

**Special Issue on Housing**  
**Editor's Introduction**

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## Special Issue on Housing

### Editor's Introduction

Although in most respects the amount and quality of Canadian research on the history of urban housing cannot compare with that on British and U.S. cities, in recent years its comparative disadvantage has been reduced. As much significant scholarship has been published on the subject in the past ten years as in the previous fifty.<sup>1</sup> The 1990s have seen the publication of the first history of housing in Canada;<sup>2</sup> the first scholarly history of federal housing policy;<sup>3</sup> and the first comprehensive, historical overview of housing since World War II.<sup>4</sup> On a smaller scale, but with significant detail, it has seen the first history of housing in a Canadian province (Alberta);<sup>5</sup> the first history of the politics of housing in an English-Canadian city (Vancouver);<sup>6</sup> the first history of planning in a Canadian city;<sup>7</sup> the first book-length history of an English-Canadian suburb;<sup>8</sup> and the first systematic study of housing and suburban development in a Canadian city (Toronto).<sup>9</sup> In a different, and more ambitious vein, it has also seen the publication of an attempt to write a history of North American housing through the lens of a Canadian city (Hamilton).<sup>10</sup> In addition, it has seen the publication of substantial studies of apartment housing, prefabrication, boarding, and residential financing.<sup>11</sup> Recent issues of *Canadian Folklore Canadian* and the *Material History Review* have also been devoted to the subject<sup>12</sup>. Altogether, the quantity of research on the history of housing in urban Canada has never been greater, or the quality higher.

At such an auspicious time, it seemed appropriate to bring together those Canadian scholars who were most actively involved in historical housing research. With the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, a small research workshop was held in Hamilton, Ontario, in the spring of 1993. A mixture of senior and younger researchers presented the results of their own research and took stock more generally of what was known in their respective fields. Presentations dealt with most of the important aspects of the subject.<sup>13</sup> This special issue of the *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine* contains revised versions of five of the papers that were presented at that workshop. Additional papers dealing, among other things, with differences in housing tenure between French and English Canadians — that most Canadian of topics — will be published in a second special issue, planned for the spring of 1998.

All of the papers included in the current issue contain significant new evidence. In some ways David Burley's paper is the most ambitious in scope dealing, as it does, with comparative patterns across the country as it existed in 1871. It is welcome for the way that it begins to fill some important gaps in our knowledge, both in the way that it focusses upon landlords, a neglected group, and also because it deals with the situation in a range of urban centres, small and comparatively large. In Canada, as in Britain and the United States, those who are interested in housing tenure have tended to focus upon homeowners, and the methods by which homeownership has been attained. Especially in North America, they have largely ignored the experience of tenants (the majority of urban dwellers in Canada until the 1920s), of landlords, and of the the customary and contractual relations between the two. At the same time, like

urban historical scholars in general, the great majority have written about the larger cities where the opportunities for families to acquire homes usually were most limited. Burley's paper helps to counterbalance these biases. A companion paper by Richard Dennis, dealing with apartments, is planned for the second special issue.

An interesting, international development in the field of housing research in recent years has been the attempt to interpret housing in terms of the experience and expectations of its occupants, and not simply of those census takers and (middle class) reformers on whose evidence and commentaries so many researchers have relied. Thus, for example, writing in Australia Alan Mayne has recently reminded us not to accept at face value the label 'slum', which was for many decades applied uncritically to the poorer sections of cities.<sup>14</sup> As part of the research that she undertook for her book on the history of housing reform in Vancouver, Jill Wade gathered evidence on what were generally considered to be the worst housing in the city, marginal in social, economic, and sometimes also in geographical terms. Focussing on this topic now in a more sustained way, in the second article in this special issue she recaptures and discusses the way in which the occupants of such housing viewed their situation. She finds that many people did not simply reconcile themselves to such housing, but in fact preferred it as an expression of individuality. It is informative to read Wade's account in counterpoint with Sean Purdy's survey of the early history of housing reform in Canada, the third paper included here. At the local level the class biases of urban and housing reformers has been documented by others. Drawing upon the English-Canadian experience as a whole, Purdy sketches the broader patterns of development. Juxtaposed with Wade's account, the contrasts in perspective stand out in sharp relief.

If some writers have begun to deconstruct the slum it is appropriate that others have tackled the suburb, the home environment which has increasingly come to dominate the experience of urban Canadians in the twentieth century. For many decades, intellectuals have enjoyed criticising suburbs for their supposed social and physical homogeneity. In the postwar years they came to see suburbs as the epitome of passive consumerism. Recent research has challenged the assumption that suburbs have ever been homogeneous. At the same time, a new type of architectural history has begun to recover the ways in which suburban vernacular housing (variously defined) has been produced, used and adapted. In an American context, for example, Barbara Kelly and Annmarie Adams, respectively, have examined the ways in which stereotypical tract homes built by Levitt and Eichler were actually used, and then made unique.<sup>15</sup> In Canada, several of the papers in the recent special issue of *Material History Review* concern themselves with the production of modest suburban homes. In this country some of the most generic of all suburban dwellings were those designed under the auspices of Wartime Housing, a crown corporation established during the Second World War in to house war workers. Houses that conformed to only a handful of basic designs were erected in cities and towns from sea to sea. In the

fourth article published here, Leonard Evenden shows in detail how, from this generic template, owners made alterations to suit their needs. His research helps to underline the fact that behind the flat academic stereotypes of suburbs and slums are three-dimensional worlds of difference.<sup>16</sup>

Just as some architectural historians have begun to look behind the rhetoric of reformers and of architects, others have begun to look behind the stated goals of housing policy to discover its actual effects. The evidence presented here by John Belec suggests that the results of such research might prove very interesting. Although the United States has the reputation for having a more market-oriented policy than that of any other leading industrial nation, in fact Canada can more fairly claim this dubious honour.<sup>17</sup> The United States began to build public housing during the 1930s, while a similar Canadian programme did not get under way until after World War II, and indeed not in a serious way until the 1960s. Although the main U.S. housing program, mortgage insurance guaranteed by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), has been criticised for being biased in favour of new as opposed to existing homes, the equivalent Canadian programme, initiated under the Dominion Housing Act (DHA) of 1935, was even more obviously partial, being targeted exclusively at new homes. In this context, and despite the rhetoric of the time which emphasized housing need as well as job creation, John Belec shows that in most Canadian cities the actual impact of the DHA was to provide assistance for the affluent. Although for many decades Canadians have liked to think that they live in a kinder and gentler society than their American cousins, the early history of federal housing policy does not bear this out.

Altogether, the articles gathered in this special issue embody new approaches to the study of housing, present significant new evidence, and raise interpretative questions. Together they exemplify the health and diversity of historical housing research in Canada today.

#### Notes

1. For a more extensive critical review see Richard Harris, "More American than the United States. Housing in Urban Canada in the Twentieth Century," *Journal of Urban History* (1998, forthcoming).
2. Marc Denhez, *The Canadian Home. From Cave to Electronic Cottage*. (Toronto, 1994).
3. John Bacher, *Keeping to the Marketplace. The Evolution of Canadian Housing Policy* (Montreal and Kingston, 1993). Albert Rose's, *Canadian Housing Policies (1935-1980)* (Toronto, 1980) is also informative but neglects early federal policy and is based largely upon secondary sources, together with the author's extensive personal experience.
4. John Miron, ed. *House, Home and Community. Progress in Housing Canadians, 1945-1986* (Montreal and Kingston, 1993).
5. Donald G. Wetherell and Donald G. Kmet, *Homes in Alberta. Building, Trends, and Design*. (Edmonton, 1991). On Alberta see also E.A. Doherty, *Residential Construction Practises in Alberta, 1900-1971* (Edmonton, 1984).
6. Jill Wade, *Houses for All. The Struggle for Social Housing in Vancouver 1919-1950* (Vancouver, 1994). For an earlier study of Montreal see Marc Choko, *Cri-ses du logement a Montreal (1860-1939)* (Montreal, 1980).
7. John Sewell, *The Shape of the City. Toronto Struggles with Modern Planning* (Toronto, 1993). See also James Lemon, "Plans for Early 20th-Century Toronto: Lost in Management," *UHR/Rhu* 18 (1989), 11-31.
8. Bruce Elliott, *The City Beyond. A History of Nepean, Birthplace of Canada's Capital 1792-1990* (Nepean, Ont., 1991). Nepean began as a distinct community but became a suburb of Ottawa. On a French-Canadian suburb of Montreal see Paul-Andre Linteau, *The Promoter's City. Building the Industrial Town of Maisonneuve, 1883-1918* (Toronto, 1985).
9. Richard Harris, *Unplanned Suburbs. Toronto's American Tragedy, 1900-1950* (Baltimore, 1996).
10. Michael Doucet and John Weaver, *Housing the North American City*. @NOTES = 11. Richard Dennis, "Interpreting the apartment house: modernity and metropolitanism in Toronto, 1900-1930," *Journal of Historical Geography* 20 (1994), 305-322; Marc H. Choko, "Le 'boom' des immeubles d'appartements a Montreal de 1921 a 1951," *UHR/Rhu* 23 (1994), 3-18; G.E. Mills, *Buying Wood and Building Farms. Marketing Lumber and Farm Building Designs on the Canadian Prairies 1880 to 1920* (Ottawa, 1991); Ross Paterson, "Housing Finance in Early 20th Century Suburban Toronto," *UHR/Rhu* 20 (1991), 63-71; Richard Harris and Doris Ragonetti, "Where Credit is Due. The Sources of Residential Mortgage Financing in Canada, 1900-1954," *Journal of Real Estate Finance and Economics* (in press); Richard Harris, "The Flexible House. The Housing Backlog and the Persistence of Lodging, 1891-1951" *Social Science History* 18 (1994), 31-53.
12. *Material History Review* 44 (Fall 1996); *Canadian Folklore Canadien* 17,2 (1995).
13. Notable exceptions were the building industry and the issue of homeownership. Despite Saywell's pioneering research two decades ago, little has been written about the construction industry. John Saywell, *Housing Canadians. Essays on the History of Residential Construction in Canada* Discussion Paper No. 24, Economic Council of Canada (Ottawa, 1975). Extensive research, and synoptic overviews, were already available on the latter topic. See, for example, Doucet and Weaver, *Housing the North American City* (Montreal and Kingston, 1991), chs. 4,7; Richard Harris, "Homeownership and Class in Modern Canada," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 10,1 (1986): 167-86.
14. Alan Mayne, *The Imagined Slum. Newspaper Representation in Three Cities 1870-1914* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1993).
15. Annmarie Adams, "The Eichler Home. Intention and Experience in Postwar Suburbia," in Elizabeth C. Cromley and Carter L. Hodgins, eds. *Gender, Class, and Shelter. Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* (Knoxville, 1995), 164-178; Barbara M. Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream. Building and Rebuilding Levittown* (Albany, N.Y., 1993).
16. See also Annmarie Adams and Pieter Sijpkes, "Wartime Housing and Architectural Change, 1942-1992," *Canadian Folklore Canadien* 17,2 (1995): 13-30; Jason Gilliland, "Transforming the Ideal. Visions and Revisions of Housing in a French-Canadian Community of Montreal, 1942-1995," MA thesis, McGill University, 1996.
17. Bacher, *Keeping to the Marketplace*.