

## The "Sting" of Vancouver's Better Housing "Spree", 1919–1949

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Résumé de l'article

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# ***The “Sting” of Vancouver’s Better Housing “Spree”, 1919-1949***

***Jill Wade***

## ***Abstract:***

***Contrary to other accounts of the 1919 national housing program, this article examines the plan’s long-term history using Vancouver as a case study. It argues that a basic structural flaw in the local Better Housing Scheme created financial hardship for the City of Vancouver as well as for mortgagors during the depression. The burden of mortgage repayment that fell to the city discouraged it from participating in other housing initiatives in the 1930s and 1940s. Still, the labour, women’s, and veterans’ organizations that supported the scheme represented the beginnings of Vancouver’s social housing movement that matured in the late 1930s and achieved significant improvements in residential conditions in the 1940s.***

## ***Résumé:***

***Contrairement aux autres comptes rendus du programme national du logement de 1919, cet article en examine la portée à long terme tout en utilisant Vancouver comme cas type. L’article soutient qu’un défaut structural du Better Housing Scheme créa, durant la dépression, des difficultés financières à la ville de Vancouver ainsi qu’aux débiteurs hypothécaires. Le fardeau de remboursement hypothécaire échu à la ville la découragea de participer aux autres initiatives de logement offertes dans les années trente et quarante. Cependant les organisations regroupant les travailleurs, les femmes et les vétérans qui donnèrent leur appui au programme, sont à l’origine d’un mouvement d’action sociale qui atteindra sa maturité dans les années trente et qui enregistrera des gains considérables dans les conditions de l’habitation pendant les années quarante.***

In April 1919, the Province of British Columbia introduced a Better Housing Scheme for the construction of veterans’ homes. Almost immediately, it loaned \$300,000 in mortgage money to the City of Vancouver. The funds were a portion of a larger sum advanced under the first national housing program in Canada to British Columbia and several other provinces to ease the re-establishment of returned soldiers following the Great War. In recent years, historians have generally characterized this federal plan as a dismal failure for a variety of reasons.<sup>1</sup> They have also ordinarily focused on the initial period of implementation rather than the entire 20-year period of loan repayment. By contrast, this case study of Vancouver’s Better Housing Scheme investigates the plan’s history between 1919 and the 1940s. While it tempers to some extent earlier perceptions of the scheme’s deficiencies, it reveals a previously undescribed structural weakness in the 1919 program and the subsequent ramifications for governments and federal initiatives in the 1930s and 1940s. Indeed, the study argues that the “sting” of the Better Housing Scheme’s major flaw contributed significantly to delays in the implementation of local low-rent programs. On a brighter note, the enthusiastic reception of the plan by labour, women’s, and veterans’ groups in the community represented the beginnings of a social housing movement in Vancouver.

The 1919 federal housing program emerged during an acute accommodation shortage brought on by the cessation of building operations during the war and the return from overseas of soldiers eager to re-establish themselves and their families in civilian life. These conditions prompted proposals for government action from members of Parliament, Ontario government members, labour, veterans’ organizations like the Great War Veterans’ Association, and the Toronto Board of Trade.<sup>2</sup> In July 1918, the Ontario government set up a scheme

to make loans to municipalities as mortgage money for individual home buyers. Later that year, Ontario and Ottawa engaged in negotiations over a federal loan for the provincial scheme. When the housing issue came up at the Dominion-Provincial Conference in Ottawa in November, Sir Thomas White, the acting prime minister and minister of finance, offered to make such loans available to all the provincial governments.<sup>3</sup>

The federal government then set up machinery to implement a housing program. An order-in-council in December 1918 authorized the apportionment under the War Measures Act of \$25 million to the provinces according to population size.<sup>4</sup> The allotment took the form of a 20-year loan at 5% annual interest secured in provincial bonds or debentures. The federal government expected each province to negotiate an agreement for a housing scheme financed by the loan.

A subsequent order-in-council established a cabinet committee to determine the program’s nature and objectives.<sup>5</sup> Chaired by N. W. Rowell, president of the Privy Council, the committee included G. D. Robertson, minister of labour, A. K. Maclean, vice-chairman of the Reconstruction and Development Committee of Canada, and T. A. Crerar, minister of agriculture. Thomas Adams acted as adviser, and, to a great extent, he drafted the housing plan. The committee also worked with representatives of the Ontario scheme to define federal and provincial responsibilities.

According to the cabinet committee’s report of February 1919, the program’s explicit objectives were to relieve shortages through construction, to give working people, especially veterans, the opportunity to own homes at a fair price and to promote community health and well-being through housing and planning projects.<sup>6</sup> Those in government and busi-

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ness who supported and fashioned the scheme apparently had another less obvious motive. White, who at first seemed cool to the plan, eventually offered housing loans to the provinces because he anticipated that residential construction would contribute to post-war social stability.<sup>7</sup> In May and June 1919, the Winnipeg General Strike and the sympathetic strikes accompanying it elsewhere in the country made clear to all governments the importance of implementing the program. The June 1919 report of the Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, prepared by the Hon. Chief Justice T. G. Mathers of Manitoba, stressed that insufficient and poor housing represented one of the chief causes of recent industrial unrest in Canada.<sup>8</sup> The program received strong support for the same reason from the National Industrial Conference in September and from business in general. Thus, the scheme's initiation in the turbulent circumstances of 1919 represented insurance against social unrest, much like the contemporary British "homes fit for heroes" program.<sup>9</sup>

Under the scheme's terms, a province had to submit for federal approval a proposal explaining the guidelines for local plans. Federal regulations permitted maximum costs of houses to range between \$3,000 and \$4,500 according to size and building material. They allowed land ownership by provinces or municipalities, limited dividend societies, companies, or individual home owners. The cabinet committee strongly recommended using large sites for "good planning and economy," limiting loans to purchasers or renters with annual incomes below \$3,000, and imposing minimum standards of services, space, and sanitation. Ottawa made available the expertise of Thomas Adams to the provinces. In October 1919, Adams and the scheme's administrative staff moved from the cabinet committee to the newly created

housing branch of the federal Department of Health.

All provinces except Alberta and Saskatchewan participated in the 1919 federal housing program. Ontario passed enabling legislation in 1919 and quickly put its scheme into operation under a Bureau of Municipal Affairs housing branch. Its eligibility requirements tended to favour veterans who were provincial residents of modest means. Municipalities appointed housing commissions to administer local projects. The Quebec scheme offered no preference for ex-servicemen, but other provinces, including British Columbia, followed the Ontario model. The federal program resulted in the construction of a total of 6,244 dwellings in 179 municipalities across Canada.<sup>10</sup>

As in Britain, federal interest in the scheme faded by 1923 as the economy improved and the threat of social disorder declined.<sup>11</sup> As well, the government viewed the program as a temporary solution to a momentary problem rather than a commitment to permanent involvement. Housing remained the responsibility of provincial and municipal governments and, in particular, the private sector. Furthermore, the political situation in Ottawa changed as sympathetic politicians like Rowell, Crerar, and Maclean left the scene and other lukewarm ones like Meighen and then King came to power. At first, the federal government reduced the size of the housing branch. Later, despite an additional advance of money in 1920–1921 under pressure from veterans, provincial and municipal governments, boards of trade, labour, business, and community groups, it discontinued funding in the fiscal year 1923–1924.

British Columbia and the City of Vancouver were among the first participants in the federal program. Still, a combina-

tion of social discord, high unemployment, and housing congestion likely prompted the province and the city to act. Militancy in the wartime workforce, unemployment among veterans, labour's response to the 1918 murder of organizer Ginger Goodwin, formation of the One Big Union, fears in government and business circles of a socialist revolution, and post-war industrial disputes leading to the June 1919 general strike in Vancouver generated excessive social tension.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Vancouver experienced severe housing congestion characterized by rising rents, diminishing vacancies, and doubling up. According to two reports prepared in 1920 and 1922 by the city's medical health officer, overcrowding particularly affected rental accommodation in the West End and the central business district.<sup>13</sup> A construction slowdown owing to the pre-war depression and the war effort, the rapid formation of veterans' families, the continuing migration of prairie people to the west coast, especially in winter, and the problem of post-war material shortages, rising costs, and severe unemployment in the building trades produced the crisis.<sup>14</sup> The public mind immediately connected unrest and unemployment with the demand for housing. At the old Hotel Vancouver on the 29th and 30th April, labour and business representatives agreed with members of the Royal Commission on Industrial Relations that house construction would provide jobs, homes, and social stability.<sup>15</sup> As a local shipwright commented,

... if your average workman could feel that he was certain of being able as long as he lived to earn a decent livelihood for himself and his family to live in decency and comfort with sanitary surroundings, and educate his children, give them the opportunity of getting a few more of the good things of life than he has had, I believe you

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would go a long way towards solving this question of unrest.<sup>16</sup>

Later, in a 1919 address to a Victoria realtors' meeting, the director of the American Department of Labor's "Own Your Own Home" section described the Canadian program as "a panacea for Bolshevism" intended to stabilize the social situation.<sup>17</sup> Within days, the *Vancouver Sun* remarked that there "would be little, if any likelihood of serious social upheaval in a community where every family owned the quarters in which they live."<sup>18</sup> Moreover, ex-servicemen's groups pressed Vancouver City Council to participate, and the Local Council of Women endorsed the federal program.<sup>19</sup>

British Columbia's Better Housing Act received royal assent on 29 March 1919.<sup>20</sup> It enabled the province to arrange agreements to borrow federal money using debentures as security and to lend funds to municipalities at 5% annual interest repayable in 20 years. The Act also allowed municipalities to make available sums of money to soldiers for housing. Any agreement or contract made under the legislation had to include a fair wage clause. The provincial Department of Lands assumed administrative responsibility for the Act through its soldier settlement branch. British Columbia promptly submitted a proposal to the federal committee and Thomas Adams. On 1 May 1919, the Cabinet in Ottawa approved the Better Housing Scheme.<sup>21</sup> The Province then applied for a \$1,500,000 loan and issued debentures as security for advances.<sup>22</sup> Eventually, additional funding pushed the total loan to \$1,701,500.<sup>23</sup> British Columbia was the only province to spend its entire allotment.<sup>24</sup>

Eager to share in Better Housing funding, the Vancouver City Council set up a special committee to work out details for a civic proposal. In May, it contracted an

agreement with the British Columbia government.<sup>25</sup> The city borrowed \$300,000 from the province repayable in 20 years at 5% annual interest and issued debentures as security for the loan. The agreement included a fair wage clause and a preference for ex-servicemen's employment. It gave priority to soldiers and/or their families in obtaining a loan or purchasing a dwelling. It made available a \$300 rebate to agreement holders if they remained in their houses for ten years. The scheme provided for detached dwellings of frame, stucco on frame, or brick veneer costing \$3,000 maximum for 4–5 rooms or \$4,500 maximum for 6–7 rooms and complying with municipal building by-laws. It also allowed the province, the city, or an individual to own the site of a house.

The special civic committee did not obtain all it wanted.<sup>26</sup> Most significantly, in terms of subsequent developments, it could not convince the province to make guarantees against losses in the scheme.<sup>27</sup> Minister of Lands Duff Pattullo argued that the federal government had similarly declined to assume liability against loss for the provinces and that the city should share equal responsibility with British Columbia for its project. As well, the committee unsuccessfully pressed the province to set up a central administration to direct the entire Better Housing Scheme in the interests of continuity and economy. Some committee members also believed that the Vancouver proposal should have gone to the voters as a plebiscite before implementation.

The City of Vancouver set up an administrative committee consisting of three aldermen and three civic officials and formulated a series of guidelines for the scheme's execution.<sup>28</sup> An allotment sub-committee accepted applications and \$10 fees from individual citizens, all of

whom the civic employment bureau screened. No applicant received consideration unless he had been domiciled for at least six months prior to enlistment for overseas service and had an annual income under \$3,000.<sup>29</sup> Top priority went to widows of soldiers and disabled veterans who were burdened with dependents and had few material resources. While successful applicants contracted independently with builders, the city regulated the building process through its building inspector, who sat on the administrative committee. He approved plans and specifications for all houses, and he supervised the tenders and contracts for construction, the expenditures and progress estimates of the contractors, and the erection of every dwelling. City Council itself approved all loans and extended written permission to owners to sublet, vacate, and transfer houses. Almost all of the homes built under the program went up in 1919–1920.<sup>30</sup>

The municipalities of Point Grey and South Vancouver lying next to the City of Vancouver also entered into agreements with the provincial government under the Better Housing Scheme. By February 1920, the allotments amounted to \$54,000 for Point Grey and \$65,000 for South Vancouver, and a year later they had increased to \$94,000 and \$90,000 respectively.<sup>31</sup> Here, too, the majority of homes were constructed in 1919–1920. After the 1929 amalgamation of the three municipalities, the City of Vancouver assumed responsibility for the housing erected in Point Grey and South Vancouver.

The provincial government itself built some houses. Indeed, it went ahead with a soldiers' housing plan in South Vancouver before it reached a firm agreement with Ottawa.<sup>32</sup> In 1919, the Department of Lands purchased from South Vancouver 50 lots lying between

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47th and 49th Avenues near Fraser Street. It combined several lots into 50' x 120' "homesites" and built ten soldiers' houses costing a maximum \$2,500 each according to the provincial architect's plans.<sup>33</sup> (See Figure 1.) The province continued to administer this housing even after the municipality itself decided to participate in the scheme and set up its own commission composed of representatives from various veterans' groups.<sup>34</sup>

Over the years, various critics have pointed out the flaws of the 1919 federal housing program. The 1935 report of a special parliamentary committee on housing in

Canada presented a grim picture of mismanagement, poor construction, and loss of owners' equity.<sup>35</sup> One witness described the Ottawa scheme, comprised of 29 houses on city lots and another 142 in the Adams-designed community of Lindenlea, as a "hopeless mess" and "a gross failure." Incompetent administration led to the mishandling of funds (and even embezzlement), to substandard construction and thus vacant dwellings, and to the need for additional city funding to cover tax and mortgage arrears and extra building costs. As inflation came and went in the post-war period, many owners who had bought houses when prices peaked lost their equity when values declined and faced

foreclosure if they could not meet their mortgage payments. The housing monograph of the 1931 Census prepared by H. F. Greenway, the 1939 housing study written by A. E. Grauer for the Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations, and the 1944 final report of the Advisory Committee on Reconstruction housing and planning subcommittee repeated this theme of mismanagement.<sup>36</sup> Despite all these negative pronouncements, the program apparently worked well in Winnipeg where better control by City Council produced 712 units of superior quality and a small surplus.



*Figure 1: In 1919, the British Columbia Department of Lands built this soldier's home on Windsor Street in South Vancouver.*

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For other reasons, more recent evaluations are even less flattering than the older ones. On the basis of the program's own objectives, A. E. Jones charged that the scheme was too limited in scope to relieve congestion, that it did not systematically favour low-income people, and that it failed completely as a demonstration of good planning and housing principles.<sup>37</sup> In his biography of Thomas Adams, Michael Simpson characterized the program as short-term and market-oriented: its aim was to reduce social unrest and to stimulate the private sector and generate employment without sounding too collectivistic.<sup>38</sup> The housing never reached those of lowest income who

most desperately needed it. Simpson mentioned other difficulties with the program. Projects did not fulfill Adams's standards. Funding represented a token sum. No government surveyed actual accommodation needs at the municipal level before implementing the program. Some provinces did not participate, and regulations excluded rural housing. Simpson, too, called the scheme "a dismal failure." Finally, John Weaver and Michael Doucet have argued that the "hastily conceived program demonstrated the hazards of higher ratio or low down-payment loans" especially in the volatile housing market following World War I.<sup>39</sup>

The operation of Vancouver's Better Housing Scheme reinforces to some extent this bleak perspective of the national program. First, since the housing consisted of detached dwellings on scattered city lots, the scheme never represented an innovative model housing or planning project to Vancouverites as Adams and the federal cabinet committee had intended. Despite the city's control over the building process, the houses conformed to Vancouver's unplanned suburban development patterns and to its predilection for the bungalow styles offered by individual local builders. (See Figures 2 and 3.) Even the province's supervising architect, Henry



**Figure 2:** *A bakery employee, a plasterer, and a carpenter successively owned this Better Housing Scheme bungalow built in 1920 for about \$3,500 on West 13th Avenue in Kitsilano. The carpenter still owed \$660 on the home in 1942.*



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Whittaker, missed an opportunity to design a garden suburb for the bungalows and Dutch Colonial homes built by the Department of Lands. Still, for families desperate for housing, innovation in design was probably not a major concern. Ranging in cost from \$2,000 to \$5,000, the dwellings were not cheap in quality. Indeed, they resembled the other now highly praised workers' "cottages" lining the streets of Vancouver's older suburbs.<sup>40</sup> Secondly, the scheme seemed a poor stimulus to the post-war economy and employment when contractors showed great reluctance to tender for houses.<sup>41</sup> They resisted paying the city's mandatory deposit of 10% of the contract value as security when they

could use it to better advantage in other ways, and they were loath to bid for small houses. Nevertheless, in 1920, 17% of new dwellings built in Vancouver were Better Housing units.<sup>42</sup>

More importantly, Vancouver's housing program failed to reach those of lowest income living in overcrowded, unsuitable rooms, cheap hotels, cabins, Chinese boarding houses, and foreshore shacks located in the downtown area.<sup>43</sup> The federal plan contributed to the building of only one house in the city centre. Instead, it was responsible for the construction of over 150 others in suburban areas. As Simpson has pointed out, the objective of the program was to provide

jobs, social stability, and market housing rather than to deal with problems in low-income accommodation.

Still, if it did not benefit low-income households, the scheme did favour workers' families. About 60% of Better Housing Scheme dwellings went up on the amalgamated city's working-class east side, and about 40% were on the middle-class west side.<sup>44</sup> (See Figure 4.) The allotment committees gave the housing to applicants with up to \$3,000 yearly income. Blue- and white-collar workers with the financial ability to repay their loans made up almost 80% of mortgagors between 1919 and 1929.<sup>45</sup> About 20% of the rest were



**Figure 3:** *A City of Vancouver police officer originally lived in this \$2,600, one-storey home, erected in 1920 on Triumph Street in East Vancouver under the Better Housing Scheme. The officer paid off his mortgage in 1937.*

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professionals, businessmen, and agricultural workers. Some level of government employed about 30% of those who held mortgages under the scheme. Only 11 of the more than 150 mortgagors were soldiers' widows. Not unexpectedly, about three-quarters of the east side homes were small and valued under \$3,000, while about three-quarters of west side houses exceeded them in size and worth.

Furthermore, the city government and community groups had no input into the design of the over-all program. Federal and provincial bureaucrats apparently never consulted civic officials like Medical Health Officer Frederick T. Underhill who had extensive knowledge of local housing conditions.<sup>46</sup> Assistance therefore went to moderate rather than low-income households. Moreover, the scheme's organizers at every level ignored groups outside government, excepting veterans' organizations, that

might have offered sound advice. For example, Vancouver City Council excluded the women's department of the local Reconstruction League, much as the federal government disregarded the women's department of the Canadian Reconstruction Association and its firmly held opinions about "better housing" standards.<sup>47</sup>

The administrative structure of the federal program also caused problems for the City of Vancouver. The senior

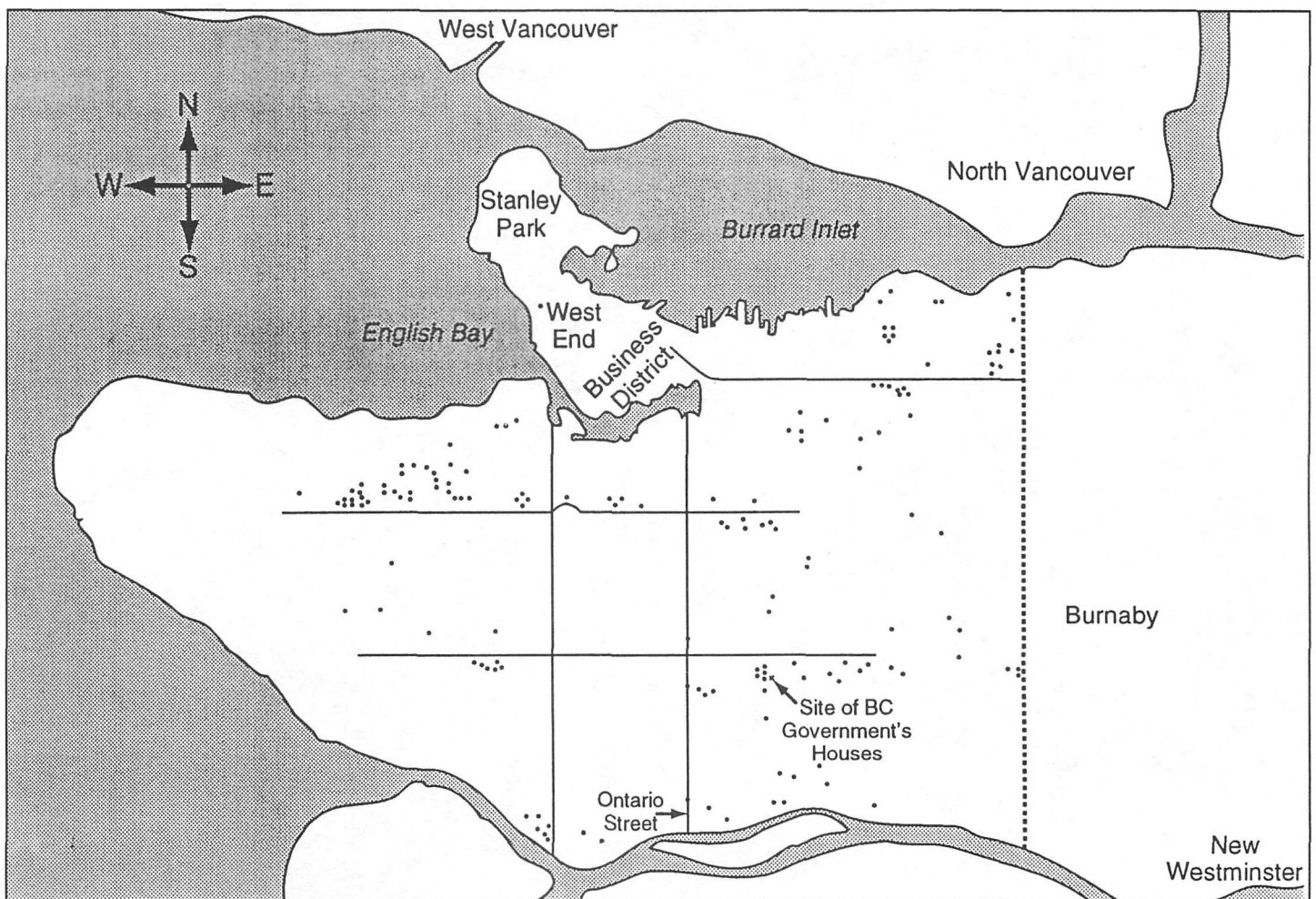


Figure 4: Map showing the location of Better Housing Scheme homes on the east and west sides of Vancouver.



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governments expected the municipalities to carry the burden of executing the plan. In Vancouver, the city hired extra staff to assist the building inspector, who supervised all contractors' work in order to prevent shoddy construction or financial liability for the taxpayers.<sup>48</sup> As well, the city comptroller and the Finance Department assumed the heavy responsibility of allotment and administration when the load became too cumbersome for special civic committees.<sup>49</sup> Eventually, they also handled the Point Grey and South Vancouver schemes. However serious the burden, Vancouver, like Winnipeg, never showed any sign of mismanagement of funds.

The Better Housing Scheme had questionable value as an instrument of social control. First, it produced only 153 units in Vancouver, Point Grey, and South Vancouver between 1919 and 1921.<sup>50</sup> While the program's impact on construction jobs was significant in 1920 if not in 1919 or 1921, unemployment remained acute until 1925.<sup>51</sup> Secondly, public pressure for the creation and continuation of a housing program came as much from veterans in need of homes as from others in search of jobs or social stability. The Army and Navy Veterans' Association, the Great War Veterans' Association of Canada and its women's auxiliary, the British Columbia Mainland United Soldiers, the Grand Army United Veterans, the Amputation Club of British Columbia, and many individual veterans pressed City Council to participate in the federal plan and later demanded additional funding.<sup>52</sup> The local Trades and Labor Council, the University Club, and the Vancouver Council of Women also supported involvement.<sup>53</sup> In other words, social action may have played as much a role as control in the Better Housing Scheme's history. In fact, the pressure coming from these elements of the Vancouver community signalled the modest beginnings of a local social housing movement that matured in

the 1930s and achieved some important advances in the 1940s.<sup>54</sup> The same organizations representing labour, women, and veterans provided the link between the first and later housing campaigns.

The real difficulty with the Better Housing Scheme was its overextended financial structure. The chain of lending arrangements included the mortgagor, the city, the province, and Ottawa. This system of mortgage repayment too easily broke down during tough economic times. In an arrangement anticipating the 1935 Dominion Housing Act, the Better Housing mortgagor paid the city monthly blended installments of principal and interest as well as charges for administration, taxes, water rates, and insurance.<sup>55</sup> If a mortgagor failed to meet his or her obligations, then the house reverted to the city, which had to deal with subsidizing arrears in taxes and mortgages, renting or selling the unit, and paying off the provincial loan. Unlike later housing initiatives, the 1919 program did not insure lenders (the municipalities) against loss. The province in turn was responsible for meeting its debt to the federal government.

The scheme generally worked well in the 1920s. Still, while records show no cases of foreclosure, they do indicate that three quitclaims and 45 transfers to new owners occurred throughout the decade.<sup>56</sup> Most of the transfers and quitclaims took place following a sudden drop in prices following the inflationary peak of 1919–1922. As Doucet and Weaver have pointed out, mortgagors purchased their homes with small downpayments and large monthly charges in ill-conceived, high-ratio mortgage lending operations.<sup>57</sup> In Vancouver, buyers might put down \$50 on a \$2,000 or \$4,500 house and make total monthly payments of \$20 to \$40. By 1923–1926, owners' equity vanished, and rented quarters of the same quality were avail-

able at cheaper rates than mortgage payments contracted a few years previously.<sup>58</sup>

The problem with Better Housing Scheme finances worsened during the depression when many mortgagors could not meet their house payments. The City of Vancouver then carried the burden of repaying the provincial government. By January 1937, 29.8% or 45 of 151 properties reverted to the city, and 33.11% or 50 agreement holders were in arrears.<sup>59</sup> Completed agreements numbered 27, or 17.88%, and 29 mortgagors had up-to-date payments. Thirty-two quitclaims and 17 foreclosures occurred in the 1930s. The total outstanding balance by 1936 amounted to over \$229,000. Properties held under agreement could not produce the capital represented by the debentures held as security for the provincial loan. By 1942, when 51 agreement holders continued to make payments, the city had written off over \$99,800 under the scheme and still owed probably another \$45,000.<sup>60</sup> In 1935 and 1937, the city sought assistance from the senior governments that had introduced the 1919 program. Although veterans involved in a post-war land settlement plan had obtained relief measures, the city's approaches met with resistance from both governments.<sup>61</sup> In fact, the province threatened to deduct outstanding sums from a grant for motor license fees unless the city repaid its loan in full.<sup>62</sup>

Thus, although many of Vancouver's blue- and white-collar workers realized their ambitions of purchasing dwellings in the 1920s under the Better Housing Scheme, some of them discovered the risks of ownership in the 1930s when high unemployment caused them to default on loan and tax payments and forced them to give up their family homes. The hazards of working-class ownership apparent in the Better Hous-

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ing story serve to caution those optimists who rightly comment upon the remarkable extent of workers' suburbs before 1930 in Vancouver and elsewhere in Canada or North America.<sup>63</sup>

As well, the financial state of the Better Housing Scheme created an unfortunate legacy for Vancouver's social housing movement of the 1930s and 1940s. By 1937–1939, a campaign to build low-rental housing under the 1938 National Housing Act had fully emerged in the city. Part II of the Act provided for federal loans to local housing authorities or limited dividend companies at low interest rates to cover project construction costs.<sup>64</sup> However, it stipulated that municipalities would have to forego all but 1% of taxes on low-rental developments. Anticipating the loss of additional tax revenues at a time when relief expenditures remained high, a majority of aldermen opposed the project. To them, the City of Vancouver had "lost heavily" in the Better Housing "spree," and no federal or provincial assistance was forthcoming.<sup>65</sup> As housing activist and alderman Helena Gutteridge herself remarked, the scheme had so "badly stung" the city that it refused to become involved in another federal plan.<sup>66</sup> A smaller British Columbia city, Nanaimo, also struggled with the long-range financial consequences of the scheme and failed to obtain redress from the provincial and federal governments.<sup>67</sup>

The bad impression left by the 1919 program extended into the post-World War II years when acute accommodation shortages generated a variety of proposals requiring federal and civic involvement. In the mid-1940s, City Council moved reluctantly in contracting new agreements with Ottawa for veterans' homes. Intense public pressure finally forced the city in 1944 and 1945 into accepting an agreement with the federal crown corporation Wartime Housing

Limited to build 1,200 dwellings. For its part, the city was dissatisfied with unfavourable financial arrangements surrounding the provision of tax sale land to the federal government, the contribution of annual payments in lieu of municipal taxes, and the future sale of units.<sup>68</sup> Taxpayers would "face the same financial loss which occurred when the former housing scheme was inaugurated during the first world war."<sup>69</sup> As well, the city exhibited a clear unwillingness to bear administrative and financial responsibility for emergency shelter projects despite federal contributions. After a particularly disastrous experiment in managing a shelter at Sea Island Camp No. 1, it left the operation of projects like the old Hotel Vancouver, Seaforth Village, and Dunsmuir Hotel to the Citizens' Rehabilitation Council of Greater Vancouver.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, in 1947, during discussions about a plan to import American armed forces hutments from Bremerton, Washington, to shelter veterans' families in Vancouver, two aldermen who had wound up the Better Housing Scheme's affairs a few years earlier "cooled" interest by reminding Council that the city had lost \$140,000 on the 1919 program.<sup>71</sup>

The "sting" of the Scheme finally disappeared at the end of the decade. In 1948, a revised contract with Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation to build veterans' houses in Renfrew Heights eventually addressed the city's financial concerns.<sup>72</sup> A year later, Council endorsed an amendment to the 1944 National Housing Act that made possible a 75–25% federal-provincial sharing arrangement for the construction of public housing and the establishment of a provincially initiated local housing authority, and it supported the building of Little Mountain, Vancouver's first low-rental project.<sup>73</sup>

In sum, the history of the City of Vancouver's experience with the Better

Housing Scheme over twenty years adds to our understanding of the 1919 federal housing program. It reveals the plan's greatest shortcoming, its method of uninsured mortgage repayment. This basic structural weakness in the program created financial hardship during the depression for the city, which subsequently shied away from participating in other seemingly risky housing initiatives in the 1930s and 1940s. In other respects, the Better Housing Scheme story is as dismal as critics have thought. Clearly, the program did not produce innovative accommodation for low-income households, and it imposed a heavy administrative responsibility on the city. Its contribution to the reconstruction of the post-war economy was debatable. Yet the story is not entirely a dreary one. In the Vancouver manner, the scheme built comfortable bungalows in garden settings for mostly blue- and white-collar workers. In addition, whether they wanted houses, jobs, or social stability, many organizations and individuals in Vancouver enthusiastically supported the program. Significantly, their response represented the beginnings of the social housing movement that peaked in the 1940s when veterans, labour, women, and others in the community obtained substantial improvements in housing. Finally, after seventy years, a large number of Better Housing Scheme bungalows have survived the more recent onslaught of "Vancouver specials" and "monster houses" and still shelter families in the city's older suburbs. In diverse ways, then, the Better Housing experience both retarded and advanced the cause of housing in Vancouver.

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Canada in Ottawa. The paper is dedicated to the memory of my friend and colleague, Elizabeth Lees.

### **Notes**

- 1 A. E. Jones, *The Beginnings of Canadian Government Housing Policy, 1918–1924* (Carleton University, Centre for Social Welfare Studies, Occasional Paper no. 1/78, [1978]); John C. Bacher, “Keeping to the Private Market: The Evolution of Canadian Housing Policy, 1900–1949” (unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, McMaster University, 1985), 71–98; Michael Simpson, *Thomas Adams and the Modern Planning Movement: Britain, Canada and the United States, 1900–1940* (London, 1985), 94–99, 105–8; and Michael Doucet and John Weaver, *Housing the North American City* (Montreal, 1991), 291–92. For “sting”, see, *Vancouver Sun*, 9 October 1937, 14.
- 2 Jones, 6–7, 10. For veterans’ activities in general at this time, see, Desmond Morton and Glenn Wright, *Winning the Second Battle: Canadian Veterans and the Return to Civilian Life, 1915–1930* (Toronto, 1987).
- 3 “Proceedings of the Conference between the Government of Canada and the Provincial Governments at Ottawa, November, 1918,” in *Dominion Provincial and Interprovincial Conferences from 1887 to 1926* (Ottawa, 1951), 101, 103.
- 4 National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC), RG 19, Department of Finance Records, vol. 705, file 203–1, P. C. 2997, 3 December 1918. See also, Canada, Privy Council, *Housing Project of Federal Government: Orders in Council* (Ottawa, 1919), for national orders in council mentioned in this and subsequent notes.
- 5 NAC, RG 19, vol. 705, file 203–1, P. C. 3067, 12 December 1918.
- 6 *Ibid.*, P. C. 374, 20 February 1919.
- 7 Jones, 12–14.
- 8 Canada, Royal Commission on Industrial Relations [T. G. Mathers, Chairman], *Report of Commission*, printed as supplement to *Labour Gazette*, 19 (July 1919), 6, 13, 19.
- 9 Mark Swenarton, *Homes Fit for Heroes: The Politics and Architecture of Early State Housing in Britain* (London, 1981), 189–96.
- 10 Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931; Census Monograph No. 8: Housing in Canada* (Ottawa, 1941), 23.
- 11 Jones, 40–41; and Swenarton, 192.
- 12 Jean Barman, *The West beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto, 1991), 219–24; Patricia E. Roy, *Vancouver: An Illustrated History* (Toronto, 1980), 93–95; *idem*, “Vancouver: ‘The Mecca of the Unemployed,’ 1907–1929,” in *Town and Country: Aspects of Western Canadian Urban Development*, ed. A. F. J. Artibise (Canadian Plains Studies, no. 10; Regina, 1981), 393–413; *Working Lives: Vancouver, 1886–1986*, comp. by the Working Lives Collective (Vancouver, 1989), 169, 171, 173; and Elizabeth Lees, “Problems of Pacification: Veterans’ Groups in Vancouver, 1919–1922” (unpublished M. A. Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1983).
- 13 City of Vancouver Archives [hereafter CVA], Health Department Records, 145-C-1, file [entitled] Archival File Re Housing, Lodging Houses, “Report of Housing Conditions Existing in the West End of Vancouver, B. C. [and Lists Nos. 1 and 2],” 30 September 1920, “Elaboration of Sheet No. 1,” November 1920, and “Elaboration of List No. 2,” n. d., and M. S. P. Ellis to F. T. Underhill, 28 April 1922.
- 14 CVA, Office of the City Clerk Records, 13-E-4, file [entitled] Housing Committee, 1919, J. E. Elkins to Mayor Gale, 21 March 1919. See also, *Sun*, 9 November 1919, 3; and NAC, RG 33/95, Royal Commission on Industrial Relations [Mathers Commission] Records, 1919, M-1980, 260, 535–36 (microfilmed).
- 15 NAC, RG 33/95, M-1980, 259–60. The old Hotel Vancouver was located at Georgia and Granville; it is not to be confused with the present hotel.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 469–70.
- 17 *Sun*, 18 July 1919, 1. For more on the American “Own Your Home” campaign, see, Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (New York, 1981), 193–214.
- 18 *Sun*, 31 July 1920, 6.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 25 March 1919, 1, 9, and 4 November 1919, 4.
- 20 British Columbia, Statutes, 9 George V, Chapter 8.
- 21 NAC, RG 19, vol. 712, file 203–3, J. D. MacLean to T. Adams, 29 April 1919, “General Housing Scheme of the Province of British Columbia,” and P. C. 907, 1 May 1919.
- 22 *Ibid.*, Telegram from John Hart to minister of finance, 27 May 1919, and Executive Council Order 810, 19 June 1919.
- 23 *Ibid.*, vol. 705, file 203–1, “Advances to Provinces under Housing Act, Dec. 12, 1923,” 15 December 1923.
- 24 Jones, 23.
- 25 CVA, City Clerk’s Records, 13-E-5, file [entitled] Soldiers, 1919, “Memorandum of Agreement,” [22 May 1919].
- 26 *Ibid.*, 13-E-4, file [entitled] Housing Committee, 1919, Elkins to Gale, and G. D. Ireland to Elkins, 21 March 1919; and *Sun*, 15 March 1919, 13, and 25 March 1919, 1, 9.
- 27 See also, British Columbia Archives and Records Service, GR 441, Premiers’ Records, vol. 208, file 76, president, Great War Veterans’ Association, Point Grey Branch, to John Oliver, 27 March 1920.
- 28 CVA, City Clerk’s Records, 13-E-5, file [entitled] Soldiers, 1919, “Rules and Regulations Governing the Acquiring of Land and the Building of [Dwellings] for Returned Soldiers.” See also, *ibid.*, for the indenture entered into between the mortgagor and the City of Vancouver; and *ibid.*, 13-F-4, file [entitled] City Comptroller, 1921, for examples of applications for allotment under the Better Housing Scheme. The civic officials were the city’s solicitor (or his assistant), accountant, and building inspector.
- 29 Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931* (Ottawa, 1935), vol. 5, table 12, 25. The average annual earnings of \$1,161 for a Vancouver male wage-earner between 25 and 49 years in 1920–1921 were much less than \$3,000.
- 30 Data about individual Better Housing Scheme homes and mortgagors was collected from CVA, Finance Department Records, 97-D-3, Better Housing Scheme Ledger Account, 1924–1925, 113-A-15, Better Housing Scheme Ledger Account, 1920–1923, and 115-E-2, Soldiers Housing Accounts, 1920. We know very little about which contractors built the houses in the City of Vancouver. The ledgers give the names of contractors only for South Vancouver.
- 31 B. C. Legislative Assembly, *Sessional Papers*, 1920, “Report of the Superintendent of British Columbia Soldier Settlement,” G13; and *ibid.*, 1921, “Report of the Superintendent of British Columbia Soldier Settlement,” G12.
- 32 *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 16 January 1919, 11.
- 33 *Sessional Papers*, 1920, “Report of the Superintendent of British Columbia Soldier Settlement,” G12–15; and *ibid.*, 1919–1920, Report of the Supervising Architect, D22. See also, Robin Fisher,

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- Duff Pattullo of British Columbia (Toronto, 1991), 138.
34. CVA, Finance Department Records, 93-C-5, file 13, F. Jones to C. A. Dunning, 25 March 1937; and *ibid.*, 93-F-7, file 1, W. L. Woodford to F. Jones, 20 January 1937. To date, the financial records for the ten homes built by the provincial government are unavailable.
35. Canada, Parliament, House of Commons, Special Committee on Housing, *Minutes of Proceedings*, no. 3, 57–71, and no. 10, 331–34. For more on Lindenlea, see, Jill Delaney, “The Garden Suburb of Lindenlea, Ottawa: A Model Project for the First Federal Housing Policy, 1918–24,” *Urban History Review/Revue d’histoire urbaine* [hereafter *UHR*] 19 (February 1991), 151–65.
36. *Housing Monograph No. 8*, 33; Canada, Advisory Committee on Reconstruction, Subcommittee on Housing and Community Planning [chaired by C. A. Curtis], *Final Report of the Subcommittee, March 24, 1944* (Ottawa, 1944), 25; and A. E. Grauer, *Housing: A Study Prepared for the Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations* (Ottawa, 1939), 35–38. For Winnipeg’s scheme, see, Grauer, 36.
37. Jones, 41–43.
38. Simpson, 105–08.
39. Doucet and Weaver, 291–92.
40. For the cheapness of many homes built under the national program, see, *ibid.* For more on Vancouver’s “cottages,” see, Deryck W. Holdsworth, “Cottages and Castles for Vancouver Home-Seekers,” in *Vancouver Past: Essays in Social History*, ed. R. A. J. McDonald and Jean Barman (Vancouver, 1986), 11–32. See also, *Sun*, 26 October 1919, 8. While the City tightly regulated the construction process, it apparently did not provide plans for homes; every house financed under its scheme seems to have cost a different amount. At Lindenlea, while the house types resembled contemporary Ontario styles, Adams imposed a garden suburb style on the scheme’s site planning; see, Delaney, 159, 162.
41. CVA, City Clerk’s Records, 13-E-2, file [entitled] Building Inspector, 1919, A. J. Bird to the mayor and council, 29 December 1919.
42. In 1920, 58 of 338 new homes built in the City of Vancouver were Better Housing Scheme units; see, the ledgers listed in n30 and City of Vancouver, *Financial Statements and Annual Reports*, 1924, 101.
43. Jill Wade, “‘Citizens in Action’: Local Activism and National Housing Programs, Vancouver, 1919–1950” (unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1991), 18–45.
44. Using Ontario Street as the dividing line, east side houses numbered 90 and west side ones 63.
45. Blue-collar workers included, among others, firemen, lumbergraders, electricians, carpenters, policemen, labourers, cranemen, masons, plasterers, drivers, cooks, and shipyard workers. White-collar workers were, for instance, draftsmen, clerks, salespersons, customs officers, school nurses, stenographers, and bookkeepers. The professional group was comprised of clergymen, barristers, physicians, engineers, druggists, and veterinary surgeons. Businessmen were, for example, garage proprietors, bakers with their own shops, newspaper publishers, building contractors, realtors, and suppliers. Agricultural workers raised poultry, farmed, or operated fruit ranches. Government employees included clerks at the post office, customs office, and Soldier Civil Re-establishment Board, a veterinary surgeon with the British Columbia civil service, an accountant with the provincial liquor warehouse, and clerks, policemen, labourers, firemen, janitors, and school nurses with all three municipalities. The occupations of the residents did not appear to have become any more middle class over the years. When the City was able to sell some homes at the beginning of World War II, many of the purchasers worked in war industry as boiler-makers or shipyard workers. The CVA’s British Columbia directories for Vancouver between 1919 and 1930 yielded the agreement holders’ occupations.
46. For more information about Underhill, see, Margaret W. Andrews, “The Emergence of Bureaucracy: The Vancouver Health Department, 1886–1914,” *Journal of Urban History* [hereafter *JUH*] 12 (February 1986), 131–56.
47. *Sun*, 20 February 1919, 4; and Canadian Reconstruction Association, Women’s Department, *Better Houses for Canadians* (Toronto, 1919).
48. CVA, City Clerk’s Records, 13-E-2, file [entitled] Building Inspector, 1919, A. J. Bird to chairman, building committee, 3 November 1919; *ibid.*, 13-E-6, file [entitled] City Comptroller (2), 1920, Bird to A. J. Pilkington, 22 September 1920; *ibid.*, 13-E-6, file [entitled] Council Minutes (1), 1920, minutes, 9 February 1920; and *ibid.*, 13-F-3, file [entitled] Building Inspector, 1921, Bird to Pilkington, 25 November 1921. Andrew Haggart, a veteran who later became building inspector and who owned a Better Housing Scheme home, joined the Building Department at this time.
49. *Ibid.*, City Clerk’s Records, 13-E-2, file [entitled] City Comptroller, 1919, G. F. Baldwin to finance committee, 29 October 1919; and *ibid.*, 13-E-5, file [entitled] Soldiers, 1919, “Memorandum of Changes in the Rules and Regulations under the Better Housing Scheme Requested by Allotment Committee.”
50. In addition to the 153 houses built in Vancouver, South Vancouver, and Point Grey and the 10 homes erected in South Vancouver by the provincial government, about 59 other Better Housing units were located in Burnaby, New Westminister, North Vancouver City, Port Coquitlam, and West Vancouver; see, *Sessional Papers*, 1921, “Report of the Superintendent of British Columbia Soldier Settlement,” G12.
51. Roy, “Vancouver: ‘The Mecca of the Unemployed,’” 408–09.
52. *Sun*, 4 September 1919, 2, and 4 November 1919, 4. See also, CVA, City Clerk’s Records, 13-E-4, file [entitled] City Comptroller, 1921, W. Butterworth to [City of Vancouver], 14 May 1921; and *ibid.*, 14-A-1, file [entitled] Soldiers, 1921, W. H. Roberts to the mayor, 14 July 1921, Reg A. Webb to W. R. Owen, 14 July 1921, [representation from Amputation Club of British Columbia], 14 July 1921, and numerous letters from individual veterans to the city, 15–16 July 1921.
53. Jones, 56, n95.
54. For the growth of Vancouver’s social housing movement, see, Wade, “Citizens in Action.”
55. For the innovative aspects of the 1935 Dominion Housing Act, see, Robert B. Bryce, *Maturing in Hard Times: Canada’s Department of Finance through the Great Depression* (Kingston, 1986), 165–66; and J. David Hulchanski, “The 1935 Dominion Housing Act: Setting the Stage for a Permanent Federal Presence in Canada’s Housing Sector,” *UHR* 15 (June 1986), 27.
56. The data on the program’s finances is compiled from the CVA’s Better Housing Scheme ledgers and account books. In quitclaiming, the mortgagor renounced all claim to the property and gave it up to the city.
57. Doucet and Weaver, 291–92.
58. Special Committee on Housing, *Minutes*, no. 4, 101.
59. CVA, Finance Department Records, 93-F-7, file 1, W. L. Woodford to A. Wells Gray, 7 January 1937. In the 1930s, the city counted 151 Better

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- Housing properties whereas the ledgers and account books contain records of 153 properties extending from 1919 to the 1940s.
60. CVA, Mayor's Office Records, 34-B-5, file [entitled] Housing Act, 1942, G. C. Miller and others to finance committee, 26 June 1942. See also, City Solicitor Records, 115-C-2, file 17, Woodford to A. E. Lord, 9 March 1940.
  61. CVA, City Clerk's Records, 27-C-1, file 4, "[Brief] Re Better Housing," 5 August 1935; *ibid.*, Finance Department Records, 93-F-7, file 1, W. L. Woodford to A. W. Grey, 7 January 1937, and F. Jones and D. E. McTaggart to Dunning, 25 March 1937; and NAC, RG 19, vol. 712, file 203-3, McTaggart to Dunning, 2 April 1937, A. MacInnis to Dunning, 9 April 1937, Dunning to McTaggart, 12 April 1937, and Dunning to MacInnis, 12 April 1937. See also, CVA, Finance Department Records, 93-F-7, file 13, "Re Better Housing," [1937], and file 1, F. Jones to C. A. Dunning, 25 March 1937. For the soldiers' land settlement scheme, see, Paul M. Koroscil, "Soldiers, Settlement and Development in British Columbia, 1915-1930," *BC Studies* 54 (Summer 1982), 63-87.
  62. CVA, Mayor's Office Records, 34-B-5, file [entitled] Housing Act, 1942, Miller to finance committee, 26 June 1942.
  63. For the insecurity of working-class home ownership in the United States, see, Matthew Edel, Elliott D. Sclar, and Daniel Luria, *Shaky Palaces: Homeownership and Mobility in Boston's Suburbanization* (New York, 1984). For those who have noted the singular extent of workers' suburbs in Vancouver and North America, see, Holdsworth's article and Richard Harris, "American Suburbs: A Sketch of a New Interpretation," *JUH* 15 (November 1988), 98-103.
  64. Canada, Statutes, 2 George VI, Chapter 49.
  65. CVA, Clippings File, M4289-1, 29 June 1937; and *Sun*, 12 January 1939, 1.
  66. *Sun*, 9 October 1937, 14.
  67. CVA, City Clerk's Records, 17-C-6, file 16, "Corporation of the City of Nanaimo, Better Housing Scheme," 6 February 1939.
  68. Jill Wade, "Wartime Housing Limited, 1941-1947: Canadian Housing Policy at the Crossroads," *UHR* 15 (June 1986), 50, 52.
  69. CVA, Mayor's Office Records, 34-C-7, file [entitled] Housing, 1947, acting mayor to E. Litchfield, 23 April 1947.
  70. Jill Wade, "'A Palace for the Public:' Housing Reform and the 1946 Occupation of the Old Hotel Vancouver," in *Vancouver Past: Essays in Social History*, ed. R. A. J. McDonald and Jean Barman (Vancouver, 1986), 288-310; and *idem*, "'Citizens in Action,'" 318-27.
  71. *Sun*, 1 April 1947, 9, and 27 May 1947, 9.
  72. City of Vancouver, Legal Department, [Agreement between the City of Vancouver and H. M. the King in Right of Canada Represented by War-time Housing Limited], 31 December 1947.
  73. Canada, Statutes, 13 George VI, Chapter 30; and British Columbia, Statutes, 14 George VI, Chapter 31.