavik: What do they want to see in their future in terms of housing? One major thing is that the housing points system needs to be changed, or we need to create a new housing category with a different points system. As I mentioned, this

is social housing built for people who are in need, but we don't have any other avenues to go to get housing. So, under the KMHB, working with the SHQ, we need to create a subcategory in the existing point system where some of the houses that are built could be given to educated, motivated, single youth who have good jobs.

We would also like to create local youth and family “safe spaces” for educational and prevention activities. To support College/University students, we need to create seasonal rental space. During the summer months and during Christmas season, a lot of company houses are empty. A lot of college students come back for the summer or for the holidays and literally have nowhere to stay, even if we have many many empty houses. If we developed partnerships with local organizations to create seasonal renting for our college students, it would support them when they come back home.

We also need to work with local entrepreneurs and businesses to create coop opportunities with youth, to create coop apartments, coop housing, where youth are involved as a board of directors and where we can make decisions with our houses and how we will manage them.

One of the big things is: Company housing needs to be provided to Inuit staff. This creates a lot of separation and racism within our communities... and I'm not just talking about the quality of the toilets! We have different toilets compared to people from the South. It's ridiculous to talk about these small things, but really, they create huge separations. We cannot work together if we are living under different standards. For example, I am from my community and I live in the lowest standard, while people from outside of my community come in and they live privileged lifestyles. This has to change! So company housing standards for Inuit need to be reviewed and changed.

Immediate and preventative solutions for youth

We need to do this right now, because at the moment, we're losing control of the housing crisis. And we need to have preventative measures for when the youth get to the age where they're going to be able to rent houses, they are mentally stable, they are financially stable, they are educated. We need to provide them with Youth centres and family houses to create “safe spaces” for youth and families: an environment where youth can do their homework and learn without distraction. There's no space in our home to do educational activities, there is no space to do homework. Youth Centres often have homework-helping programs after school and these are very very important. You know, there is a lot of prevention work going on in the Family houses and in the Youth centres: drug and alcohol prevention, teen pregnancy prevention, vandalism prevention, and similar interventions, and these are

going to help in the future when the children become tenants and renters of these houses. There is a lot of community involvement in all different aspects: health professionals, education professionals, volunteering... There are a lot of different aspects in the community that are involved. So, these are vital resources for us. If we can't get housing right away, we urgently need Youth centres and Family houses to support our youth.

Another program that I used when I was a teenager—and this saved my life—was Safe Houses. Our Youth centre, at night, would open its doors and we could go sleep there. If our parents were drinking and we had nowhere to go, we could go sleep at the Youth centre. They had one monitor there every night, so it's a safe space where youth can go to sleep during the night to escape overcrowded housing or dangerous situations. Back then, it was very, like, unofficial, when I used to go sleep there. You slept there and you went to school the next day and you were not followed by a health professional or by Youth protection or anything. But the last Safe House we had had partnerships with Youth protection, Family houses, and professionals from Health and Social Services, so creating programs for the youth who are sleeping there at night and trying to help the situation, and not just sending them off to school the next day. So, this type of program is what we need to look at: A prevention-based program that is urgently needed because we know we can't defeat the housing crisis any time soon without this vital support.

Some other ideas for housing solutions for young adults

Residences such as shared living, dormitory-style, with common living, cooking, and cleaning spaces

This could be an option for now for young people who are waiting to receive a home of their own. If they could at least rent a room where they could have a space to do laundry and have their own space... because most of the time, you don't even have your own room. I was in a room with my brother until I was 20, until we moved him into a walk-in closet because I wanted my own space. If I could have had the chance to go and rent a room somewhere, I would have taken that opportunity, but this option did not and still does not exist. Maybe we could set up a Youth Co-habitation program with the local housing bureau. When I was 17, I applied for a house with one of my best friends, thinking that it would give us extra points. I thought that we would go higher on the list but it doesn't count! It is not looked at as extra points, so that option needs to be looked at so we can create "roommate" programs for housing.

We also need to work with local organizations to create seasonal renting programs

As I was saying, teacher housing, staff housing, these houses are empty half of the year. A lot of houses are empty, a lot of people from the South move into houses where, for example, one person is living in a three-bedroom house. Some of their dogs even have their own room. It's that bad! So, we really need to change this system and start working together to find more effective solutions that work better for our situation. Some teachers work with youth directly to give the students their house: 'I'm leaving for the summer; would you like to take care of my house?' Such arrangements are currently made personally between people. But if we could create a program, we could help our youth, especially college students, because we're constantly losing educated Inuit who have all gone and are now living in Montreal. Everybody with a university diploma is moving out because there are no jobs with housing available for them.

Create a local Youth Co-op program and create apartment complexes to rent at a decent price

We did create this at one point; we created a co-op housing program, but the subsidies we got from the government were still not enough. We were going to rent out one-bedroom apartments for \$1,200. With the cost of living, we were going to put the youth in debt. You were going to pay rent, you won't get to eat, you won't live, you were just going to pay rent. I did not want to put my youth in that situation, so we started a whole new program. We tried to explain our cost of living to the government. I even sent pictures of laundry detergent for them to understand that the subsidies do not help us. We need better subsidies! One of the things we were told was to rent it out to youth who were working at the mines. But then the youth are out of their community for 6 months of the year, so the house is empty for 6 months of the year. So it was not realistic for us to do that and so the program was scrapped, but if we could look at a better program with better subsidies, maybe it would work.

Another thing is creating a rent-to-own program

I know that in the 60s, the government tried to create a rent-to-own: You rent your house and, in the future, you end up owning it. Right now, there is a lot of vandalism, there are a lot of repairs that need to be made. A lot of people think like this: "It's not my home so I'm not going to take care of it. I am renting from somebody." Their attitude is: "It's not mine, it doesn't matter, the Housing Bureau is going to take care of it". But if we created a program where you rent to eventually own, it will totally change people's perspective on that, to become: "This is my home and I'm going to keep it and my children will keep it, so I will maintain it. I will maintain the outside,

I will maintain the inside...". That changes the whole mind set of that, and as a result it will prevent vandalism and a lot of things that are associated with costs and maintenance. We currently have a lot of costs and repairs and renovations, so we cannot catch up to building new houses because we're constantly fixing old ones.

Conclusion

So that's it. I have no statistics, I have no "research". This all comes from my own personal experience and perspective. I lived this. I'm not a college student or anything, but I have lived everything I've spoken about, so what I am giving you all here today is some food for thought to help you to understand the situation that we are living in right now in Nunavik.

I fought for five years to get a house. I had no children, I made too much money. Now I have a two-bedroom house. You know the way life is supposed to go: You're supposed to get a house and then have a baby; that's what I thought. But they were telling me to have a baby to get a house. That's not how I wanted to live my life. So I got a house, I got a good job, now I have a daughter, I take care of my house, I pay my rent.

People need to understand that what you are doing now is going to affect my daughter. They are not looking at 30-40 years from now. They're looking at the crisis we are in now and how they're throwing people in houses. But this is going to affect my daughter when she gets to the age when she will want a house.

That's how I live my life today. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak.