Home or Homelessness? Marginal Housing in Vancouver, 1886–1950

Jill Wade

Résumé de l’article

Entre 1886 et 1950, l’habitation marginale à Vancouver passait par toute la gamme de logements depuis le foyer jusqu’au sans-abri. Certains louaient une chambre dans une pension localisée dans une banlieue respectable; d’autres habitaient dans des boîtes qui avaient servi au transport du thé et qui gisaient au milieu des taudis de la dépression. Plusieurs résidents étaient fort attachés à leur logis quelqu’en soient les conditions. Les causes de cet attachement reposaient sur un ensemble d’attitudes, d’intérêts et de relations amicales ou familiales auquel s’ajoutaient les espérances pour de meilleures conditions de logement de ceux qui avaient vécu et travaillé dans les communautés nées de l’extraction des ressources naturelles. Quelques exemples de ces liens puissants et de la résistance au changement qu’ils incitèrent, devraient donner matière à réfléchir aux fonctionnaires et activistes du logement et les pousser à évaluer la justesse et l’efficacité d’interventions qui requièrent l’expulsion et la rélocalisation.
Home or Homelessness?
Marginal Housing in Vancouver, 1886–1950

Jill Wade

Abstract:
Between 1886 and 1950, marginal housing in Vancouver ran the gamut from home to homelessness: in the spectrum of housing conditions, it could be anything between a room in a lodging house in a respectable suburb and a tea box in a depression-era jungle. Many residents had strong emotional ties to their homes, whatever the quality of housing conditions. Foremost among the reasons for this attachment was a variety of attitudes, concerns, and relationships, including the expectations about adequate housing of those who had lived and worked in British Columbia’s resource communities. Examples of these powerful ties, and of the resistance to change that they prompted, suggest that housing bureaucrats and activists should think carefully about the justness and the effectiveness of interventions such as eviction and relocation.

Résumé:
Entre 1886 et 1950, l’habitation marginale à Vancouver passait par toute la gamme de logements depuis le foyer jusqu’au sans-abri. Certains louaient une chambre dans une pension localisée dans une banlieue respectable; d’autres habitaient dans des boîtes qui avaient servi au trans port du thé et qui gissaient au milieu des taudis de la dépression. Plusieurs résidents étaient fort attachés à leur logis quel qu’en soient les conditions. Les causes de cet attachement reposaient sur un ensemble d’attitudes, d’intérêts et de relations amicales ou familiales auquel s’ajoutaient les espérances pour de meilleures conditions de logement de ceux qui avaient vécu et travaillé dans les communautés nées de l’extraction des ressources naturelles. Quelques exemples de ces liens puissants et de la résistance au changement qu’ils incitèrent, devraient donner matière à réfléchir aux fonctionnaires et activistes du logement et les pousser à évaluer la justesse et l’efficacité d’interventions qui requièrent l’expulsion et la relocation.

In May 1940, a contented “shacker” of the Vancouver waterfront wrote to Mayor Lyle Telford praising his “roomy” False Creek home with its views in three directions and “an abundance of light, fresh air and sunshine” that gave him “the best of health.” He had proudly “owned and occupied [his] House Boat since 1927” and furnished it with “the Amenities of life,” including “arm chairs, a heater of the Fireplace type, pictures, plants, flowers, [and] ornaments.” The False Creek shacker claimed that his only alternative accommodation was a room in a dingy, dreary lodging house. Other observers likened the nearby shoreline community in Coal Harbour to Vancouver’s upper-class district Shaughnessy Heights: here, a “neat little house boat” was known as “city hall,” and a resident of twenty years was its “Mayor.” By contrast, a critic of the “Slums of the Water Front,” Frank Buck, deplored the “shambles indescribable” on or near water fed by “a fountain of continuous pollution” [a sewer outlet]. He described the residents of these “pigsties” as the “Flotsam and the Jetsam” of humanity, “Wrecks of lives … Prostitutes, whore-mongers, thieves, and ne’er-do-wells,” and “gaunt, weary, depressed [people], accepting the environment with a deep feeling of resentment.” As the False Creek shacker argued, then, “there are two sides to this question” of houseboats. If Buck thought a foreshore shack was wretched and insanitary, the shacker himself found his place comfortable and healthy. However, while there may have been two conflicting positions on the issue, it may also be that a spectrum of residential conditions from squalid to satisfactory occurred in shacks.

We generally think of Vancouver before 1950 as a city of homes and gardens. Still, while middle-class and “respectable” working-class families lived in single houses surrounded by rhododendrons, laurel hedges, and monkey puzzle trees in the suburbs, seasonally employed white and Asian single men, unemployed workers, male and female pensioners, single working women, and low-income families inhabited shacks, lodging houses, and jungles, or hobo camps, located in the city’s downtown, shoreline, and outlying areas. As Sir Raymond Unwin stated in 1939, Vancouver was not a city of slums, but some of its parts did suffer from “slum dwellings and conditions of overcrowding and bad sanitation.” In contrast to the more prevalent, higher quality, single-family houses of Vancouver’s built environment, this more marginal, less satisfactory housing was the subject of many negative reports by civic officials and housing activists. Whereas their earlier counterparts distinguished between satisfactory and slum dwellings, today’s housing specialists speak of “home” and “homelessness.” They would categorize as homeless the residents of much of this marginal accommodation because they experienced “the absence of a continuing or permanent home over which individuals and families have personal control and which provides the essential needs of shelter, privacy and security at an affordable cost, together with ready access to social, economic, and cultural public services.” The homeless include those individuals who endure absolute homelessness as well as those who are “at risk” because of “their fragile hold on economic and social stability.” Thus, foreshore shacks and lodging houses called slum dwellings in the past would today be seen as places of homelessness. Indeed, housing advocates of the 1990s define as homeless the occupants of Vancouver’s downtown east side hotels, many of which troubled health inspectors forty or fifty years ago. Yet, in his letter to the mayor, the False Creek shacker contradicted all the experts past and present: he thought of his houseboat as his home rather than a slum dwelling or a case of homelessness.

Housing historians have tended not to seek out the sentiments of residents like the False Creek shacker. Instead, we have written about marginal housing in Canadian cities by drawing upon primary sources supplied by federal and local governments and by activists like Frank Buck, and, with a couple of exceptions, our assessments are uniformly black. This case study of
Marginal Housing in Vancouver, 1886—1950

Vancouver attempts to correct the imbalance in evidence. In the end, its conclusions, while more accurate, are less categorical. For example, the shacker was secure in his houseboat home for thirteen years, but with the prospect of eviction, he faced homelessness. In fact, Vancouver's marginal housing ran the gamut from home to homelessness, and, in cases like the shacker's, represented something between a slum and a satisfactory lodging in a Vancouver suburb. Furthermore, many residents of this housing developed strong, lasting ties to their homes. Foremost among the several reasons for this attachment to floathouses and boardinghouses were the expectations of many occupants who had lived and worked in British Columbia's resource communities. The question for housing historians to address is whether Vancouver's situation was unique: other cities in Canada may well have experienced the same spectrum of conditions in lodging houses and shacks and the same attachment of residents to their homes.

**Foreshore Shacks**

For many of us, Vancouver before 1950 was a city of single homes and gardens in a spectacular West Coast setting. While this impression is largely accurate, it obscures the existence of more marginal forms of housing in the downtown, waterfront, and outlying areas occupied by individuals who, for whatever reason, did not reside in suburban family dwellings. In particular, the 1931, 1941, and 1951 census data indicates that the quality of Vancouver housing remained generally good in those years, but it tends to hide substandard residential conditions in certain parts of the city.  

Foreshore shacks and boathouses were not categorized separately in the pre-1951 census statistics, but they have been part of the built environment around Burrard Inlet since the 1860s, when squatters settled in what is now Stanley Park (Figure 1). In the 1880s, unemployed Chinese railway workers threw up huts on the marshes between Pender Street and False Creek. By 1894, about 380 shacks lined the Burrard Inlet and False Creek shorelines. One might speculate that, ten years later, waterfront shacks may have contributed significantly to the 238 one-room dwellings in the 1921 census. During times of economic depression or housing shortages in the 1930s and 1940s, both individuals and families squatted in floathouses, live-aboard boats, and shacks on piles or land stretched along Burrard Inlet, False Creek, and the Fraser River (Figure 2). In the Great Depression, the majority of shackers lived on the waterfront because they were unable to find suitable housing at affordable rents. These shakers were people "of small means and of independent spirit" who survived hard times by living on the waterfront.
times by fishing, by beachcombing and selling cut wood at the Main Street public market, and by relying on relief or small pensions. Many veterans’ families caught up in the post-World War II housing shortage also moved into waterfront accommodation. Consequently, by 1949, the number of shacks had climbed to 866. Across the Inlet, ninety more shacks, including the one in which the writer Malcolm Lowry lived and worked, stood along the Dollarton beach (Figure 3).

As the assessments of Frank Buck and the False Creek shacker suggest, and as civic surveys between 1937 and 1940 indicate, some waterfront colonies provided better living situations than others. On Burrard Inlet, enclaves at Coal Harbour and along Commissioner Drive sheltered prosperous occupants living in decent circumstances. The eight Commissioner Drive “boat-houses ranged from one-room shackts to large, solidly built houses” with flowers in window boxes and barrels and with terraced gardens on the adjacent embankment. If well maintained, these bungalows on rock and timber piers could last a couple of generations. Others, “the worst of their type,” between Cardero and Broughton Streets and at the north foot of Clark Drive near the sewer outfall offered “a very unsatisfactory condition.” On False Creek, the area at the foot of Columbia Street among the old Great Northern Railway track pilings represented “the filthiest and most distressful portion,” while another part east of Cambie Street bridge, where the False Creek shacker lived, was “a fairly bright and cheerful neighborhood.” The Fraser River “fisher folk” and mill workers set standards of health for their community, and a “better atmosphere” pervaded the area.

Access to water supply and electricity and control over tenure differentiated conditions in the various waterfront colonies. Shackers living in more satisfactory situations had water connections or use of taps or wells on adjacent property. They frequently received power directly in their homes and often supplied neighbours with electricity. Unfortunately, many shackers had no water supply and power. Some owned their own shacks or boats and thus enjoyed greater security of tenure, but all were at risk of eviction because they squatted between the high and low tide marks on federal land.

Sewage disposal and fire hazards were major problems for all foreshore dwellers. Toilets placed over tidal flats and sewer out-
falls from city homes or private operations like the Canadian Pacific Railway yards and the Granville Island industrial shops polluted False Creek, Burrard Inlet, and the Fraser River, heightening the risk of typhoid epidemics. In addition, the air pollution from eleven large sawmills on False Creek created an unhealthy environment. Refuse dumps and old, abandoned timberwork and boat hulls along the waterfront were probably as much unsightly as unhygienic.

**Lodging Houses**

If the False Creek shacker counted himself lucky not to live in rooms in downtown Vancouver, others, who in his mind were less fortunate, did occupy by the day, week, or month various types of multiple dwellings, including lodgings, cheap hotels, Asian boardinghouses, and cabins. All referred to by city officials as “lodging houses,” these dwellings were concentrated in the downtown peninsula from the West End through the business district to the east end. Probably the most common form of lodging house was the converted single home, which might be a Yaletown version of pattern-book Gothic Revival domestic architecture or a West End wood-frame builder-house consisting of perhaps, six, twelve or even twenty-two rooms from basement to attic. The manager, who either owned or rented a whole dwelling, let rooms and housekeeping suites to seasonal and unemployed workers, elderly men and women with or without a pension, single women, couples, and families on low incomes or relief. Ordinarily, the lodgers lived in a room or two equipped with a gas plate and sink and shared a toilet and bathtub.

Conversions began before 1900 in the east end and business district and later spread to the West End. The migration of its original residents to other neighbourhoods and the arrival of European immigrants transformed the east end into a mixed single-family and boardinghouse area by the early 1900s. East Indian and Italian bachelors lived communally in houses rented by one man for many, and women in Italian and other European families supplemented family incomes by supplying probably the best living conditions for male workers in the way of room, board, and washing. The West End began its transition into a lodging house area in the 1910s when its residents gradually moved to Shaughnessy Heights and other upscale west side districts. After 1911, the City of Vancouver authorized growing numbers of lodging houses: by 1929, it had issued business licenses to the managers of 380 houses mostly situated in the core area.

Conversions increased dramatically during the 1930s, especially in neighbourhoods bordering downtown, such as
Boardinghouses
Cheap Hotels, Rooms, Cabins, and Asian Boardinghouses
Lodging houses included cheap hotels and "rooms" located in the business district and the east end. Rooms had no bar, but hotels were "stopping places" with saloons where proprietors and bartenders watched out for "good-and-drunken" loggers on a spree "after hard days and weeks of work in the woods." Premises such as the Powell Rooms or the Grand Union Rooms would have twenty to thirty-five units.

Other rooms were "cabins:" two- or three-storey frame buildings containing single rooms, or cabins, that opened off a porch running along one side of the structure from street to lane. The majority of cabins provided only outside taps and shared cast-iron toilets and supplied no bathtubs or showers. Usually, cabins covered most of a lot. Closer to the city centre, large neighbouring industrial plants or warehouses surrounded them and cut off natural light and ventilation. The construction of cabins started by 1900 in the east end to service the demands of local industries. By 1912, while intended for single working men, they also accommodated families with small children. Many cabins survived until 1950, when forty still remained in Strathcona, and a few others could be found in east Kitsilano and Yaletown (Figure 4). As time went on, health inspectors reported many "helpless or indifferent" pensioners living in cabins with woodstoves, coal lamps, and minimal plumbing.

Another form of lodging was the boardinghouse occupied by single male Chinese labourers who worked in canneries or on the railroad in summer and returned to town when jobless in winter. While they inhabited shacks at first, these men later boarded in buildings operated by Chinese associations and businessmen. Usually, groups of men from the same family, village, or district in China shared premises. Some boarding houses, such as the one in the two-storey Sam Kee Building at Pender and Carrall Streets, were extremely small: narrow cots, a cast-iron stove, and a coal box ranged along a six-foot wide room. In other larger buildings, the men partitioned off cellars, mezzanines, and whole floors into small rooms and cubicles for privacy; they prepared meals in communal cooking facilities. City Health Inspector Robert Marrion reported to the 1902 Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration that the Armstrong lodging house was a two storey brick building with 27 rooms upstairs. The rooms were 20 feet long, 13 feet wide, and 10 feet high, and were capable of holding six persons in each, according to the bylaw. This was one of the best lodging houses in the city. When visited the other night all the rooms but two exceptions were occupied by more than six people. The furniture of a room would consist of a table, six bunks, and a stove: no more. As a rule, the six occupants would rent that room from a keeper who leased the building from the owner. The amount paid was $3 per month, or fifty cents per month for each occupant, provided no more than the proper number were allowed to use it. This was a fair example of the manner of living among the working Chinamen.

Boardinghouse conditions were no better in the 1930s, when Chinese men received bed tickets worth sixty cents per week rather than twenty cents per day like white relief recipients, and when many met with refusals for assistance. The larger community in Chinatown cared for numerous destitute individuals inhabiting these boardinghouses. In particular, the Yip family accommodated many old, indigent men in a building on Canton Alley leased from the city. By the end of World War II, hundreds of Chinese men still lived in boarding houses such as the old Marshall Wells Limited warehouse on Shanghai Alley.

Living Conditions in Lodging Houses
The reports of civic officials and housing activists reveal sub-standard living conditions in lodging houses of all types. These conditions included overcrowding and doubling up, interior and exterior disrepair, lack of adequate natural light, ventilation, heat, and hot water, deficient or insufficient cooking and sanitary facilities, absence of fire precautions, infestations of pests, and increased risk of diseases such as tuberculosis and typhoid. This residential environment was especially inappropriate and even harmful for children and the elderly. Over time, but particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, conditions worsened as lodging houses aged and as conversions occurred in neighbourhoods outside the downtown area.

Still, like foreshore shacks, some lodging houses offered better living conditions than others. For example, a 1941 civic report noted differences in congestion and costs in premises located in the West End and the business district. The most crowding and the cheapest rentals occurred in the centre of the West End and in Yaletown, and the best, more expensive rooms lay west of Denman Street and around St Paul's Hospital on Burrard Street. The quality of management varied, too. The Vancouver Housing Association claimed that owner-operated lodging houses in the West End were well maintained compared to speculative properties east of Burrard and that, in particular, rooming houses in Strathcona suffered from bad management and defective structural conditions. By the 1950s, housing activists described cabins in Strathcona as "the City's poorest type of accommodation." Vancouverites like the mother of historian Rolf Knight thought of "coolie cabins" as "the black hole of Calcutta," but Knight himself saw one of these places in a much better light. His friend Pat Fitzpatrick, a bachelor on
Marginal Housing in Vancouver, 1886—1950

Figure 4: These East End cabins, photographed in about 1960, are examples of the dreary alternative lodgings available to the False Creek shacker. Source: National Archives of Canada, PA-154626.

pension, lived in a comfortable, “roomy enough” cabin partitioned off into bedroom, kitchen, and living room areas. Thus, depending on congestion, cost, location, management, and maintenance, surroundings in individual lodgings varied from miserable to cheerful.

**Jungles**

The most extreme form of marginal housing was the jungle, which represented absolute homelessness. In the 1930s, a “floating population” of jobless, homeless, single men wandered in and out of Vancouver according to the season, work opportunities, relief conditions, and political protests about their hopeless predicament. Hundreds of men spent their days in department stores, poolrooms, libraries, streets, and railway stations and their nights in refuges and parks. Many stayed in jungles, or camps, in close proximity to the railway tracks that brought them into town. During the summer of 1931, about 1,000 homeless men occupied four east end jungles.37 Jungles offered no control over shelter and no access to social and financial public services. Yet, strange as it may seem, contemporary observers noticed that even the jungles varied in terms of the wretchedness of their conditions. In a camp near the Canadian National Railway yards bordering Prior Street, the men used packing boxes, corrugated iron, tar paper, barrels, tea boxes, and even old Ford cars found in the nearby city dump to construct huts supposedly “as healthful as in camplife.”38 They arranged their shacks along trails named after Vancouver’s major streets. Water came from a tap on adjacent city property, and the men exercised care in the disposal of human waste. By contrast, in a jungle under the Georgia Viaduct, conditions could only be described as bad. Some men built temporary cover against the British Columbia Electric Company Railway fence, and others slept under the floor of an old
Response of Residents to Marginal Housing

What did the residents of marginal housing themselves think about their accommodation? Although the False Creek shacker wrote the mayor to explain the positive side of the squatting issue, many tenants complained to the city about filthy, insanitary, damp, cold lodgings and about the transgressions of operators and neighbours. When low-rental housing proposals came up, other tenants were desperate enough to write letters to the city asking to be considered for units.

Some residents also exhibited a quiet, stubborn determination to undermine the health inspector's orders. They kept or rebuilt the partitions.

In at least four instances, shackers and tenants used petitions to assert, however unsuccessfully, control over the fate of their housing. In 1936, sixty-eight of the eighty-seven occupants petitioned the city to lease or buy the property in question and to make improvements in compliance with municipal health by-laws. The shackers submitted a second petition and attended a special committee meeting, but the city went ahead with the eviction.

Early in 1952, the low-income tenants of the Davenport Rooms on West Pender Street also petitioned the city. Officials had asked the operator for alterations in toilet and bathing arrangements, but twenty-three tenants asked the city not to enforce its order (with unknown results). Although they would have liked some sanitary improvements, the tenants argued that higher rents "would force them back into one housekeeping room, and ... lower ... [their] standard of living." As well, they praised the clean, pest-free premises for good lighting, adequate sanitary facilities, and "a nice lobby on the ground floor with chesterfield and chairs, with plenty of reading material, where ... [they] could read or talk."

Some shackers used other strategies in disputes with the city. In 1909, under the influence of a City Beautiful lobby, civic officials decided to clear the Stanley Park waterfront of "hideous shacks" and obtain complete jurisdiction. Sustained by a new lease for the park from the federal government, the city tried to evict a squatter, Thomas Ludgate, who threatened to clear Deadman Island of its trees and erect a sawmill. Ludgate and another squatter fought off an invasion of "fifteen policemen and a bum politician" [the mayor] in "a real Irish, stand-up and knockdown fight." The shacker forces won the skirmish but eventually lost the island in a legal fight. As well, in 1925, several descendents of the original Stanley Park squatters took their claims to the Supreme Court of Canada. Only one descendent could prove sixty years of occupancy. The other five lost their claims to the city and became tenants in their own shacks.

Importance of Marginal Housing to Its Residents

Why was marginal housing so important to these tenants and shackers? Clearly, affordability was a major consideration. Most would have moved on to better accommodation if they could have afforded the rent, but they were limited in their options by poor earnings, small social asistance payments, and low old age, disability, or veterans' pensions. Some preferred to stay in places where they could supplement their incomes by gardening or raising cows, pigs, ducks, and chickens. One fellow found dead of pneumonia in the Ferry Rooms had supported himself by packaging and selling peanuts. Another important consideration was availability. Housing shortages following both wars and depressions drove families into lodgings and shacks where ordinarily they would not have lived. Such short-
Marginal Housing in Vancouver, 1886–1950

Figure 5: Many residents of lodging houses in downtown Vancouver had lived in bunkhouses such as these photographed in 1922 at the International Timber Company's Camp 4 on northern Vancouver Island. Source: The Museum at Campbell River, Gerti Kusba Collection, 14951.

Figure 6: Foreshore shacks in Vancouver were much the same as this floathouse belonging to the handlogger, trapper, and bounty-hunter August Schnarr, who lived with his family north of Campbell River, B.C., in the 1920s. Source: The Museum at Campbell River, August Schnarr collection, 14388.
Marginal Housing in Vancouver, 1886–1950

ages left less space for low-income people. As the city's social services administrator observed, if the cheap, bad housing were torn down, "then the tenants would be out on the street."52

Yet there were other reasons for living in marginal housing besides affordability and availability. Some residents apparently found their accommodation adequate, agreeable, and even cheerful. Others sought out cabins or shacks because they were independent spirits.53 In fact, many elderly people stayed without complaint in appalling residential conditions to avoid institutionalization in the Riverview mental asylum, Vancouver General Hospital, St Joseph's Hospital, known as the "Oriental hospital," Taylor Manor, referred to as the "old folks' home," and boarding-houses for the aged licensed by the provincial government.54 Furthermore, while some tenants were on relief and had shelter allowances, others wanted lives free of dependence upon public support. Still others searched for a setting that complemented their work as fishermen, millhands, and even artists and writers. Malcolm Lowry and Frederick Varley found freedom to write and paint in shack houses in Dollarton and in Lynn Valley in the North Shore Mountains.55

Friendships, family connections, and ethnic ties were also major considerations for the occupants of shacks and lodgings. In the face of discrimination by the dominant white society, Chinese workers and seniors occupied boardinghouses in Chinatown provided by extended families such as the Yips. In the 1940s, younger men cared for elderly Chinese men who were ill, disabled, or waiting for the war in Asia to end before returning home.56 In the east end cabins, old bachelors passed the time of day while splitting firewood and kindling for their woodstoves.57 In Dollarton, the reclusive Lowry and his writer wife had several close friends among the squatters, although they never fit in with the larger community.58 In the West End, Helena Gutteridge, a fiery, long-time social activist and former city alderman, retired to the top floor of a lodging house, known as "the CCF house," where her landlady, neighbours, and visitors were political comrades.59

Much of Vancouver's marginal housing was "an impoverished but relatively peaceful semblance of the camps" in British Columbia's resource industries.60 It met the expectations of many workers and their families. Indeed, some of this housing was built before the city's incorporation in 1886, when the Burrard Inlet shoreline was itself a frontier, resource-based community.61 Many tenants had probably lived in boardinghouses similar to those of the Canadian Western Lumber Company Limited at Fraser Mills near New Westminster, or they may have bunked down in floating, logging, and summer camps like those of Comox Logging and Railway Company and International Timber Company on northern Vancouver Island (Figure 5).62 Some working as handloggers, trappers, and bounty-hunters may have owned floathouses, which they towed from workplace to workplace along the rugged British Columbia shoreline (Figure 6).63 Others may have stayed in cabins provided by canneries along the West Coast from Steveston to the Alaska Panhandle, or in bunkhouses located next to industries in Vancouver itself.64 As well, a good many residents of foreshore shacks were active in resource industries as fishermen, loggers, tug boat crew, and mill workers.65 Finally, old bachelors like Pat Fitzpatrick fixed up their rooms "very much like the cabin beside the Bridge River, where, ... washing gold a decade earlier," Rolf Knight's parents had first met him.66

The attachment to their homes, however modest or at risk those places might be, was often very strong for residents of marginal housing. The best documented example is the bond between Malcolm and Margerie Lowry and their shack in Dollarton. Between 1947 and 1954, "eviction was always preying on their minds and they were heartbroken about the possibility of losing their beloved shack."67 When the eviction finally came and they left for overseas, Lowry's despondency and sense of loss intensified his alcoholism, and in 1957 he died by misadventure in Britain.

Thus, between the extremes of the squalid jungle and the snug Kitsilano housekeeping suite stood the Lowrys and the False Creek shacker, individuals with homes but at risk of homelessness, or Pat Fitzpatrick, an old bachelor with a cabin regarded as a horrible slum by some and a camp-like home by others. Any depiction of early marginal housing in Vancouver, then, is best sketched in washes of black, grey, and silver rather than solid black. Yet, in the recent past, we historians have not achieved a very balanced interpretation of home and homelessness in marginal housing in Vancouver or elsewhere in Canada: we have taken into consideration the cold facts of statistics and the judgmental assessments of bureaucrats and activists, but we have not been sensitive to the sentiments of the residents themselves. How in the end may we historians assess the justness and the effectiveness of interventions like eviction and relocation by those bureaucrats and activists if we do not understand the emotions and the attitudes of the residents affected by change?68 By listening to all the players, we may well arrive at a picture of past marginal housing that, despite touches of fuzziness and contradiction, is more accurate than the highly resolved depictions of previous studies.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Bob McDonald for early discussions about the nature of marginal housing, to Richard Harris, John Weaver, and several anonymous readers for their invaluable suggestions for improving this paper, to Eric Lainberger for the map, and to Louise Robert for the translation.

Notes

1. City of Vancouver Archives (hereafter cited as CVA), Records of the City Clerk (hereafter cited as CC), 27-D-7, file 28, A.H. Horsell to L. Telford, 5 May 1940.

2. Vancouver Sun, 30 November 1938, 1. Clearly, the use of "Shaughnessy," which in Vancouver connotes upper-class grandeur, exaggerates the character of the living conditions in a squatting community. However, Vancouverites often associated the word with better quality workers' housing. For example, they referred to Fraserview, the post-World War II veterans' sub-division, as the "workingman's Shaughnessy Heights." See CVA, Newspaper Clippings, M3335-1, 16 November 1948.

Marginal Housing in Vancouver, 1886–1950


5. In this paper, marginal housing is defined by its inferior physical condition, its limited extent, and its frequent documentation in archival and printed records. The rather tenuous social status of the residents and the often questionable legal status of the dwellings are two other legitimate factors in defining marginal housing, but this case study lacks the space to deal with them in depth. In contrast to John R. Mirone’s definition in Housing in Postwar Canada (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press 1988), 21, 154, marginal housing, however unsuitable, was inhabited year-round in Vancouver. For an example of the predominance of single houses in Vancouver before 1950, see Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics (hereafter cited as DBS), Seventh Census of Canada, 1931: Census Monograph No. 8, Housing in Canada, prepared by Harold F. Greenway (Ottawa: King’s Printer 1941), 39, 145, table 4. In 1931, a total of 61,250 dwelling houses, or places “in which one or more persons sleep,” included 48,658 single houses, 1,067 semi-detached houses, 10,375 apartment houses and flat houses, 432 row houses and terrace houses, 601 hotels and rooming houses, and 119 “other and not specified” units.


11. Canada, DBS, Sixth Census of Canada (Ottawa: King’s Printer 1923), Bulletin XIII, 13, table X. We do not know with certainty that these one-room dwellings included waterfront shacks.


13. CVA, Records of the Health Department (hereafter cited as HD), 145-C-4, [Report of the Health Inspector (hereafter cited as HI) on the shack below Burrard Bridge,] and 145-C-5, [HI report on a houseboat at the foot of Cardero Street].


17. CVA, TPC records, 77-B-6, file 3, Secretary, zoning matters, to the special committee re Fraser River shacks and waterfront area, 10 July 1939.

18. CVA, TPC records, 61-C-6, file 14, [Report of the special committee on housing], 15 November 1937.

19. CVA, CC records, 27-D-4, file 2, S. Murray to the building, civic planning, and parks committee, 16 November 1938.


21. Ibid., chs. 1 and 2, passim.

22. CVA, Public Documents #11, Reports of the Medical Health Officer, 1911-13; CVA, Records of the Permits and Licenses Department (hereafter cited as PLD), 126-B-11, Business License Register, 1929.


25. CVA, Records of the Mayor’s Office (hereafter cited as MO), 34-A-2, Housing Act, 1940 file, A. Haggart to the building, civic planning, and parks committee, 20 November 1940.

26. Vancouver Sun, 4 June 1931, 18; CVA, TPC records, 61-C-6, file 14, [Report of the special committee on housing], 15 November 1937, 2.


28. CVA, PLD records, 126-B-11, Business License Register, 1929.


30. CVA, HD records, 145-C-4, [report on the cabins at 343 Alexander Street].


Marginal Housing in Vancouver, 1886–1950


38. Sun, 25 July 1931, 2.


42. CVA, CC records, 15-D-4, Relief Officer, July-September 1931 file, H.W. Coo­

43. See, for example, CVA, HD records, 145-C-5, [HI reports for 663 Cambie Street and 77 and 304 West Cordova Street], 145-C-6, [HI report for 767 East Georgia Street], 145-C-4, [HI reports for 1216 Alberni Street and 1230 and 1370 Burnaby Street], 145-D-2, [HI report for 840 Nelson Street], and 145-D-4, [HI report for 110 Water Street].

44. See, for example, CVA, HD records, 145-C-6, [HI report for 1263 Davie Street], and 145-D-1, [HI report for 210 Keefer Street].

45. CVA, CC records, 15-D-4, Relief Officer, July-September 1931 file, H.W. Coo­

46. CVA, CC records, 16-E-2, file 9, [Petition from the committee representing the residents of Kitsilano Reserve foreshore to the mayor and members of city council], 3 November 1936. See also CC records, 27-C-4, file 12, for more on the Kitsilano Indian Reserve issue.

47. CVA, CC records, 27-D-7, file 28, [Petitions submitted by the residents of the Fraser River waterfront dwellings east of Nanaimo Street to the building, civic planning, and parks committee, 4 March 1940, and to the special committee on foreshore shacks, 3 May 1940]. For the Fraser River shacks, see CC records, 27-D-4, file 2.

48. CVA, HD records, 145-D-3, [HI report for 1124 West Pender Street, including the petition from the tenants of the Davenport Rooms to the metropolitan health committee, 25 February 1952].

49. CVA, BPR records, 50-E-4, Album of Newsclippings, 153, 23 October 1913. For more on the City Beautiful movement’s plans for the park, see R.A.J. McDonald, “*Holy Retreat* or Practical Breathing Spot?” *Canadian Class Perceptions of Vancouver’s Stanley Park, 1910-1913,”* Canadian Historical Review 65, no. 2 (June 1984): 127-53.

50. For the entire, colourful story, see CVA, Newspaper Clippings, M2378, 29 May 1943. For an earlier controversy over the island, see Mark Leier, “The Deadman’s Island Dispute of 1899: A Monument to Stupidity and Vandalism,” *British Columbia Historical News* 26, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 22-4.

51. CVA, BPR records, 50-E-4, file 1, Album, 2, 7, July 1925, and 189, 28 May 1931. In 1955, one shackler still occupied a cottage near Brockton Point; see CVA, Newspaper Clippings, M8839, 10 May 1955.

52. See, for example, CVA, HD records, 145-C-4, [HI report for the shack below Burrard Bridge], and 145-C-7, [HI report for 650 Gore Avenue]. See also CVA, TPC records, 77-B-6, file 3, Secretary, zoning matters, to the special committee re Fraser River shacks and waterfront areas, 10 July 1939; Knight, *Along the No. 20 Line*, 79; Province, 2 April 1938, 14.

53. CVA, HD records, 145-C-5, [HI report for 57 Cordova Street].

54. CVA, HD records, 145-D-1, [HI report for 750 Keefer Street], attached clipping for Province, 22 October 1948, 42.

55. Knight, *Along the No. 20 Line*, 84.

56. Many squatters lived near their places of employment; see the petitions in notes 44 and 45; CVA, TPC records, 77-B-6, file 3, Secretary, zoning matters, to the special committee re Fraser River shacks and waterfront areas, 10 July 1939. For Varley’s sojourn in a small Lynn Valley shack, see Christopher Var­

57. CVA, HD records, 145-C-5, [HI reports for 1 to 25 Canton Alley and 517 Car­


62. For this community, see McDonald, *Making Vancouver*, 3-32.


68. Recollections of William McConnell, 1984-85, quoted in Hallam, *Malcolm Lowry*, 118; see also ibid., 28, 44. Lowry died of an overdose of alcohol and prescription drugs; ibid., 121-2.

69. An excellent example of a vital shacktown devastated by relocation is Afric­


71. For this community, see McDonald, *Making Vancouver*, 3-32.

72. For an earlier controversy over the island, see Mark Leier, “The Deadman’s Island Dispute of 1899: A Monument to Stupidity and Vandalism,” *British Columbia Historical News* 26, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 22-4.


75. For an earlier controversy over the island, see Mark Leier, “The Deadman’s Island Dispute of 1899: A Monument to Stupidity and Vandalism,” *British Columbia Historical News* 26, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 22-4.

76. See the petitions in notes 44 and 45.

77. Knight, *Along the No. 20 Line*, 53.

78. Recollections of William McConnell, 1984-85, quoted in Hallam, *Malcolm Lowry*, 118; see also ibid., 28, 44. Lowry died of an overdose of alcohol and prescription drugs; ibid., 121-2.

79. An excellent example of a vital shacktown devastated by relocation is Afric­


81. For this community, see McDonald, *Making Vancouver*, 3-32.

82. For an earlier controversy over the island, see Mark Leier, “The Deadman’s Island Dispute of 1899: A Monument to Stupidity and Vandalism,” *British Columbia Historical News* 26, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 22-4.