Culture

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Matthew Cooper et Margaret Rodman

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Résumé de l'article

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Housing And The Discursive Construction Of Community

Matthew Cooper * and Margaret Rodman **

In response to perceived housing problems, many housing cooperatives have been organized in Canada in the last 20 years. These co–ops are resident managed, nonprofit and nonequity. One of their chief goals is the creation of community. A discourse of cooperation frames co–op discussions on contentious issues, e.g. selection of new members, allocation of space, granting of subsidies to low–income members, and member participation. Yet the demands of economic viability, legal and administrative regulation, and the need for capable, active members force co–ops to make difficult practical decisions. This paper investigates how such issues help shape emerging local discourses of community identity.

Pour faire face à ce qui paraissait être des problèmes de logement, de nombreuses coopératives d'habitations ont été mises sur pied dans les vingt dernières années. Ces coopératives sont à but non-lucratif et sont gérées par des résidents qui n'en sont pas propriétaires. Leur but principal est de créer un esprit de communauté. Ce même esprit de coopération anime les discussions portant sur des sujets de discorde tels que la sélection de nouveaux membres, la répartition de l'espace, l'allocation de subventions aux membres à faibles revenus, et la répartition des tâches. Mais les contraintes économiques, les règlements légaux et administratifs et le besoin d'attirer des membres actifs et compétents forcent les coopératives à prendre de difficiles décisions d'ordre pratique. Cet article analyse l'impact de ces questions sur l'émergence de discours liés à l'identité communautaire.

Introduction

In Canada, many urban areas suffer from housing problems. For the most part, such problems revolve around two general issues: affordability and poorly met needs. Canadian housing policy generally has favoured private sector solutions to housing problems. Neither the principle of housing as a commodity like any other nor the myth of market efficiency has been challenged (Fallis, 1994). But the market often has failed to provide for low and many middle income households. Nonprofit cooperative housing has emerged as one solution to this problem. But cooperatives also have larger goals. Through collective action they aim to help satisfy some of the noneconomic needs people have, e.g., for greater control over their residential space and for community.

The two Toronto housing cooperatives on which we focus in this paper, Windward and Harbourside Co–ops, were built in response to such housing problems (Rodman and Cooper, 1989). The co–ops sought to provide alternative housing that was affordable for low and middle income residents. As well, they addressed some of the needs poorly met by conventional rental hous-

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ing, including the need for housing appropriate to nontraditional households — especially single parents and households in which one or more members had a disability. Needs for security, control, sociability, and a sense of community also often were not adequately served by ordinary housing.

This paper is concerned with the processes through which community identity emerged in these co–ops.[1] One of the most difficult of co–op goals to reach, especially in large metropolitan settings, is the development of a sense of community. Most new co–ops attempt to take strangers and make them committed members of a community. In the cases we have studied, the context is a large metropolitan area. The new neighbours, like other urbanites, came from many different backgrounds and had a wide variety of other ties and interests besides the co–op in which they lived. It is important to bear in mind that these co–ops were not utopian societies or communes nor were they isolated. Rather, they were essentially single–purpose associations providing housing in a large city for people who initially were strangers and had many other ties and interests.

Co–op policies on a number of contentious issues, e.g., selection of new members, allocation of space, granting of subsidies to low–income members, and member participation, are based on cooperative principles and expressed in language that emphasizes cooperation and community. Yet the demands of legal and administrative regulation, economic viability, and the need for capable, active members create contexts in which co–ops must make difficult practical decisions. Such decision making often involves implicit debates about community identity and how it is to be talked about. Crucial questions lie just below the surface in these cases: Who are we? Whom should we include in (and, of course, exclude from) our community? What are we like as a community? How do we differ from others? What should we become? Discussions about the practical problems of running co–ops create contexts in which different conceptions of community identity are constructed. Often such discussions produce trade–offs, sometimes winners and losers. They lead to practical outcomes that influence future discussions and the ongoing project of community construction.

Thus, this paper is centrally concerned with the discourses of community that emerged in these cooperatives and how they may have been impli-

cated in the development of a sense of community. Following the traditions established by Toennies, Durkheim, Simmel, Weber, and the Chicago sociologists, the literature on communities in North America generally has defined 'community' in terms of shared territory, common ties, and social interaction. As Lyon (1987: 5–6) points out, however, even if we accept such definitions "the type and degree of these three elements remain nebulous." That is, much of the discussion concerns whether or to what degree communities exist in rapidly changing North American society. The changing nature of such communities and the consequences of those changes for society more generally remain important topics (e.g., Suttles 1972; Fishman, 1987). However, in this paper we are not concerned with whether or to what degree these housing groups did "in fact" constitute communities. Nor are we concerned with development of social scientific discourses on these phenomena. Somewhat like Cohen (1985: 38), we seek an understanding of community by trying to capture a sense of people's experience and of the meanings of community they create. Thus, we focus on the emerging discourses of community employed by residents as they attempted to define and construct their own communities. We see these discourses as providing rhetorical means with which people try to advance their projects. Through analysis of these discourses we hope to understand better the diversity of meanings of community as well as the kinds of circumstances and processes through which they were created.

Discourses of community, in our usage, incorporate fundamental presuppositions about human beings and groups; often they are a component of spatial discourses that are critical for everyday conceptions of self and the world. As the geographer Rob Shields argues (1991: 46), "Spatial suppositions ... ground a cultural edifice of perceptions and prejudices, images of places and regions, and ... establish performative codes which relate practices and modes of social interaction to appropriate settings." Spatial discourses encompass linguistic and nonlinguistic images, figures of speech, judgments, design standards, plans, descriptions of imaginary places and events, experience and feeling.

Housing Cooperatives In Canada

Most contemporary Canadian housing co–ops are nonprofit, "continuing" cooperatives, that is ones in which active members reside in and jointly

own the entire project but have no individual equity or shareholding. In Canada, the principles of broad access and social mixing have been important in the development of the cooperative housing movement. Co–op housing activists argue that including a broad cross–section of society in housing cooperatives provides benefits both to the residents and to society at large. Yet this commitment to draw together diverse people both provides the possibility of forming communities and the greatest challenge to achieving it.

Housing co–ops of different types had been developed since the 1930s in Canada. But it was only in 1973, as a result of pressure from the cooperative movement, churches, labour, tenant associations, and other community organizations, that the federal government instituted a nonprofit cooperative housing program. The program's basic rationale was to provide modest, affordable housing at minimum cost for low and moderate income households. As Dreier and Hulchanski (1993) point out, development of the federal nonprofit and cooperative housing program represented a major policy shift. Increasingly, the delivery of social housing came to depend on municipal and private nonprofit organizations rather than the state. The co–ops we discuss in this paper were developed under an amended program launched in 1978. Federal support for new social housing ended in 1992, as a result of cutbacks to federal social program spending. Ontario introduced a provincial co–op housing program in 1986, however, under which units continue to be produced (Fallis, 1994). During the 1980s, co–ops accounted for from twenty–seven to fifty–nine per cent of social housing starts (Selby and Wilson, 1988). Under the several federal and provincial programs, the number of co–ops in the greater Toronto area grew from ten in 1975, to seventy–four in 1984, and more than 120 today. In 1975 there were approximately 800 units of cooperative housing; by the early 1990s the total exceeded 11,000.

Nonprofit housing co–ops are private organizations regulated by provincial legislation on cooperatives. The 1978 federal nonprofit and cooperative housing program involved a mix of direct funding and loan guarantees (CMHC, 1981, 1983). Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), a federal agency, guaranteed thirty–five year mortgage loans obtained from private lenders for 100 per cent of capital costs. It required that projects house people of different income levels, some of whom would pay rents geared to their incomes. Co–ops in most provinces are prohibited by law from converting their property to simple private or condominium forms of ownership.

For each co–op, CMHC provided a total grant based on the difference between the monthly amortization payment on the mortgage at market rates and what the payment would have been at two per cent (up to a maximum of $500 per unit). Rents were set at the low end of market rents for the area.

Two sorts of subsidies became available to co–ops. CMHC paid the difference between the true economic rent and actual rents to the co–op as a general subsidy.[2] Thus, even though most members paid market rents, all members of the co–op indirectly were subsidized. Money left over (that is, the difference between the total grant and the general subsidy) formed a pool to provide direct rental subsidies to at least fifteen per cent (later twenty–five per cent) of member households. For these households rents were subsidized down to twenty–five to thirty per cent of income. Each co–op administered its own subsidy pool.

Harbourside And Windward Housing Co–Ops

We conducted ethnographic research at Windward and Harbourside Co–ops from January, 1987 until November, 1989. The membership and boards of directors gave us permission to conduct the study and to have access to demographic data. Our research design was longitudinal. We followed the two new co–ops for their first three years, until they could be considered reasonably well established. The research was based mainly on intensive interviewing, as well as observation and the collection of co–op documents, newsletters, photographs. In September 1989 we conducted a mail survey of all members of both co–ops. A questionnaire was designed with input from the boards of directors, several co–op members, and staff. At both co–ops, committees concerned with trying to increase the level of member involvement assisted us in follow–ups. We analyzed the data statistically and provided a summary to each co–op in November 1989.

Harbourside and Windward Co–ops are located near downtown Toronto in a redeveloped waterfront area known as Harbourfront. The land they occupy is some of the most valuable and most contested in Toronto (Cooper, 1993). Affordable

housing was required to be part of the redevelopment. However, it occupies the western end of the redevelopment area, far from the trendy hotels, condominiums, marinas, and upscale shopping that make up the rest of Harbourfront. By the end of our three–year study in 1989, the co–ops' immediate neighbourhood on Bathurst Quay also contained a park, two other co–ops, public housing owned by the City of Toronto, a disused grain elevator, a marina, a clothing factory, a parking lot for people taking the ferry to Toronto Island Airport, and empty lots awaiting development.

As noted above, each co–op unit was indirectly subsidized by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation through a grant that reduced the co–op's monthly mortgage interest payments. CMHC set the initial rents for the co–ops at the low end of the range of market rents for similar units in the area, which however contained many expensive developments. These rents are called "housing charges" in co–ops and include utilities. Members paid one month's rent as a security deposit; there was no other contribution or equity investment. The co–ops, as corporations, owned the property. Members individually had no shareholding or equity interest in it.

CMHC required each co–op to set aside a minimum of twenty–five per cent of the units for people in "core housing need," that is, for people who otherwise would have to spend more than thirty per cent of their income on housing. Such households received direct subsidies administered by the co–ops themselves. Over time, the amount of the grant for reduction of mortgage interest payments declines, while the amount available for individual subsidies increases proportionately. By 1989, forty to fifty per cent of the members of each co–op received direct subsidies.

Windward Co–op consists of an eight–storey apartment building flanked by three–storey stacked townhouses, providing in all 101 residential units. It opened at the end of 1986. The co–op had a total population of roughly 250, of whom about 160 were members. Harbourside Co–op opened in mid–1986. It contains fifty–four units, two–storey townhouses with one floor of apartments above, built around three sides of a courtyard. It had roughly eighty members, about 140 residents in total.

Neither Windward nor Harbourside was a physical landmark. However, Windward did stand out socially: the first housing cooperative in Toronto that was fully accessible for people with mobility impairments. Twenty five per cent of the co–op's units were occupied by at least one person with a disability. Windward was designed expressly to integrate able bodied people and those with disabilities. People confined to wheelchairs could live wherever they liked rather than having to select from a limited number of accessible units and could use all the building's facilities. Harbourside was developed to house a broad range of households. Unlike some housing co–ops, it was not developed by an interest group with a particular ethnic or other focus. Both projects were quite diverse socially and economically, for example, containing people from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean, as well as many parts of Canada. Few members of the co–ops knew each other prior to moving in.

Over the three years of our study, from twenty–five to almost fifty per cent of member households paid housing charges geared to their income. Understandably, some of those receiving subsidies were single parents and, at Windward, people with disabilities. Yet, for example, when a young professional couple without children at Windward both suddenly lost their jobs they appreciated receiving an emergency subsidy. Probably because of their downtown waterfront location, both co–ops attracted a large number of middle and upper middle–income professionals who paid full market rents (which ranged up to $1300 per month at Windward in 1989). For many of these professionals, however, location was not the only factor that attracted them to these co–ops. Some saw it as part of a ideological commitment to bring about social change. Even those without such commitments often hoped to be able to create a sense of community they felt was lacking in the other places they had lived.

More Than Just A Place To Live?

George Melnyk (1985: 28–30, 102) has pointed out that all cooperatives have both idealistic goals of "ending exploitative relations through self–help group action" and pragmatic goals of successful economic activity. The interplay between idealistic social and pragmatic economic goals has propelled and shaped the development of co–ops and the cooperative movement in Canada. A discourse of cooperation framed the development of Harbourside and Windward Co–ops, one that had been enunciated by activists in the broader co–op hous-

ing movement. Alexander Laidlaw (1977: 48), one of the founders of the Canadian cooperative housing movement, spelled out its main goals: collective ownership, adequate housing at cost, nonprofit operation, democratic control, and creation of community. Other goals often include the support and empowerment of disadvantaged members of the co–op, as well as growth of the broader cooperative sector.

To the people we interviewed, the economic benefits of co–op housing were attractive (bearing in mind, of course, that residents had no equity in the projects). We found, as Ley (1993) did in a study of Vancouver housing co–ops, that for some members commitment to socialist or social democratic ideals was significant. But, overall, the use values the co–op provided seemed most important. These included the essential elements of shelter, safety, and location but, more significantly for this paper, what housing means to people as "home" and as a place connected to a community. Such values obviously differ to some extent from person to person. Conflicts arose as co–op members created and defended different use values associated with their housing. They had to negotiate with each other, persuade, achieve consensus, or take a vote. Inevitably, there were both winners and losers.

Many members of Harbourside and Windward talked of the creation of community as an important goal, although most did not seem especially concerned with community formation in any general or abstract sense. There were other members, however, who did not look to the co–op for community at all. For them the co–ops' chief goals should have been simply to provide adequate, affordable housing.

Among those members who did think that creation of community was an important goal, however, there were many differences as to what community meant and how it could be fostered. The meaning and importance of community for co–op members were contested and seemed unstable, subject to changing circumstances, personal experience, and community discussion. When reflecting on the co–op as a community, three members discussed it in very different ways that may stand for the range of opinion we found. We label their perspectives the traditional, the social democratic, and, for want of a better term, the new age. For the traditionalist the co–op should be like a small village or neighbourhood. The traditionalist asked little of a community except that its mem-

bers should come to know and be concerned about each other through long term, informal interaction. Members would become involved with each other but community would remain amorphous and essentially undefined. A sense of community would emerge out of the minor practices of everyday life. This perspective did not necessarily entail any particular changes on the part of individuals or in the organization of the co–op.

However, the other two views focused precisely on these other factors as crucial elements. The social democratic perspective focused on organizational development. A former coordinator (i.e., a hired manager and organizer) of Windward Co–op argued that there are important differences between co–ops and other forms of housing tenure. One has to do with the sense of community that develops because members come to feel they share responsibility for the place. The sense of responsibility, he felt, translated into organizational structure, i.e., the committees necessary to run the co–op. He felt that members came to know each other through participation on committees and thus became willing to take part more generally in the co–op. For him, organizational development was crucial, not as an end in itself, but because it helped a sense of community to grow.

An entirely different perspective was put forward by a former president of Windward Co–op. A consultant on organizational development, he found the social democratic view overly narrow.

> People don't get motivated by formal structure . . . . Organizations, I think, are fundamentally pathological. Structure . . . disorients . . . . People end up saying things because of their position. They say things to other people that human beings would never say to each other.

Quoting from Peck (1988), he argued that communities are groups of people:

> who have learned to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment to rejoice together, mourn together, and to delight in each other, make others' conditions [their] own.

> [Thus] Community–building begins at home. In our own hearts and minds we must build a community based on paradox: that includes the truth of our strengths as well as our weaknesses; our wholeness as well as our brokenness; our independence and our interdependence.

In this perspective people must give up structure and self. They must encourage chaos, out of which true community will emerge. Involvement of members will contribute to community if individuals relate to each other as whole persons, not segmentally. Thus, at the extreme, community formation depends on individual, not organizational, change.

We can epitomize these three perspectives as making the creation of community dependent upon experience, organization, and the self. Each implies a larger narrative that proposes an imaginative placement of the co–op in society. For the traditonalist, the narrative turns on nostalgia and the desire somehow to recreate the remembered neighbourhood of one's childhood. The social democratic perspective in the co–op is itself structured by the modernist discourse of progress through the application of reason to human affairs. More particularly, it expresses the Enlightenment hope that human beings can be improved by changing their environment. The new age perspective tells a story of loss, a secularized version of the Fall, the separation of the soul from God. But more like the Buddhist than the Christian version of this story, it makes redemption depend wholly on inner growth, enlightenment, and the giving up of self. The growth of community depends entirely on individual change. Thus, in the end the story is one of hope, a secular version of the mystical return of all beings to God.

Yet each of these discourses of community identity and formation emerged in the context of reflection. The first two were elaborated in interviews in which the speakers noted how pleasant, and how unusual, it was to reflect on the co–op in general. The third appeared in an article written for the co–op newsletter and was expanded upon in an interview with us. More commonly, however, discourses of community emerged or were implicit in discussions about practical concerns.

Administrative Regulation

In his historical study of changing uses of space in Swiss housing co–operatives, Roderick Lawrence (1986) showed that administrative regulation and surveillance has played a crucial role. Similarly, in considering Canadian housing co–ops, we too have pointed out the importance of this dimension (Cooper and Rodman, 1992). Co–ops are democratically governed by their resident members. Managerial decisions, as well as some of the actual management, are made by the co–op's board of directors, functional committees, and the general membership. As a legal corporation and property owner, the co–op in a sense is prior to its individual members. The latter have well–specified rights, privileges, and obligations which the co–op, as a corporation, must promote, respect, and oversee. Inevitably, decisions must be taken that affect the relations between members and the collectivity.

Consideration of such cases often turns on or implicates discourses of community. For example, during our study an important question that arose at Windward Co–op was whether the co–op provided members with a home or a unit? Note the difference: 'home', as many writers have argued, is a polysemic term whose richness and complexity makes it often expressive of people's deepest longings (e.g., C. Cooper, 1976; Hummon, 1989). 'Unit', on the other hand, has no such complexity or expressive potential. It implies the breakdown of a larger geometric whole into its constituent parts, i.e., similarity and interchangeability. No one dreams of their unit. Thus, to describe the places in which members lived as homes or units might have serious implications for the very nature of the community.

As members, residents were entitled to an apartment or townhouse whose size depended on the number, sex, and ages of people in their household. City bylaws generally define housing as suitable if it has sufficient usable space for a household of given size and composition. Legally, therefore, households may be under– or overhoused. But Canadian co–ops deal with this issue in different ways. All members have the right to be suitably housed and have security of tenure. Underhoused households generally must be given larger accommodation to comply with government requirements. Some co–ops allow members whose households have shrunk to remain in their original dwelling while others require such households to move to smaller quarters. This was a contentious issue at Windward Co–op. If the co–op provided members with homes then they need not move in such circumstances. But if all the member had a right to was a unit, then the member could be required to move within the co–op.

Several cases of this sort arose at Windward during our study. The grown–up children of one of the founding households moved out, leaving their parents with a three–bedroom, corner apartment

overlooking Lake Ontario. In another similar case, a couple's two children left home; the co–op put considerable pressure on the couple to move from their three– bedroom apartment. As well there was a series of family breakups and recombinings, all of which had implications for the co–op's allocation of space (Cooper and Rodman, 1992: 258–262).

In discussing these cases with us, Windward members talked mostly about the specifics. But they also talked about how these cases reflected the nature of the co–op community and how it differed from the surrounding society. One member, who later left the co–op over the overhousing issue, compared co–op living with single–family private housing. In the latter, he said, once you closed your door, the "macrocommunity" was shut out. In the co–op, however, the administrative regulation of space meant to him that the macrocommunity invaded the "microcommunity." That is, the boundaries between household and community were different because the co–op had the administrative power to allocate space and regulate its use. Surveillance could become an important instrument of this regulatory apparatus. The grown children of the couple mentioned above were listed as living in their parent's apartment. But since they rarely were seen, did they actually live there?

An older woman reflected on how these policies could affect people's level of committment and willingness to care for the property. Her husband was quite ill. She feared that if he died the co–op would make her move to a smaller apartment. "What's the incentive in that situation to care for your apartment? Like everyday I clean the sink. You put a lot of money into drapes or whatever. It's like a home, you know." Her use of the word "like" flagged a certain ambiguity and the ambivalence she evidently felt.

Yet, the other side of this discursive coin was the co–op's rhetoric of obligation to its members. By virtue of membership, they were entitled to suitable housing. As a co–op, the group had obligations that were different from those of other providers of housing in the surrounding society. Cities are not obliged legally to house their residents. Nor, beyond enforcing maximum density bylaws, do they concern themselves with whether some people have too much space. Owners of market housing, similarly, need not concern themselves if a single person buys or rents a four–bed-

room house. Thus, at Windward, the administratively regulated boundaries between household and collectivity were contested and unstable. Inevitably, discussions of these issues and the decisions that followed rested on but also helped to shape residents' sense of community identity.

Remaining Viable Economically

Some of the most important practical issues the co–ops had to deal with were financial. Each co–op was a self–managing, private nonprofit corporation, although it was supported by government loan guarantees and/or grants. Thus, if finances were not managed properly, serious difficulties could arise. Discussion of such issues, however, sometimes implicated community identity. In this section, we will describe first a case that illustrates how discussions about the co–op's subsidy policy raised questions about what the co–op was like as a community. Then, we will describe a budget dispute to show how it made members aware of other members' time perspectives and, thus, their apparent commitment to the co–op.

ADMINISTERING SUBSIDIES

At Harbourside Co–op subsidy policies were endlessly and hotly debated. The coordinator administered subsidy funds on a day–to–day basis. But setting subsidy policy was the members' job. One debate concerned the practical question of how members could prove that they qualified for a subsidy. How could they demonstrate that without a subsidy they would have to pay more than thirty per cent of their gross household income in rent?

A simple answer, to which Harbourside ultimately turned, was for households requesting subsidies to submit their personal income tax assessment notices to the coordinator. Each taxpayer receives one of these from Revenue Canada after his or her tax return has been processed. It confirms that the return is correct or else that it needs revision.

But this answer was not so simple as it seemed. In fact, it raised many difficult questions. Whose income should be considered? For example, should it include the income of regular "guests" of single–women members? What income should be counted? Is any request for proof an invasion of members' privacy? And is a tax statement enough proof to prevent abuses of the sys-

tem? These questions were further complicated at Harbourside by the co-op's small size. It was hard to discuss subsidy policy issues in the abstract there. Each question was coloured by the personalities and experiences of the particular individuals involved. Some members, for example, pointed to others' possessions and accused them of cheating.

By the end of our study, according to one of our informants, the board of directors had recognized that "we're never going to protect ourselves from the cheaters. So then we turned the policy around and looked at making it as equitable and as unobtrusive as we possibly could." Given the complexity and sensitivity of the issue, they found it hard to define a clear policy while minimizing conflict between those who were subsidized and those who were not. As the same member herself subsidized) pointed out to us, "It was a real challenge, to hand out money in as fair and unwelfare-like a way as possible. There is obviously a division in the co-op between who gets money and who doesn't. But [the co-op must] try to minimize that in terms of reporting income and baring your all." In short, for this member and many others with whom we spoke the co-op had to strive to create a community in which income differences did not entail differences in how members were treated. Yet all members had to have confidence that incomes, at least for those on subsidy, were accurately and honestly reported.

The lengthy subsidy policy debate raised members' consciousness about subsidy issues. It also raised issues of the nature of their community and how members of a community should behave towards each other. Harbourside Co-op, and the housing co-op sector generally, stressed the importance of mixed-income communities. Furthermore, they held that as part of the "third sector" i.e., in neither the private nor the state sector) co-ops must develop a more humane form of economic organization. As the Harbourside member quoted above said about the subsidy debate:

> If we haven't succeeded in developing a more humane way, we certainly succeeded in making all of us think about how inhumane [the system] really is. At least as a group we could acknowledge the strings attached to subsidies and to social welfare in general. I think it is important for people to think about that when they think about their neighbours on subsidy.

She thought that the debate had made members less likely to comment about new possessions

that people on subsidy had acquired. The debate over subsidy policy cut across lines of income difference. Everyone became more aware that all of them, whatever their income, were being subsidized through the mortgage interest reduction grant.

> So people are beginning to see that we're all in this together. They see that people on subsidy who are making their way in the world on some level — you know, if they're getting new things and stuff — aren't actually taking it out of this person's pocket who is not on subsidy.

Most of those who strongly disagreed with this characterization had moved out of Harbourside by the time we concluded our study. There were no more than four or five in all. These people shared the feeling that there was a strong sense of community in Harbourside but that they had no place in it. They felt that people on subsidy exploited the system, for example, taking in boarders and boyfriends, and lying about their incomes. Conflict over subsidy policy and related issues embittered these members sufficiently that they chose to leave.

A BUDGET DISPUTE

Each year a co-op's board of directors proposes a budget, which is then submitted to the membership at a general meeting for approval. At Harbourside Co-op, a dispute arose in 1988 over how much to increase housing charges in view of the co-op's continuing problems with building deficiencies. When Harbourside opened in 1986 there were many such deficiencies. Although most of these were remedied there continued to be problems that reflected the poor quality of the co-op's construction. Concerned about long term maintenance, the board of directors hired consultants to do a technical audit. The consultants recommended that the co-op put aside an additional $12,000 per year beyond the $15,000 per year required by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation as a reserve fund. To do this required an increase of eight to ten per cent in housing charges.

The board proposed a five per cent increase as a compromise from the original raise thought necessary. But at the general meeting many members became upset. They demanded the setting up of an ad hoc budget committee which, eventually, recommended a three per cent rise. In the end, members compromised on a four per cent increase.

Although a difference of one per cent meant only five to ten dollars per month for those paying full market housing charges and nothing for those receiving rental subsidies, the dispute was serious and bitter.

We have discussed several ways of trying to understand this dispute elsewhere (Cooper and Rodman, 1992: 255–257). Here we will suggest how discussion of this issue implicated community identity. The depth of feeling among Harbourside residents about the budget dispute was obvious. Many were disappointed and even exasperated to find how different their views and feelings were from those of their neighbours. For some, it had the quality of a revelatory moment. After several years of working to form a community albeit a partial one) of seemingly like–minded people they discovered the depths of their differences. Some members evidently felt so uncommitted they refused to spend an additional five dollars a month for the long term good of the co–op. Those who opposed the increase felt the proponents were asking them to subsidize the co–op's future which they did not expect to be part of) and felt that was unfair.

Several members sought to understand what was happening by trying to conceptualize the sociology of the co–op. For example, one member implicitly divided the co–op into the philosophically committed and those whose commitment rested on material grounds. She added that there was a third group: ambivalent people who thought of the co–op as being theirs and treated it as if it were a home they owned yet refused any long term committment to it. She compared this third group to homeowners who take good care of their property yet who intend to sell and move on in a few years.

Other residents analyzed the co–op into "professionals," who allegedly opposed the rent increase, and others. Our self–categorized nonprofessionals characterized the professionals as better educated, more experienced financially, and better able to argue their points in meetings, but also as more mobile and uncommitted to the co–op. Some co–op members tried to explain the sides members took in the dispute by conceptualizing the nature of committment to the co–op. They argued that commitment depended on people's time perspective, which itself varied with economic power. They tended to associate strong commitment to the co–op with weak economic power and a long time

perspective. Yet, they recognized that these dimensions did not always reinforce each other.

As became apparent, those who favoured the increase did so for different reasons. Some expected to reside at Harbourside for the foreseeable future because they were on subsidy and had few options. Others, both people on subsidy and some who could afford to buy a house, were committed ideologically and emotionally to co–ops and to this one in particular. Some of those who paid full rent did have only a short time perspective. If, for example, they were living in the co–op to save for a down payment on a house then they might not be concerned with what the co–op would be like ten or twenty years later.

Thus, in confronting these issues, co–op members raised questions about the nature of their community. Was it a humane one? Could its members trust each other? How could the co–op balance individual privacy and the needs of the community? At another level, the debate implicated difference. What were the significant social differences among co–op members? How could the co–op accommodate households at very different income levels? Could the co–op itself develop a community that was more humane than the surrounding society?

RECRUITING GOOD MEMBERS

One of the key features of Canadian housing co–ops is that members get to choose their own neighbours (Cooper and Rodman, 1992: Chap. 5). Initial member selection crucially shapes the character of a new co–op. Those selecting new members must bear in mind the differing implications of the roles that members play. To be a member is to be at once tenant, co–owner, and neighbour (Poulin, 1984: 21–22). A good tenant pays the rent on time and follows the rules prescribed for use of the property. A co–owner participates in management and takes decisions that affect the property's future disposition. A good neighbour must somehow integrate appropriately into the group.

Co–ops work out for themselves how to choose households whose members will meet these desiderata and how to deal with difficult cases. Usually, the founding board of directors of a co–op decides on a member selection policy, and establishes a committee to do the actual work. In recent years, however, consultants working for housing resource groups who have considerable experience in the co–op housing field have materi-

ally affected planning and implementing such policies.

Applicants were accepted into Windward and Harbourside Co–ops through a selection process which, while standardized to some extent, depended on selection committee members' assessments of who would make a good co–op resident. Successful applicants were those deemed likely to be financially responsible, willing participants in running the co–op, and good neighbours. At Windward, the apparent likelihood that applicants would participate in the co–op was especially important for committee members.

Selectors were gatekeepers who controlled access to one of contemporary society's most important consumption goods. However, selection decisions did not necessarily reveal a struggle between people positioned differently in terms of their relationship to the means of production or consumption. Selection committee members at Windward and Harbourside, as a group, did not differ in social class or range of incomes from applicants or in whether their housing was directly subsidized.

Yet member selection was complicated by several factors. One is that while these co ops sought harmony based on a sense of community or like mindedness among members, they were predicated on heterogeneity. They made new neighbours out of people who could afford to buy a home and those who could pay only a limited rent. At Windward, they attempted deliberately to integrate people with and without disabilities. The co–ops committed themselves to principles of openness and nondiscriminatory practice.

Another is that the process itself was fraught with ambiguity. The information available to the selection committee was partial and sometimes unclear. The criteria by which applicants were judged often were vague or difficult to apply. Committee members might sometimes have been biased. Selectors in making these decisions were trying to create mixed income residential communities that would work. After all, co–ops are self–managing; thus they need active, involved members as well as ones who can pay the housing charges.

Selectors recognized that difficult decisions often had to be made, ones that might appear to contradict the co–ops' commitment to egalitarianism, openness, and providing housing for those in need. For example, at Windward Co–op some applicants in great housing need were rejected because the committee thought them unlikely to participate. Often this conclusion followed from the applicant's lack of prior volunteer experience. Applicants who did not appear likely to take good care of their housing also were rejected. The committee tried to ascertain this by conducting selection interviews at applicant's homes. They interpreted the applicant's home as a system of signs that not only reflected but had shaped and continued to shape the applicant's character (see Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg–Halton, 1981). Other applicants who did not "sell" themselves in the selection interview were rejected. Committee members saw these people as being more concerned with the benefits of living in the co–op than with what they could contribute. However, it appeared that some of these rejected applicants were people who, because of poverty, lack of education, or living with a disability, had not had time for volunteer experience. Sometimes they were people who were living in poor circumstances beyond their control or who had not acquired the skills of self–presentation.

Yet one need not conclude that such decisions necessarily expressed simple conflict between ideology and practice. Committee discussions and reports often reflected members' awareness of the ambiguities and uncertainties of their task. The essential context was their attempt to imagine a community, one in which one's own access to and enjoyment of housing might conflict with the consequences of an open–door policy based entirely on need. People whose lives were in disarray and people who were not "house proud" potentially affected everyone's enjoyment of their housing. People who would not participate would make the burden of those who did that much greater. People who did not pay their rent put the whole co–op in danger.

Rejection decisions often revealed negotiation taking place over the meanings of the use values of housing. This became particularly clear because the exchange value of housing was not at issue here. No one was concerned about the resale value of his or her unit. Such decisions emphasized the degree to which the enjoyment of the use values of multiple housing depends on one's neighbours.

The dynamics and history of selection committees also influenced the selection process at both Windward and Harbourside. This was true

both within the selection committees themselves and between them and the boards of directors. For example, committee members developed tacit understandings among themselves that underlay their decisions. Rifts in the committee at Windward seriously affected its ability to work productively. Conflict between the committee and the board led to a stalemate for a time on acceptances.

Member selection decisions showed that part of the process of constructing a community involves defining what a 'good member' is. Highly charged terms like 'commitment', 'giving', 'volunteering', 'neighbour', 'home', and 'cooperative' came into play. Such symbols helped selectors to create an image for themselves of what their co–op and its members should be like. For example, a good neighbour must achieve a delicate balance between being sociable and helpful and respecting others' privacy and property. As well, such terms allowed members to compress the wide range of applicants' personal characteristics, experience, and needs into easier to handle wholes. As symbols, they also gave the community rhetorical means with which to justify its decisions. Thus, while discussing and sometimes arguing about the selection of its members, the co–ops' founders also were elaborating a discourse with which to describe and imagine their hoped–for community. Later members, of course, did not necessarily all subscribe to this image of a community.

Conclusions

For residents of contemporary North American urban centres a sense of community is often hard to define, fragile, shifting, partial, fragmentary; for some perhaps nonexistent. The housing co–ops we have studied, however, have taken the need for community as a basic organizational principle. As we have pointed out, some co–op participants had more elaborated views of what a community consists of and how it develops. The traditional, social democratic, and new age perspectives, as we have labelled them, were products of reflection and dialogue although they were not necessarily widely shared.

Our discussion suggests, however, that discourses of community identity emerged in these housing co–ops through attempts to resolve practi-

cal problems of organization and management. In the cases of subsidy policy and the budget presented, residents tried to characterize the nature of their community. Was it humane in the way it treated its members? Did differences of income imply different treatment? Were community members trustworthy? How could the composition of the community be described? How was social composition related to members' attitudes and committment? Discussion of such issues allowed or, perhaps, impelled members to develop discourses of community, Inevitably, however, these discourses remained partial, fragmentary, and highly specific.

In the cases of administrative regulation we have discussed, different rights and obligations conflicted with each other. The development of a sense of community depended to some extent on how the cases were resolved. What kind of community would Windward become? Would it be one that put its members rights first, or would it privilege the rights of the community? As a community, did the co–op have processes capable of providing ways of deciding such issues equitably? Because they lived in a co–op, at least members were able to think about and act on these issues in ways that affected their daily lives.

For community identity to emerge in these groups, the institutional context was crucial, i.e., the fact that these residential groups were democratically controlled by residents not by outsiders. But, as our examples have suggested, the sense of community that developed was partial and not necessarily shared. Perhaps better stated, senses of community emerged. Conceptions of community identity, often fragmentary themselves, thus intertwined with the more practical discourses of co–op management. As we have shown, often it was in and through these practical contexts that discourses of local community identity were constructed. Employing these discourses, members created images of what their community was and should be like. They attempted to understand their co–op by contrasting it with parts of the surrounding society. They debated whether their community was humane, open, and just. As a former coordinator of Windward told us, it's only in co–ops that people are always talking about justice.

Notes

1. Some of the materials presented in this paper have been discussed in other contexts in Cooper and Rodman (1992). We would like to thank McMaster University, York University, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which have supported our research.

2. The economic rent consists of the monthly mortgage payment at market rates plus operating costs.

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