

Wartime Housing as Cultural Landscape: National Creation and Personal Creativity

Leonard J. Evenden

Volume 25, numéro 2, march 1997

Special Issue on Housing

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016070ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016070ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Evenden, L. J. (1997). Wartime Housing as Cultural Landscape: National Creation and Personal Creativity. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 25(2), 41–52. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016070ar>

Résumé de l'article

Au début des années 1940, le gouvernement fédéral dut faire face à une crise du logement aggravée par la pénurie de nouvelles constructions résultant de la Dépression, la migration des habitants des campagnes vers les villes et le déplacement de la main d'œuvre vers l'industrie de guerre naissante, les chantiers navals et les bases militaires. Il se chargea donc d'assurer le logement des travailleurs partout au pays. Le coup d'envoi fut donné par une nouvelle société de la Couronne, la « Wartime Housing Ltd. ». Cette société, après avoir construit 26 000 logements à travers le pays, fut convertie en programme de construction d'habitations pour les vétérans. Il résulta de la gamme restreinte de modèles utilisés (quatre plans de base) une image répétitive teintée d'uniformité et de conformisme à l'origine d'un paysage résidentiel canadien distinctif et d'une expérience collective sur le plan du logement. Lorsque ces habitations furent cédées à des particuliers après la guerre, ceux-ci modifièrent les modèles simples de départ. L'aspect des ensembles architecturaux constitués des logements de guerre restants est atténué par les particularités régionales, mais le caractère particulier des unités de base est encore souvent visible. Cette planification rationnelle, centrale et émanant directement des autorités a caractérisé l'effort de guerre du Canada. Elle a fourni au pays un parc d'habitations à partir duquel le paysage résidentiel canadien a évolué depuis un demi-siècle et s'est diversifié selon les goûts individuels, la capacité de payer et les règlements locaux.

Wartime Housing as Cultural Landscape National Creation and Personal Creativity

L.J. Evenden

Abstract:

Early in the 1940s, in response to a housing crisis compounded of lack of construction during the depression, rural to urban migration, and the relocation of labour to the burgeoning wartime industries, dockyards and military bases, the federal government assumed responsibility for the provision of worker housing throughout the country. Construction was initiated through the newly-created crown corporation Wartime Housing Ltd. After some 26,000 rental dwellings were built across the country, the program evolved into veterans' housing. A narrow range of designs (four basic plans) was employed, leading to a image of uniformity, conformity and repetition. A distinctive Canadian residential landscape was thus created, along with a common housing experience. As these dwellings were sold into private hands following the war, modifications were introduced which were integrated into the original simple designs. The appearance of the surviving wartime housing landscapes is nuanced by regional characteristics, but the character of the core units is often still apparent. Authority-based, rational, central planning, a feature of Canada's wartime effort, provided the country with a core stock of dwellings. In half a century a distinctive Canadian residential landscape has evolved from this, with diversity introduced as a result of individual taste, ability to pay, and local regulation.

Résumé:

Au début des années 1940, le gouvernement fédéral dut faire face à une crise du logement aggravée par la pénurie de nouvelles constructions résultant de la Dépression, la migration des habitants des campagnes vers les villes et le déplacement de la main d'oeuvre vers l'industrie de guerre naissante, les chantiers navals et les bases militaires. Il se chargea donc d'assurer le logement des travailleurs partout au pays. Le coup d'envoi fut donné par une nouvelle société de la Couronne, la « Wartime Housing Ltd. ». Cette société, après avoir construit 26 000 logements à travers le pays, fut convertie en programme de construction d'habitations pour les vétérans. Il résulta de la gamme restreinte de modèles utilisés (quatre plans de base) une image répétitive teintée d'uniformité et de conformisme à l'origine d'un paysage résidentiel canadien distinctif et d'une expérience collective sur le plan du logement. Lorsque ces habitations furent cédées à des particuliers après la guerre, ceux-ci modifièrent les modèles simples de départ. L'aspect des ensembles architecturaux constitués des logements de guerre restants est atténué par les particularités régionales, mais le caractère particulier des unités de base est encore souvent visible. Cette planification rationnelle, centrale et émanant directement des autorités a caractérisé l'effort de guerre du Canada. Elle a fourni au pays un parc d'habitations à partir duquel le paysage résidentiel canadien a évolué depuis un demi-siècle et s'est diversifié selon les goûts individuels, la capacité de payer et les règlements locaux.

Housing, Cultural Landscape and Federal Intervention

Over half a century has passed since the federal government, in cooperation with cities and municipalities across the land, and in response to the exigencies of war, assumed the burden of providing rental housing for Canada's industrializing population. Reluctant at first to make the commitment and take up the challenge, it built some 26,000 single family dwellings and numerous staff houses before the wartime housing program was brought to a close at war's end. In the process, problems of town and social planning were also engaged, and new standards were set for building construction in the years that followed. A new course of direct government involvement in the every day lives of citizens was thus charted, through a substantial contribution to the housing stock and in the creation of new residential landscapes.

This essay explores the wartime housing landscape as an expression of national government activity and the personal engagement of citizens — those who took up dwellings built under the wartime legislation and who subsequently purchased the houses and continued to (re)develop them. While national policy and nationally sponsored construction together are identified as the point of creation of this distinctive landscape, what has happened to this housing in more recent decades demonstrates the needs and inventiveness of citizens in creating and managing their domestic spaces. The result, seen collectively, is a modified housing landscape whose nuanced forms tend towards regional styles. This is shown in specific cases of dwelling modification on the west coast, and illustrates the dichotomy between the authority-based impetus to rational planning of the landscapes of human habitation and incremental development according to the interests of individuals. In this process, from the creation of the dwellings through later modifications and adjustment, wartime housing was changed from a relatively simple and prosaic landscape, the expression of nationally applied standards and regulations, to one that is increasingly variegated and textured, reflecting personal taste, financial capability and local regulation.

No Canadian landscape of national scale can be directly apprehended by the individual, and all discussion of landscapes at such scale concerns generalizations constructed for the purpose of understanding the national scene. But generalizations are necessarily rooted in specific cases. In a review of the concept 'landscape' Mikesell notes Carl Sauer's attempt to place it at the centre of geographical enquiry. Assuming an inductive approach, "... Sauer held that a landscape should not be regarded as an actual scene viewed by a particular observer but rather as a generalization derived from the observation of many individual scenes."¹ Thus the landscape of geographical interest is to be distinguished from that of the painter or others concerned with the immediate range of visual perception and apprehension. In authorizing the building of dwellings, literally one by one across the face of the land, the government put into place the elements of shelter that collectively would form not only distinctive housing but also a distinctive residential land-

Wartime Housing as Cultural Landscape

scape. Further, in terms of human experience, the dwelling units would become the homes of thousands of families. Thus government action met directly with that of individual households at the most intimate level; a national experience was thereby created, as expressed in a new cultural landscape.

Early in the 1940s the government's attitude towards the supply of housing shifted from a free-market stance to an essentially social housing position, insofar as wartime industrial workers were concerned. Once a centralized administration was established, within the framework of the crown corporation Wartime Housing Ltd., the government not only had the ability to assist municipalities in providing housing but also the responsibility to ensure that its approach was equitable. With major shifts in population distribution taking place, occasioned largely by the growth of wartime industrial production and military concentrations, the whole national settlement system was brought into view. By its allocation of housing the government gave to each recipient municipality a set of structures that, collectively and individually, came to be recognized as a distinctive form of Canadian housing.²

Housing at the beginning of World War II was highly variable in quality and availability. For many in the lower income brackets it was poor indeed.³ New construction had plummeted during the early 1930s, rising only towards the end of the decade, and neglect of the existing stock had led to its deterioration. During that time the population continued to increase, and, just as importantly for housing availability, had redistributed itself in response to major crises such as the collapse of markets and the dessication of the western wheat lands. Overcrowding, whether due to doubling-up or simply inadequate space in individual dwellings, became severe in most major centres. In what was a period of rapid rural to urban movement, the impact of overcrowding was increasingly felt in central cities, and slum developments also appeared on the rural-urban fringes of major centres.⁴ To all of this were added the conditions engendered by the onset of war, including the relocation of workers and families to centres of industrial development and the vicinities of military bases. It follows that to find adequate housing in wartime Canada was one of the most difficult problems encountered by thousands of households caught up in the industrial and military effort of the time.

Those difficulties of housing provision followed the depression decade in which little had been done to alleviate an already serious problem. The first comprehensive national legislation, the *Dominion Housing Act*, was passed in 1935 and was followed by the *National Housing Act* of 1938. Predicated upon an approach that emphasized the purchase of new homes by the middle classes, thus releasing older housing for rental, and with time-limited stipulations as to co-operation with municipalities and provinces, these acts proved to be completely ineffective in relieving the shortage of rental housing before the outbreak of war. Further, they contained no forethought for the exacerbated housing shortages that would develop as a consequence of Canada's war effort. The outbreak of war brought the housing

crisis even more strongly to the fore. Workers moving to jobs in the burgeoning wartime industries had to be housed, but often there was little housing available within the vicinities of the industries or docks where they were to work. "Munitions makers surveyed by the federal government replied that they were worried 'not about tools, not about plant, but about housing ...'"⁵ Skilled male workers refused to move to cities where the housing shortage would mean separation from their families.⁵

Not only was the country inadequately housed as it entered the war, but it was initially hesitant about federal involvement to correct the situation.⁶ As the new decade opened, the relocation of labour and personnel in response to the war effort resulted in housing emergencies across the country. It became clear that the construction industry could not by itself cope with the enormous and increasing task of housing the workers and their families, much as the private sector approach might have been preferred by the government and its advisers. The ability to negotiate with financial institutions, and to develop priorities for the control of materials during a period of shortages and wartime allocations to industry, could only be handled at the federal level of government. Deep differences of opinion about state involvement were masked for the moment when, acting at last to provide the much-needed housing, the government responded on an unprecedented scale. In light of the depression experience and the government's earlier reluctance to act, it was paradoxical that the state was now to become the principal actor in housing development across the country.

The instrument of this new government activity was Wartime Housing Ltd., a crown corporation created under the authority of the *War Measures Act* in February 1941.⁷ Thus housing construction formed a part of wartime production and scheduling, the corporation being placed within the Department of Munitions and Supply, under the Minister, the Honourable C.D. Howe. The government chose for its Board of Directors men with experience in the construction field, including Joseph M. Pigott, a Hamilton construction magnate, as President. Such a prominent appointment gave to Wartime Housing both high profile and business distinction. The corporation had its headquarters in Ottawa although much of its senior management was based in Toronto. Other offices were opened in the principal regional centres. Design requirements, contract negotiations, financial dealings, the organization of materials, provision of utilities, collection of rents, tenant and project management, and the ability to deal with local municipal governments -all these and more were matters requiring the appointment of skilled people across the country. The corporation built up an impressive national organization and corps of employees. When the war finally came to an end, considerable experience had been gained in the handling of a national housing program, complemented by town planning experiments.

Cultural Landscapes: Fact and Perception

Government involvement was justified by assuming and asserting that the housing effort would be short-lived and the houses

Wartime Housing as Cultural Landscape

themselves temporary. But the scale of participation, mainly in housing construction but also in town and social planning, marked the wartime period as a key turning point in the evolution of housing policy. At last taking a national view of the problem, and direct action, Canada took its place alongside other western nations that were involved with issues of housing policy and provision.

In discharging its mandate the corporation not only hewed to already established standards of property development in lot servicing, quality of materials and design of neighbourhoods and buildings, but it also experimented with alternative approaches. Insofar as housing was concerned, the designs chosen were few: the Cape Cod design, in side-gabled single storey and one-and-a-half storey versions, and a hip-roofed cottage less commonly used. The narrow range of housing designs, and the built forms that resulted, imposed an image of uniformity and conformity. The distinctive shapes and spacing of the dwellings cast a clearly identifiable and repetitive image

across the land, an image that has united rather than scattered the Canadian experience (Figures 1, 2). The wartime house became “... almost as identifiable to Canadians as the grain elevator ...” — a major image of comparison, if regional rather than national.⁸ Further, these “... standard ... houses created a distinctive ‘Canadian House’ which can still be found from coast to coast”.⁹ Indeed, it has been suggested that “The quintessential Canadian home is perhaps the ‘Type C’ unit, a storey-and-a-half model used across Canada by WHL in the period 1941–5, in the Veterans’ Rental Housing program after the War, and by the early NHA builders.”¹⁰

Design uniformity, however, was perhaps a necessary concomitant of financial restraint. Wartime Housing engaged local architects to present drawings which, while following the basic design concept, could introduce small modifications to suit local conditions, provided that the cost of construction remained within prescribed limits. In this there was an implicit admission that the voice of the locality might be heard. On the



Figure 1: “Construction by the Wartime Housing Ltd. of prefabricated houses for munitions workers, Canada.” Cbicoutimi, March 1942. Note the stages of construction, from right to left, and the alternation of doorways and middle windows.

Source: National Film Board/National Archives of Canada C-85217.

Wartime Housing as Cultural Landscape



Figure 2: Newly completed wartime housing, Winnipeg, 1945. Note the provision of sidewalks.

Source: Western Canada Pictorial Index, 1270-38023, University of Winnipeg.

prairies there was concern that insulating properties would be adequate, and elsewhere there was variation in how a woodshed might be incorporated into the main structure. More generally, experiments were conducted with methods of pre-fabrication. Towards the end of the war, when it was realized that the houses would not be quite as temporary as had earlier been assumed, certain changes such as improved footings were permitted. In general, the quality improved over time, especially as the corporation turned to the construction of houses for returning veterans. But the fundamental concept of the house types and forms did not alter from the basic nearly-square plan, comprising some 700 square feet on the main floor, and divided into living room, dining area, bedroom, kitchen and bathroom.

In addition to the distinctive design and appearance of individual dwellings, to be noted from coast to coast, the locating of housing schemes near industrial sites suggested national purpose, and rules of access to the housing, namely qualification by occupational category, military service and need, pointed to a social order within a national framework. The rules were the same for everyone. Just as fundamentally, and because the inti-

macy of domestic life was being provided for, the conceptualizations of space identity and differentiation within the dwelling, and within neighbourhoods, focused attention on basic shelter and community needs. These needs, projected into the design process, were met by the same basic approaches of planning, building and allocation, regardless of locality. Thus the very townscapes that Wartime Housing created suggested to the citizen in the street a shared identity from coast to coast; this was indeed a unifying cultural landscape, and to many a gratifying one.

With thousands of dwellings having been built across the country within a few short years to a common basic design and standard of finish, and with the activity having been conceived and administered from a centralized crown authority, the citizens of Canada literally came to share a common housing experience. The evidence of newspaper reports and of letters surviving in archives also suggest a degree of approval of this experience. Those who needed housing, and were fortunate enough to qualify for a wartime house, were pleased; others pleaded for assistance, and would have been overjoyed had they been allocated a place (Figure 3, 4). Tenants and would-be tenants, however,

Wartime Housing as Cultural Landscape



Figure 3: A new wartime house in North Vancouver. The original caption notes that the house is "... complete but for installation of fixtures ... Pretty girls on steps have just completed inspection ... and are typical prospective tenants." In fact these were married women who lived nearby on Lonsdale Avenue. Note the long flight of steps, implying the sloping site, and the traditional west coast shingle siding.

Source: Vancouver News-Herald, November 5, 1941. North Vancouver Museum and Archives.

were only the most obvious citizens to share the wartime housing experience. Citizens in general were involved through the application of taxes to this purpose, and in watching the impact on their communities as the dwellings were erected and neighbourhoods created. While it obviously must have been good to see people housed in decent shelter, one of the reactions in the property-owning and comparatively well-housed portion of the wider community was that wartime houses would have a depressing effect on the value of surrounding properties. The inhabitants of the new houses, after all, were 'only tenants'. In short, opinions expressed in certain sectors of society were to the effect that these houses belonged "on the other side of the tracks".¹¹ This was accompanied by a corresponding wish that the dwellings be considered temporary, and be demolished or removed as quickly as possible after the war, an attitude conforming to early statements by the government, when it had been politically necessary to justify the construction of wartime houses in terms of their temporary character. Indeed, if one of the arguments for producing houses by prefabricated methods was to ensure "... speed of erection ...", the corollary was that this meant speed of dismantling "... and possible salvage value".¹²

To a degree the potential social problems could be overcome through sensitive planning processes. Negotiations with municipi-

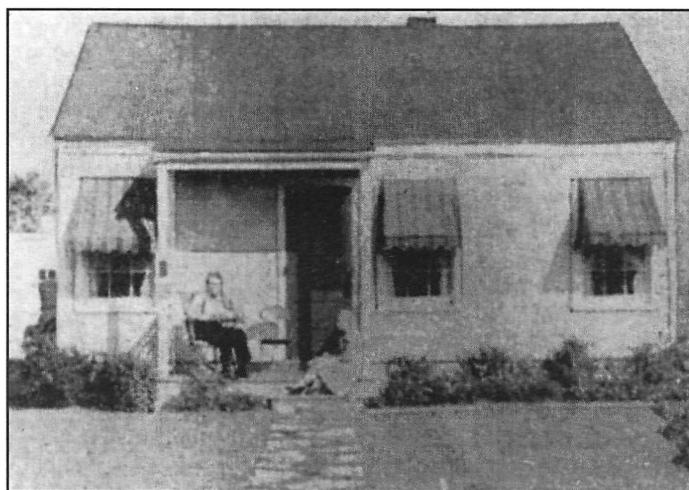


Figure 4: A wartime house in Hamilton. The original caption emphasizes the developed and settled aspect of living, implicitly defending wartime housing against criticism. "Beautify the Home: The tenant ... by keeping a neat lawn and planting a few flowers, not only enjoys living in an attractive home, but also plays his part in making a fine, clean community."

Source: Hamilton Spectator, May 25, 1946. Spectator Collection, Hamilton Public Library Special Collections.

palities required that serviced lots be made available to Wartime Housing Ltd at a nominal fee of \$1.00 each. If such lots could not be made available, further negotiations took place to come to an agreement whereby servicing might be installed as part of the construction work. In addition to whole clusters of lots being offered, municipalities also promoted the infill of empty lots within the already built-up residential districts. This not only assisted in making serviced lots available but it eased problems of access to schools and other facilities, thus partly avoiding the disapproving perception that lower class rental districts were being created en masse. Wartime Housing was sufficiently aware of potential social problems in certain districts that its officials, sometimes with on-site visits, took pains to satisfy themselves as to the suitability of locations; further, community development was fostered in a variety of ways, especially where large scale schemes were sponsored. Thus housing, social status, location and community formation were intimately related, and were taken into account in the overall planning process. With the construction of community halls, schools and other facilities, and the fostering of various programs, the work took on proportions and qualities well beyond the mere building of dwelling units.

"Keeping to the Marketplace":¹³ Impetus to Divergence

Regardless of the need for low rental housing, and the persuasive arguments for direct government intervention to provide it, there would appear to be a strong and persistent undercurrent of opinion throughout society, even in sectors that might be

Wartime Housing as Cultural Landscape

expected to benefit from direct government assistance in the rental market, that home ownership is preferable to renting, and worth some sacrifice to achieve. In the 1940s such sentiment was strong. Thus, when the war was over and the government discontinued the wartime housing program, reverting to indirect methods of trying to stimulate private sector participation, some citizens may have been disappointed but others were delighted. Among the latter may be counted the thousands of tenants who were offered first refusal to purchase the wartime houses they had been renting. From the allocation of a house at a modest rental to an opportunity for a modestly priced purchase was, for many, a progression that represented rapid social advance — and an unimaginably good deal. Many had never owned a home before and this provided them with their first chance to accumulate equity and capital as well as maintain housing security. Within a few short years, through the late 1940s to the early 1950s, virtually the whole stock of wartime houses was sold into private hands.

The implications were profound. The sale of the houses gave rise to a new class of home owners across the country which would from that moment have property protection in mind in their community relations. And it put the initiative for property development and redevelopment into the hands of the owners who now had to deal individually with lending institutions and local authorities, opening the way to the development of regional variation in the housing stock based upon local assessments of the real estate market and local building practices.¹⁴ The result is that, from the late 1940s and early 1950s down to the present, the tracts of wartime housing have evolved into variegated townscapes, 'wartime' in origin and residual core forms, but increasingly divergent from such beginnings. Since then, the needs, wishes and tastes of individual owners have found expression in a thousand ways, some changes to the dwellings being of considerable scope, some being of tiny detail and cosmetic effect, and others expressing only maintenance activity. The individualization of houses within highly similar schemes of wartime housing has increasingly diversified the townscapes. Through it all the basic wartime house has remained distinctive.

Working with the Landscapes of Home

Structural changes generally have involved adding new space to existing dwellings. Such changes have sometimes been so extensive that the original house has been completely effaced in the makeover. While retrospectively it is easy to point back in time and process to the core forms of wartime houses, it is much more difficult to imagine the many ways in which dwellings have been, or might be, personalized. Possibly the most important general modification was the addition of basements, but beyond this the ways in which rooms have been added or extended have been many. Properties have commonly been developed by the construction of garages, an outbuilding not at first permitted. To the extent that such changes (along with wholesale removal and replacement of houses, more common in recent years) were authorized by permits from local municipal building departments, they have been constrained and

shaped by local regulations. But changes have also been inspired by fashions in housing and, perhaps most importantly, have been driven by the needs of growing families. Both fashion and the need for increased personal space can be thought of as forms of constraint, but would normally be taken to suggest possibilities, opportunities and reasons for property development.¹⁶ Increased income during the decades following the war has provided the financial ability to make improvements, and the investment of personal labour has been common too. Through all these changes, local and regional forms and images have been reasserted and further developed, building on the common module of the wartime house.¹⁷

In early September, 1941, Wartime Housing Ltd. was issued a number of permits by the City of North Vancouver to construct single family dwellings on properties lying on the east side of the city within walking distance of the dockyards. Two dwellings are discussed here, representing the general processes of initial development by Wartime Housing and subsequent modification by their later owners. The cases comprise the H-12 and H-22 house sub-types, code designations for two of the standard designs that had been adopted, the latter having only a single floor level, the former having one and one-half storeys¹⁸ (Figure 5).

The process of building was similar in both cases, the main differences between the houses being in size, floor layout and cost. Both were 24 feet by 28 feet and erected upon concrete blocks. (Some early H-1 houses, the smallest and most basic, had been built on posts, emphasizing the expectation that they would be temporary.) The main floors of the two types, though identical in area, differed in layout and accommodation. Both had a kitchen and bathroom, but the H-12 layout lost floor space to a centrally-located enclosed stair that descended to face the front door. While the general intention for H-12 houses was that there would be two small bedrooms on the main floor, as well as a living room and dining area, in this case only one bedroom seems to have been constructed, allowing greater freedom of movement in the main public living and eating spaces. The stairs led to a small landing on the second floor, to gain access to two bedrooms, one on either side with one being larger than the other. The H-22 house, by not having an upstairs, saved the staircase-equivalent floor area on the main floor. This extra space helped to provide a comfortably large living room, some 16 feet square, reduced only by a small partitioned area separating the front door from direct entry into the room. The cost of construction was set at \$2,080.00 for the H-12 house and \$1,737.20 for the H-22.

The building permits were issued only two days apart and, right on schedule, two days apart later in the month, plumbing permits were also issued. Fixtures were to be identical in the two houses, comprising a sewer connection, one kitchen sink, a bathtub and basin in the bathroom, along with a W.C.¹⁹ An electrical permit was issued in the third week of October for the H-12 house, but it was not until mid November that the same permit was issued for the H-22. Electrical work was to employ

Wartime Housing as Cultural Landscape

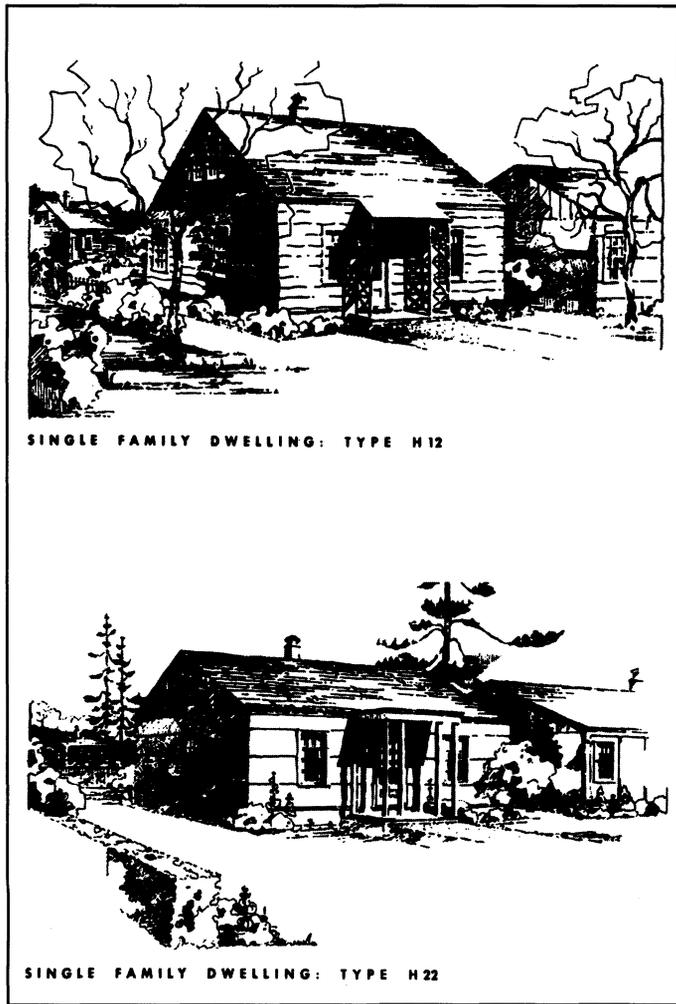


Figure 5: The H12 and H22 types of wartime houses.

Source: Burwell R. Coon, "Wartime Housing," *Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, Journal*, 19, (1942):7.

the newer and superior loomex wiring. Insofar as physical standards were concerned, these were to be quite acceptable modern dwellings, utilizing all new materials. Some years later, in the summer and fall of 1948, the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, which had taken over the responsibilities of War-time Housing Ltd., was to take out permits for both houses, to replace the original block foundations by eight inch poured concrete walls at a stated cost of \$450.00 per dwelling. This represented the end of 'central command' decision-making for and public investment in these places, however, as both houses were sold by 1951. With the installation of these foundations, an element of permanence had been introduced into the structures and implicitly admitted by the new federal agency. And with the sale of the properties to individual householders, the question of whether these places would be temporary became moot. In

the event, over the next forty years, the householders became "co-producers" with the original crown corporation builders, to further develop the physical structures in a process of transformation contributing to the evolving cultural landscape of the present.²⁰

In early 1951 the new owner of the H'22 house took out permits for building and electrical work (Figure 6). In this he followed some of the most common of the early changes, namely to construct a basement and to install heavy wiring for a cooking range and hot water heater. The owner was also listed as the contractor, although there is no record of who actually performed the work. Because the land sloped towards the rear of the property, it was a simple matter to dig into the slope to provide a ground level entry to the basement at the back of the house. The effect of the work was to increase the enclosed floor space of the dwelling by some 50 per cent, and also to provide for up-to-date modern conveniences. Thereafter little happened until a new owner contracted for a gas furnace to be installed in the basement in 1957, followed by a gas water heater the next year. A third owner, in 1966, redeveloped the bathroom, replacing all the original fixtures, and two years later the gas furnace was replaced. It would be surprising if this owner, a certified gas fitter, and listed as the owner-contractor, did not do the work himself. Two years later a 20 by 20 foot (400 square foot) double carport was added to the back of the house. It had a concrete base that provided support for the posts which rose to support the flat tar and gravel roof. The horizontally-placed rafters were over-sized at 2 by 10 inches, providing a hint of future intentions. Because the site was sloping, the carport was at the same level as the basement entry and its roof was at the level of the floor of the original house. In the Vancouver area generally, and certainly on the north shore, these open-sided and flat-roofed carports, attached or adjacent to the house, have often represented the first stage of a larger expansion of the dwelling, even when no expansion was originally envisaged or intended.

A dozen years passed, during which time the house changed hands again. Husband and wife applications were made by new owners in the summer of 1982, a business licence for her and a building permit for him. The aim was to provide space for a service business, run by the wife, and accessible from the lane behind the house. This was permissible within certain guidelines under the zoning for this residential area, and a number of inspections were made to ensure that the total space devoted to the business occupied no more than 500 square feet and not more than 20 per cent of the total dwelling floor space. In fact the business was to occupy the converted and now wholly enclosed carport area, and to extend a little way into the basement. Compliance with the noise by-law was checked, fire extinguishers and smoke alarms to approved standards were installed, and a health department inspection was carried out. Some extra electrical wiring was required, as was the provision of a single off-street parking space. The building permit provided for the construction of an extensive deck (36 feet by 12 feet) running across the back of the house, but in the

Wartime Housing as Cultural Landscape

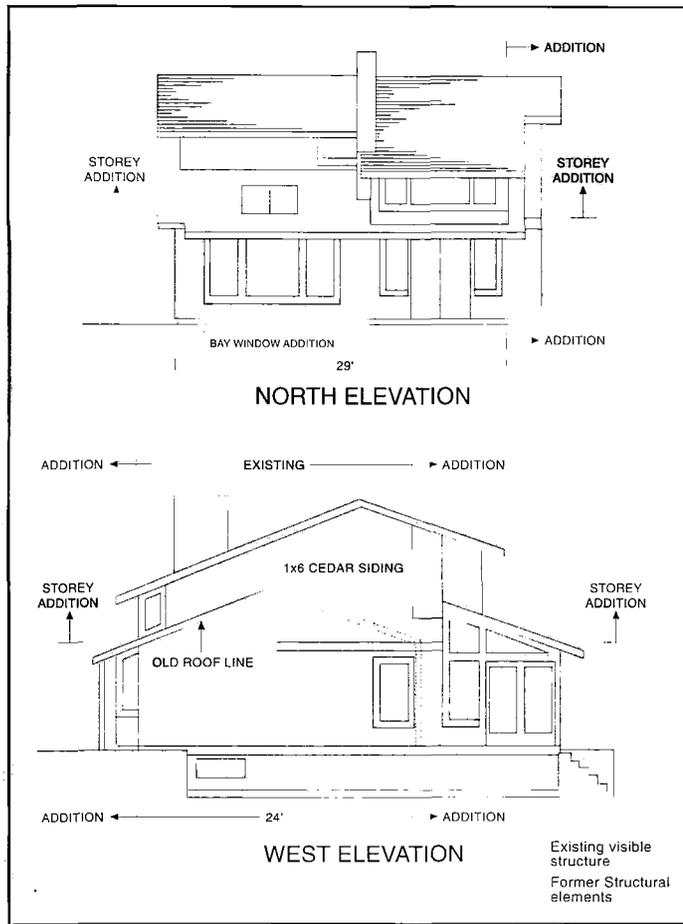
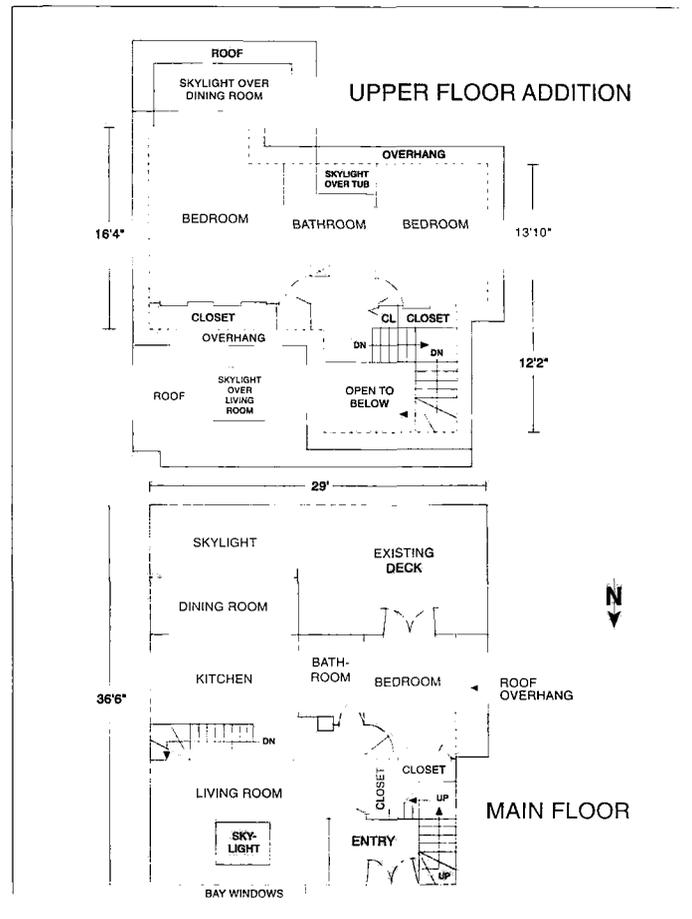


Figure 6: Transformation of a wartime house, North Vancouver.
(a) Elevations

event the deck did not extend beyond the house itself, making it a more modest 28 feet. Nevertheless, the roof of the carport now came to serve as the floor of a new living surface, albeit outside the main dwelling enclosure. Seasonal 'outdoor living' has always been popular on the west coast, and to build an upper deck over a carport is a common practice, especially on south- or west-facing sides of dwellings built on sloping land, as in the present case. The 2 by 10 inch rafters of the original carport now served as floor joists. Thanks to the foresight of the previous owner this expansion probably involved less construction upheaval and expense than might otherwise have been experienced.

The deck was not to last for long, however, as two years later, in 1984, it was demolished to make way for a major addition to the dwelling. Two bedrooms and a bathroom were to form a new upstairs, and the portion of the deck over the original carport (now enclosed and housing the business below) was to be enclosed for a dining room. This space was adjacent to the original small kitchen, which was also to be slightly enlarged by building the sink and counters out into the new room, although



and (b) Floor plans.

they were still to face back to the kitchen's U-shaped working area. The design also 'modernized' this work area, bringing it into conformity with the builder's rule of thumb that the sink, cooking range and refrigerator should all be within arm's reach of a person working in the triangle defined by the locations of the appliances. And appearances were now to count. An open tower staircase leading from the foyer was to connect the two floors. The roofs were to be arranged in such a way as to conform to the popular west coast "mine shed" look, with a prominent skylight filtering light into the living room, even as a shaft of sunlight penetrates the skylight of a mine building on a steep mountainside, or, in a layering of images, sunlight highlights a glade to relieve the gloom of the coastal forest. If the metaphors are mixed, the physical expressions nevertheless blend well to create an attractive regional style, one that fits the locality, especially when the image is reinforced, as it was in this case, by a cedar shake roof and cedar siding around the whole enlarged structure.

Wartime Housing as Cultural Landscape

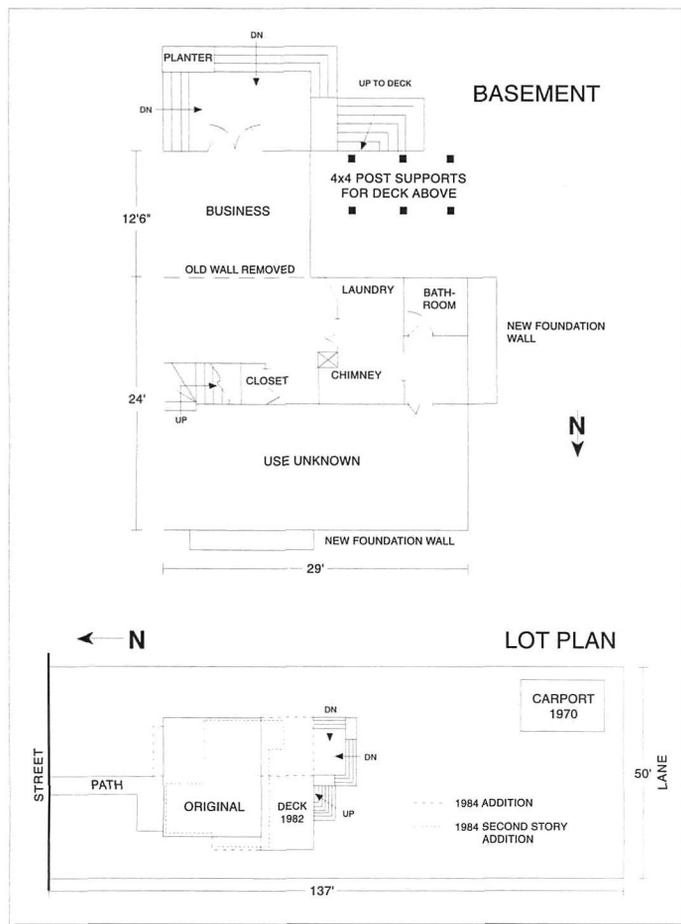


Figure 6: Transformation of a wartime house, North Vancouver. (c) basement and lot plans.

Source: City of North Vancouver

But such construction provides only the shell of enclosed space. Within a month a permit was issued for electrical work of quite ambitious scope: rough wiring and fittings for 33 light outlets, 55 wall receptacles, 33 switches, five fans and six thermostats; further wiring, some at 220 volts, was also to be supplied to the kitchen range, clothes dryer, dishwasher, six space heaters, furnace, 12 recessed light fixtures and a Jacuzzi. Small wonder that a new 200 amp main service was also installed, with 24 circuits, some six times the capacity of wiring for the original house. Early in the new year the new bathroom on the second floor was plumbed with two basins, toilet, bath tub and shower, while the bathroom on the main floor was refitted with new fixtures. In addition, to forestall drainage problems, a sump pump was installed in the basement. Inside the shell of enclosure, such installations make a modern North Vancouver house both functional and comfortable beyond the minimum. Little wonder that, in contrast to the \$500.00 stated cost of the deck two years earlier (probably for materials only) the estimated

cost of this latest addition was \$42,000.00 for materials and some contracting.

In comparison with the dramatic changes to this house, the H-12 house underwent less change overall, although the expansion seems to have been equally well thought out. Construction followed the lead of existing walls and dimensions, and thus maintained the integrity of the wartime house. The appearance of the modified dwelling does not obscure or deny the look of the original. The first owner, in 1952, up-graded the house by installing wiring for a kitchen range and water heater. Four years later a new owner installed a gas furnace. After another six years had passed a third owner decided to change the range and water heater from electricity to gas. Four years later, in 1966, more electrical work was carried out, this time to provide the heavy 220 volt wiring to operate a clothes dryer. For this a new service also had to be installed and the owner was listed as contractor, although whether he actually performed the skilled work is not clear. Thus from 1941 to 1966 the only changes were to renew the utility fixtures, these changes representing phases in the modernization of living.

In 1977, 11 years following the installation of the new electrical service, a new owner obtained permission to build an addition to the house (Figure 7). This was to be one large upstairs room, 14 feet by 28 feet, occupying the rear area over the kitchen and leaving intact the sloping roof of the original house as it appeared from the front. The room was to be a combined bedroom and studio.²¹ The novelty of the expansion lay in its vertical dimensions, for a north-facing clerestory was to extend above the original roof ridge, allowing north light to enter high in the room to be reflected to lower levels by the sloping ceiling opposite. Practical purposes were also served in that closet and storage units were installed under the undisturbed front roof. The fact that the chimney and bathroom vent from downstairs passed through the new room might have been an annoyance, but the column carrying these served to divide bedroom from studio in an otherwise open plan, thus helping to define spaces in the new room. In the following year, 1978, a woodburning stove was installed in the living room on the main floor, the new chimney running up through one of the new upstairs closets. Structural alterations were required for reasons of safety, with heat shields covering adjacent wall surfaces, regulation distances between steel flues and wooden structures being observed, and a tile apron being laid around the stove itself. At an estimated before-construction price of \$5,000.00 for the expansion, including cladding the whole house with vertically applied cedar siding, and another \$500.00 for the woodburning stove, this was a clever development of the dwelling. The second floor was made much more capacious, and the new space was well lit. By respecting the integrity of the existing dwelling, and so avoiding serious structural changes, value for the construction dollar was augmented. Further, the appearance of the house remains unmistakably that of an H-12 wartime house, and yet the additions are carried out in such a way as to bring the style fully up-to-date. One step further was taken

Wartime Housing as Cultural Landscape

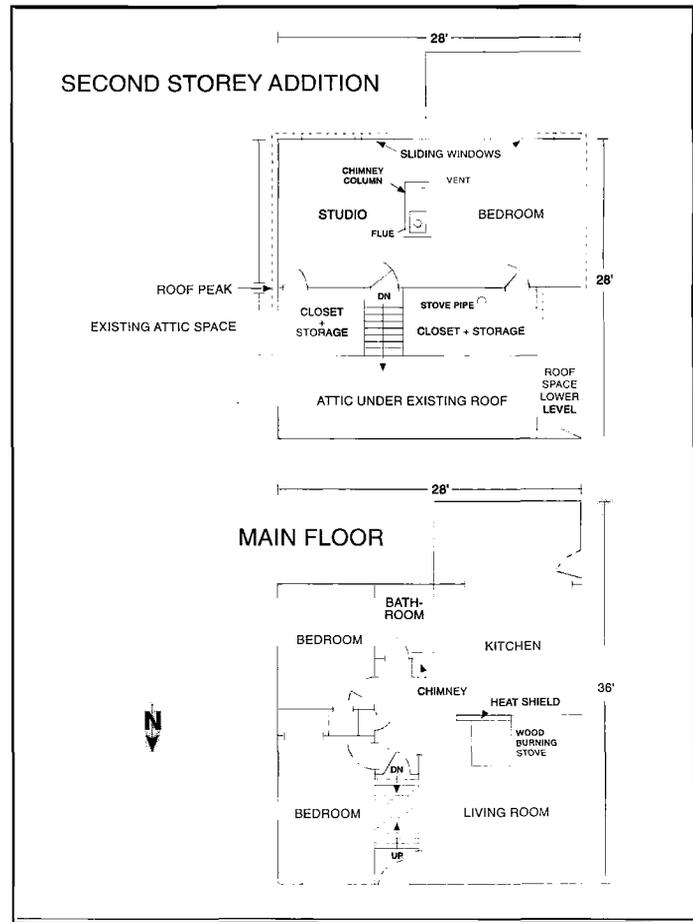
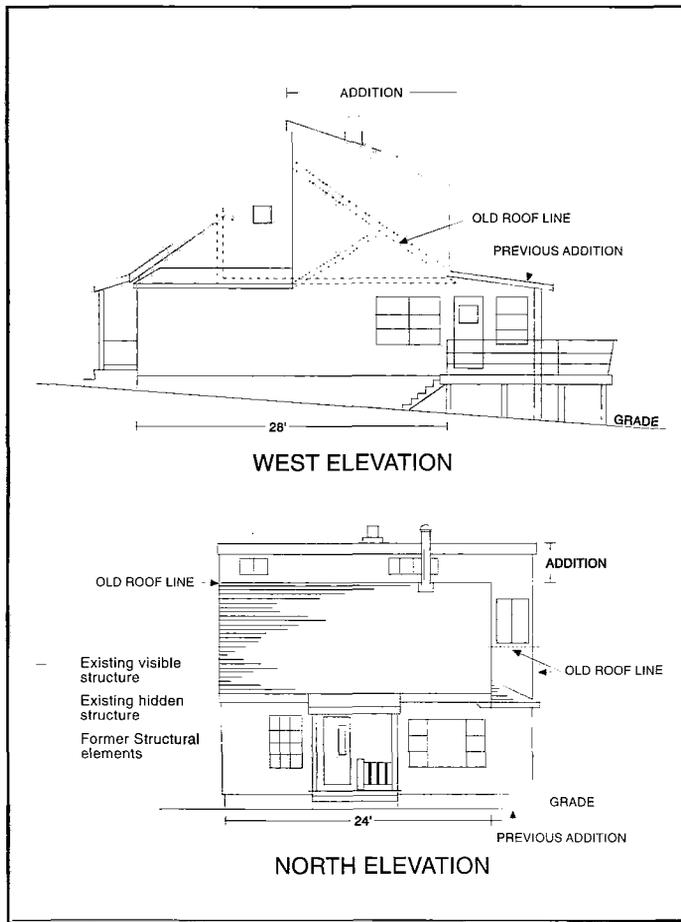


Figure 7: Transformation of a wartime house, North Vancouver.
(a) Elevations.

and (b) floor plans.

Source: City of North Vancouver.

in 1982 when a sun deck was built around the south-west corner of the building.

Investing and Improving, Building and Diversifying

The investment and physical effort in property development, as shown in these examples, are commonly justified in terms of the increase in land values; without property development, the argument holds, the land in time would have to be redeveloped to a use that would yield a higher rent. Yet the two examples cited above hardly conform to such processes. Throughout the history of the dwellings the alterations suggest two directions of activity, namely, basic upgrading and developing highly personal spatial arrangements. This is hardly the stuff of rapid resale for quick profit, even in one of the more active real estate markets in the country. Owners would not wish to lose money on selling their houses of course, but what is just as clear is that to invest the house with meanings of home is a matter of personal priority. Further, the frequency of personal ownership change associated with renovations is not remarkable, there

having been four owners of each house until the early 1980s, representing an average ownership tenure of seven to eight years.²²

Even if the “stayers and builders” are a stable population, however, they cannot escape the economics of building: it is cheaper per unit area to build anew than it is to make new sections fit old, to make new materials blend well with old, and to design the ‘machinery’ of the dwelling to work efficiently with certain additions. Some would say that places such as wartime houses should be demolished, that half a century is long enough for ‘temporary’ dwellings. Wartime houses are indeed being demolished and replaced with new structures, and sometimes the land uses also change. In this process materials are renewed, new designs are introduced and urban developments in the area proceed according to current needs. Some owners have taken this approach. But not all could do this even if they wished to do so, for replacement dwellings cannot be built incrementally. A new house must be built all at once, at least to

a basic standard and degree of finish. The continuing "production" of the dwelling over time by the owners must start from an initial base unit that is invariably more expensive than is an addition. Even at \$42,000.00, the addition to the H-22 house described above was much less costly than would have been the job of razing the dwelling and starting afresh. For individual householders who want to stay but enlarge their homes, the emphasis is on additions, modifications and renovations, rather than replacements.

When they are built, however, replacement dwellings are not guaranteed to be architecturally interesting or attractive, and indeed most places are built to conventional stock plans, perhaps with a little variation introduced. It is worth keeping in mind that the original wartime houses were 'architect designed', even if they did strike some as prosaic. An architect works for a client after all, whereas the home owner *is* the client. In 1941 the client was the Canadian government, anxious to house people adequately, inexpensively, pleasantly if possible, but certainly not extravagantly. And the charge was to relieve a housing crisis that affected the whole country. In the half century that has followed, a generally greater prosperity has been experienced, and that has enabled many homeowners to develop their houses for their own enjoyment and possible equity growth. The incremental additions and alterations implied by this, involving a large but indefinite number of owners, may not have provided a 'high art' sort of architectural interest, but they cannot fail to be culturally interesting. And architectural interest will always derive from this.²³ Almost inadvertently, the federal government through its housing policies during World War II provided Canada with a durable core housing stock of significant proportions and simple design, while maintaining a pretence of denying the intention to do so. Ordinary Canadians in their turn, for whom "...homeownership has long had a special meaning ...", went on in a myriad of ways to make these houses into homes.²⁴ By these gestures they personalized the basic wartime dwelling units and figuratively gave voice to an opinion that what they wanted and needed was the chance simply to live in a decent place and to do things for themselves. A remarkable, variegated and continually evolving pan-Canadian cultural landscape has been the result.

Notes

1. Marvin Mikesell, "Landscape", *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, David L. Sills, ed., Volume 8 (Crowell Collier and Macmillan 1968) 575–80. Sauer's own words were: "... landscape is not simply an actual scene viewed by an observer. The geographic landscape is a generalization derived from the observation of individual scenes ... The geographer ... has in mind the generic, and proceeds by comparison." Carl O. Sauer, "The Morphology of Landscape," *University of California Publications in Geography*, 2, 2 (1925): 19–54. Quotation taken from Chapter 16 in *Land and Life: A Selection of Writings from Carl Ortwin Sauer*, John Leighly, ed., (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1965). A review of the conceptual discussion of the term 'landscape', and more particularly 'cultural landscape', is contained in *Man, Space and Environment: Concepts in Contemporary Human Geography*, Paul Ward English and Robert C. Mayfield, eds., (New York, London, Toronto: Oxford University Press 1972) 1–15 and 55–68. In the present study the housing landscape created by federal government action was necessarily
2. After Wartime Housing Ltd. merged with the new Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, shortly after the war, approximately 20,000 additional dwellings were built for veterans. This represented an extension of the wartime program — the focus of this paper. For reference to the veterans' program see Jill Wade, *Houses for All: the struggle for social housing in Vancouver, 1919–50*. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1994) Chapter 5.
3. Lynn Hannley, "Substandard Housing" in *House, Home and Community: Progress in Housing Canadians*, John R. Miron ed. (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press and CMHC, 1993), 203–19.
4. On rural-urban fringe slums see S.D. Clark, *The Suburban Society* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966); Richard Harris, "A Working-Class Suburb for Immigrants, Toronto 1909–1913," *Geographical Review*, 81, 3 (1991), 318–32, and, *Unplanned Suburbs: Toronto's American tragedy, 1900 to 1950*. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); James Lemon, "Plans for Early Twentieth Century Toronto: Lost in Management," *Urban History Review*, 18, 1 (1989), 11–31; Yves Brunet, "L'exode urbain: essai de classification de la population exurbaine des Cantons de l'Est", *Le géographe canadien*, 24, 4 (1980), 385–405; L.J. Evenden, "Fleetwood in Surrey: The Making of a Place" in *British Columbia: Geographical Essays Published in Honour of A. MacPherson*, Paul M. Koroscil, ed. (Burnaby: Simon Fraser University, Department of Geography), 223–79; Evenden and Walker, "From Periphery to Centre: The Changing Geography of the Suburbs" in *The Changing Social Geography of Canadian Cities*, Larry S. Bourne and David F. Ley, eds. (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993) 234–51.
5. John Bacher, "Too Good To Last? The Social Service Innovations of Wartime Housing", *Women and Environments*, 10, 2, (1988), 10–13. p. 10.
6. The most comprehensive contemporary study of the actual conditions of housing was carried out by the Subcommittee on Housing and Community Planning of the Advisory Committee on Reconstruction and Community Planning. The *Final Report*, generally referred to as the *Curtis Report*, after the Chairman of the Subcommittee, was published in 1944. (Ottawa: King's Printer).
7. Privy Council 1286, February 24, 1941
8. Jill Wade, "Wartime Housing Limited, 1941–1947: Canadian housing policy at the crossroads", *Urban History Review*, 15, 1, (1986) 40–59.
9. Deryck W. Holdsworth and Joan Simon, "Housing Form and Use of Domestic Space," in Miron, *House, Home and Community ...* 1993. p. 191.
10. James McKellar, "Building Technology and the Production Process", in Miron, *House, Home and Community ...* 1993. p. 140.
11. A retrospective study of Levittown, a new town built in 1947 initially to house veterans on Long Island, suggests similar problems of community reaction. "From the outside, Levittown met with hostility and criticism — a fear by neighbouring towns of instant ghettos, for example — ..." From the Foreword by William R. Taylor. Barbara M. Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).
12. Burwell R. Coon, "Wartime Housing", *Royal Architectural Institute of Canada Journal*, 19, 1 (1942), 3–8.
13. John C. Bacher, *Keeping to the Marketplace: The Evolution of Canadian Housing Policy* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993).
14. A key point in the present context concerns the impact of financial arrangements, once the federal government ceased to be a factor following the war, when the program ended and the houses were sold. An important element in the 'inner workings' of the social 'machinery' that produces variable and divergent cultural landscapes is identified in a discussion of the 1938 *National*

Wartime Housing as Cultural Landscape

Housing Act, which covered the post-war period of privatization of the wartime housing stock. The *Act*

"... created a class of joint government and lending institution mortgages that required only 10 per cent owner's equity in the property. Still the institutions balked at investing in mortgages on low-cost houses in western Canada. Lenders concentrated their high ratio mortgages in what they believed were good risk centres — suburban Toronto, Hamilton and Vancouver received 45 per cent of such loans during the first year. These urban and regional preferences of major lenders were acknowledged as late as the early 1960s and may persist today as one obstacle to a truly national mortgage market. ... the regional biases were not solved by the 1944 NHA, which perpetuated the joint loans and the guarantee against loss." Michael Doucet and John Weaver, *Housing the North American City* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), p. 294.

16. An earlier study of dwelling expansion, covering the whole north shore of Greater Vancouver, thus including the City of North Vancouver and the District Municipalities of North Vancouver and West Vancouver, found that the developing life cycle of households during the child-raising years was the chief determinant of house expansions. Leonard J. Evenden "The Expansion of Domestic Space on Vancouver's North Shore" in *A Social Geography of Canada: Essays Originally Published in Honour of J. Wreford Watson*, Rev. ed., Guy M. Robinson ed. (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1991), 220–44.
17. While it must not be forgotten that some wartime housing districts have been razed in the half century since their building, and individual owners have also demolished their dwellings, we are primarily concerned here with the fate of houses that have survived and been modified.
18. Discussion in this section is based upon field observation and analyses of records made available by the City of North Vancouver.
19. The toilet is usually referred to in the records of the times as the W.C., perhaps a reflection of the fact that water closets and flush toilets were by no means universal across the country. The term seems now to have dropped out of general use.
20. For Kelly the continuing process of dwelling modification in Levittown has been so important that she indicates the focus of her study to be "...the homeowner as coproducer of the domestic environment ..." *Expanding the American Dream ...* 1993. p. 3.
21. A variety of terms is in general use for expansion plans and spaces. Bedroom and studio are general terms, and do not necessarily signify that the spaces will only ever be used for these purposes. They may be taken to indicate an intention at the time that the plans for expansion are approved. Evenden, "The Expansion of Domestic Space ..." 1991.
22. In my earlier north shore study, which included in the sample a number of wartime houses, "stayers and builders" lived in their homes, on average, "... over a decade before expanding them, and remain(ed) for a number of years afterwards". Evenden, "The Expansion of Domestic Space ..." 1991. p.221. While the literature has often emphasized the (heightened) frequency of moving as a variable in social behaviour, it must be remembered that many people do not move frequently.
23. An engaging discussion of this point may be found in Witold Rybczynski, *The Most Beautiful House in the World* (Markham: Penguin Books, 1989).
24. Harris and Pratt, "The Meaning of Home, Homeownership, and Public Policy" in *The Changing Social Geography of Canadian Cities*, Larry S. Bourne and David F. Ley, eds. (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993) 234–251. See p. 286.